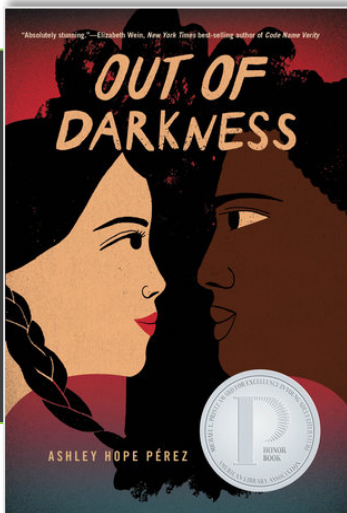


HOLIDAY HOUSE | READING GROUP GUIDE



OUT OF DARKNESS by Ashley Hope Pérez

PB: 9780823445035 • Ages 14 & Up

A Michael L. Printz Honor Book

Winner of the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award

A *Booklist* 50 Best YA Books of All Time Selection

A *Kirkus Reviews* Best Book of the Year

A *School Library Journal* Best Book

“A powerful, layered tale of forbidden love in times of unrelenting racism.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

About the Book

A dangerous forbidden romance rocks a Texan oil town in 1937, when segregation was a matter of life and death.

“This is East Texas, and there's lines. Lines you cross, lines you don't cross. That clear?” New London, Texas. 1937. Naomi Vargas is Mexican American. Wash Fuller is Black. These teens know the town's divisive racism better than anyone. But sometimes the attraction between two people is so powerful, it breaks through even the most entrenched color lines. And the consequences can be explosive.

Naomi and Wash dare to defy the rules, and the New London school explosion serves as a ticking time bomb in the background. Can their love survive both prejudice and tragedy?

Race, romance, and family converge in this riveting novel that transplants *Romeo and Juliet* to a bitterly segregated Texas town. Includes a fascinating author's note detailing the process of research and writing about voices that have largely been excluded from historical accounts.



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Reading Group Discussion Questions

- In the Prologue, the reader learns that there has been an explosion at the school in New London, Texas. Explain the last sentence of the Prologue: “More than grief, more than anger, there is a need. Someone to blame. Someone to make pay” (p. 2). How does this sentence set up the plot of the novel? What is the first hint of who that “someone” may be?
- Discuss the difference between *racism* and *bigotry*. How is Naomi the victim of bigotry at school from “The Gang,” and at Mr. Turner’s store? Wash lives in Egypt Town, the black section of New London. His mother thinks it’s okay for Wash to work for Mr. Crane, the superintendent of the white school, but disapproves of his relationships with Beto, Cari, and Naomi. Debate whether she is fearful of what could happen to her son given the racial climate. Classmate Miranda tells Naomi that she “blends in with the night.” How is this an ethnic slur? Find other examples where Naomi and Wash are the targets of racial slurs.
- Wash’s father is the principal of the black school. What are the inequities that he must deal with at his school? How does Wash push his father to ask for newer materials and better conditions for his students? Wash’s father tells him, “You can’t show your anger. Never show your anger. Otherwise you give them power over you” (p. 20). Identify the “them” to whom Mr. Fuller is referring.
- Describe Henry, Naomi’s stepfather. Why does he rename the twins, Beto and Cari? He registers Naomi for high school as Naomi C. Smith rather than giving her legal name, Naomi Consuelo Corona Vargas. Debate whether giving the children new names alters Henry’s behavior toward them. Discuss why Pastor Tom encouraged Henry to bring the children to East Texas. Pastor Tom periodically checks in with Henry and the family. Why is it so difficult for Henry to be the family man that Pastor Tom encourages him to be?
- Discuss what Henry means when he tells Naomi that she could have saved her mother. Naomi says that the house is “too full of Henry.” Cite evidence that she is repulsed by his very presence. What precautions does Naomi take to protect herself from Henry? Why doesn’t Naomi tell Pastor Tom that Henry has sexually abused her? Debate whether her grandparents would have insisted that she live with Henry if they knew that he abused her. What causes her to finally confide in Wash? How does this knowledge make Wash determined to rescue Naomi?
- Henry says that Naomi is a reminder of all the mistakes that he has made. He finds religion, but backslides many times. How does this make Naomi afraid for herself and for the twins? Explain why Pastor Tom and Abuelito and Abuelita think that Henry and Naomi should marry. What is the significance of Henry offering Naomi a cigarette? Henry gives Naomi a sewing machine. Muff, their neighbor, thinks this is an engagement gift. How are there always strings attached to Henry’s gifts? Why does the pressure to marry Henry make Naomi determined to leave with Wash?



- Explain the following simile: “Muff was her [Naomi’s] friend, but she’s soaked up the rules of being white like a sponge in a bowl of vinegar” (p. 223). What are the rules of being white in New London, Texas? How do Mr. and Mrs. Fuller abide by the rules of being black in their town? Why is Wash so determined to challenge the rules?
- “The Gang” is comprised of the high school’s mean girls. Miranda Gibbler is the ring leader of The Gang. Why is she jealous of Naomi? How is Miranda the source of gossip about Naomi and Henry living in the same house? The investigators found no blame for the explosion. Yet, Miranda reveals that she saw Wash near the white school at that exact time. Discuss whether she knew the problems her words could cause. Debate whether Miranda should bear some responsibility for the deaths of Naomi, Wash, and Cari.
- Discuss the ending of the book. Beto comments on “the family they had made for themselves in the woods” (p. 393). How did he, Cari, Naomi, and Wash become a family? He says, “They had been happy for a time, before the rules found them.” To which rules is he referring? What lines did they cross? As an adult, Beto wrote the story as he remembered it. Discuss why it was so important for Beto to tell his story.
- Explain the title of the book. At the beginning of the novel, the author quotes from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce: “It was not darkness that fell from the air. It was brightness.” Interpret this quote from Beto’s point of view. How might this quote apply to racial tensions occurring in our nation today?

Guide prepared by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

About the Author



Ashley Hope Pérez grew up in Texas and is the author of three award-winning novels for young adults. *Out of Darkness* received a Michael L. Printz Honor and the Tomás Rivera Book Award. She is an assistant professor of world literatures at The Ohio State University and lives in Columbus with her husband and two sons.

