



A NOVEL

# Long After We Are Gone

"Nothing short of astonishing." —MATEO ASKARIPOUR, *New York Times*  
bestselling author of *Black Buck*, for *One Summer in Savannah*

**Terah Shelton Harris**

AUTHOR OF *ONE SUMMER IN SAVANNAH*

# READING GROUP GUIDE

These questions include spoilers. Do not read until after you've finished the book.

1. What do you think each of the siblings' different reactions to the passing of their father says about them? What do you think it says about grief in general?
2. How did each of the four siblings grow and change throughout the course of the book?
3. The Department of Agriculture calls heir property the leading cause of Black land loss in the U.S. Were you familiar with the concept of heir property before you read this book? What is your take on it?
4. Was there one sibling whose story or struggles particularly resonated with you?

5. Junior's inner man and outer man are constantly battling each other. Do you sometimes feel like a different person on the inside than you are on the outside?
6. Why do you think CeCe was so reluctant to give in to her love for Ellis? What held her back?
7. Why do you think Mance had such trouble accepting that his son, Henry, is deaf?
8. Why do you think Mance was so reticent to hold his son?
9. Tokey feels like an outsider in her own family. Did you ever feel that way in your own family?
10. Why do you think King didn't tell his children the truth about what happened to their mother?
11. How do you see the effects of intergenerational trauma playing out among each of the characters? Do you think they were successful in breaking the "Solomon curse"?
12. Each of the siblings makes some pretty questionable choices. Do you think they all redeem themselves in the end?

# A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

## What inspired this novel?

All of my books are inspired by real and unique circumstances that happen to real people and are not widely discussed. *Long After We Are Gone* is no exception. This book is inspired by the story of Melvin Davis and Licurtis Reels of North Carolina, who went to jail for eight years after refusing to leave the land their great-grandfather purchased more than a century ago. I first read their story years ago and remained frustrated, shocked, and angry, not only at what happened to them but that I had never heard of heir property before. After much research, I was amazed that the Reels brothers were not alone in their fight and that involuntary land loss from heir property is such an important issue that no one really knows about or talks about. It's not recognized as "the worst problem you never heard of" or "the leading cause of Black involuntary land loss" by the U.S. Department of Agriculture without justification. In *Long After We Are Gone*, I hope to shine a light on this issue and



how certain laws, policies, and loopholes continue to dispossess families of their land.

**Which character was the most difficult for you to write? Which was the most fun to write?**

All of them! LOL! It's funny because while writing, I found the hardest character to write was the one I was writing at the time. I should note that I do not see scenes when I write. I hear my characters' voices. It is they who lead me, guide me, and tell me what to write. Looking back now, I think the most difficult character to write about was CeCe. Writing unreliable characters is not easy. Go too far in that direction and readers fail to connect or even relate to them or, worse, dislike them. CeCe made some extremely questionable choices (stealing money from her law firm, ignoring King's letter about the Kingdom, and leaving/denying her love for Ellis), and it was hard to keep a balance between those decisions and not losing the reader completely. The writer must stay true to the character though, and that means sending them down a path that may not line up with the writer's own opinions or beliefs. This is especially true when the characters are whispering to you. Junior was the most frustrating character for me. Only because, like CeCe, he makes some problematic decisions, choices that hurt people he loved. It was difficult to understand Junior's motivations. Mance was the easiest character to write because I know so many men like Mance. For Mance's story, all I had to do was think of what my husband or brother would do or how they would react.

**If you could give the four siblings one piece of advice each, what would it be?**

First, I would take some soothing deep breaths with Mance and then tell him that life comes at us fast and we are handed roles and responsibilities we never asked for but that it's how we handle them that defines us. Before I tell Junior that nothing good ever comes from hiding who you really are and what's done in the dark always, ALWAYS comes to light, I would hold his face in my hands and ask him what the hell is he doing! Before I talk to CeCe, I would probably shake her a few times! Then I would tell her that there's nothing wrong with having big dreams, but be open to altering them when circumstances change or when you meet the love of your life. Lastly, I would give Tokey the tightest and longest hug before telling her to live her life and that while we are influenced by our parents and the ones who come before us, we are ultimately responsible for the people we become.

**Did you find it challenging writing a novel with four points of view?**

Yes! And when I turned this book in to my editor, I swore I would NEVER write another book with so many points of view again. As a child, I was taught to never say never, so I will not close the door completely on it, but it's not something I'm going to rush into doing again. That said, this book stretched me in ways I never expected. I'm a better writer because of this book, because I challenged myself to do something I have never

accomplished before. *As I Lay Dying* is one of my favorite books of all time and served as my book inspiration for *Long After We Are Gone*. *As I Lay Dying* tells the story of a family who, after the matriarch dies, sets out to fulfill her last wish. To portray this, William Faulkner used fifteen different points of view to tell the story of the Bundrens' plight. Each character, each point of view, moves the story forward while highlighting each of the character's own personal struggles. *Long After We Are Gone* is such an emotional story, so I decided to use Faulkner's method of utilizing multiple points of view to paint the picture fully and accurately. In my opinion, using multiple points of view made all the difference in the story.

**Are any of the characters based on people you know?**

Yes! Mance Solomon is a composite of my older brother, Ben, and my husband, Jamel. They both love their families very much and are fierce protectors by any means necessary. In the book, CeCe says that she didn't have any boyfriends in high school because all of the boys were afraid of Mance. This was taken from my personal life! Most of the names used in the book were taken from my and my husband's family history. Mance is named after my husband's uncle and grandfather. We both had grandmothers in our family histories named Angeline. Cecily was named after my great-great-grandfather Cecil. The name (not the people) King Solomon was based on my husband's great-grandfather, and Shad was my husband's great-uncle. Junior and Tokey are common Southern nicknames.

**What are some of your favorite family dramas or books about siblings?**

I'm such a fan of family dramas in movies, on television, and in literature. I mentioned earlier how much I love *As I Lay Dying* but would also add *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng and *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett as two more of my favorites. I think *This Is Us* was one of the best family dramas ever on television. The emotional heft of that show, from the writing to the performances, is nothing short of extraordinary. I think about that show often. *The Family Stone*, *August: Osage County*, and *Soul Food* are a few of my favorite movies.

**How has your job as a collection development librarian influenced your writing?**

As a collection development librarian, I'm responsible for the purchase and acquisition of all adult print and digital materials for my library system. Because of this, I read a few hundred books a year for pleasure and work, and I discovered that I am drawn to unique stories, books that I haven't read before and that I could not find many comparable books for. I knew that if I were to ever write a book that I wanted to write a book that readers found to be unlike anything they've ever read before.