

“A haunting debut novel.” —Ellen Marie Wiseman,  
author of *The Plum Tree* and *What She Left Behind*

# UNDER A DARK SUMMER SKY

a novel

VANESSA LAFAYE

# Reading Group Guide



1. Henry has always had a plan for his life, which the whims of history ultimately force him to abandon and just live in the moment. He finds this very difficult, Missy less so, because her expectations are so low. Which way of living leads to greater happiness? And which do you use in your life?
2. Both Missy and Henry feel that they have failed in their lives. Does this do more to draw them together or push them apart?
3. A key theme of the novel is the question “What makes us human?” At several points in the book, characters mention the difference between humans and animals, e.g., the townspeople view the veterans as subhuman, Henry comments on the difference between the human beings and “giant cockroaches” like Two-Step. Then we see how the storm makes some people abandon their

humanity, while others rise to the occasion. What do you think makes us human? And is it just a “thin veneer” as Henry thinks? Or does it go deeper?

4. The storm pushes everyone to the limits of their endurance, where they find out who they truly are. What extreme life event have you experienced, and what did you learn about yourself as a result?
5. Another important idea is that of perception versus reality. Dwayne allows his prejudices to blind him to the evidence of Hilda’s attack. Several times, Henry comments that “people see what they want to see” rather than what is really there. Do you agree with this? How much of Henry’s view has been affected by his experiences?
6. How much or little has the treatment of traumatized military veterans changed since 1935? Do you think it’s possible that such a group could be so treated by today’s officials?
7. Hilda worshipped, and was worshipped by, her father. How has this affected her relationships with other men? Do you know any women whose lives have been similarly influenced?
8. The opening chapters show each character getting ready for the Fourth of July barbecue. Compare this scene to the epilogue, where we see each one preparing for

another important event. How has each been changed by the storm? What have they gained and lost?

9. Selma believes that she has summoned the hurricane with her voodoo spell. Other characters place their faith in a higher power who will heed their prayers. Does the universe care about us? Do things happen for a reason?
10. There are clashes between tribes, of townspeople and veterans, between black and white people, between the wealthy and the poor—all groups who mistrust and dislike the other. Jimmy's outlook changes when he is on the run with Henry. Have you ever experienced a radical change of view after getting to know someone very different?
11. There are several parallels between the veterans' experiences of the hurricane and the battlefield. How are they similar and different?
12. What is your first impression of Dwayne? And how do you feel about him at the end of the book?
13. If you were Missy, would you have gone on the run with Henry?
14. Huge events can be triggered by the smallest incident. One example is when Mabel starts the rumor that Henry is Roy's father, simply because she is piqued. Things

then quickly spiral out of control. Has something similar ever happened in your life?

15. Missy believes that people's fundamental natures don't really change, regardless of outward appearances. Do you agree?
16. Missy risks everything to save Nathan; Henry returns to the storm zone rather than save himself; the veterans have lost limbs and sanity in the service of their country. In contrast, Nelson won't even save his dog. Do you know where the boundary of your self-interest lies? What would you do to help a stranger if it meant personal risk for you?
17. Both Selma and Hilda have very emotional relationships with food. Discuss the very different reasons for this.
18. How much has changed between the races in America since 1935? And how much remains the same?