

## Reader's Guide to THE MIDDLE STEP by Denise Pattiz Bogard

### Before You Read:

The author, Denise Bogard, received a publishing contract three weeks before Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teen in Ferguson, MO, was shot and killed by a white policeman. His death resulted in protests, upheaval, and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

During the nine years that Denise was writing and revising *The Middle Step*, she was not thinking about the story in terms of race relations and white privilege, but rather in terms of telling the stories of her students in the nearly all-black Title One St. Louis charter middle and high school where she taught writing and English for 15 years. However, since publication of *The Middle Step*, coinciding as it has with the Black Lives Matter movement, the novel has become a catalyst for many lively and frank conversations about race, urban poverty, under-education and white privilege.

### As you read, consider:

1. How do Lisa's race, age and religion impact her relationship with the girls?
2. As the novel unfolds, Lisa is presented with a number of different life choices. Why do you think she continues to choose what she does?
3. Why does Lisa become more race conscious as she lives in the GIFT House? How does this evolve?
4. Each of the girls keep dangerous secrets from Lisa and from each other, sending them on potential collision courses. Who worries you the most and why?
5. The author wrote an early draft of the book in Lisa's 1st person point of view and then rewrote the book in 3rd person alternating points of view. How would the story be different if told in Lisa's 1st person voice?
6. The novel is set in North St. Louis city, an impoverished and all-black area (near Ferguson, MO). How does the setting impact the story?

### Book Club Discussion Questions:

**SPOILER ALERTS if you have not finished the novel.**

1. The book opens with Lisa's job interview in which she is offered the position to be a foster mom to four at-risk teenaged girls. She almost calls the social worker to back out, then she changes her mind. Why do you think she decides to pursue the job?
2. Lisa's first meeting and early weeks with three of the girls do not go at all how Lisa had hoped and she worries that she won't know how to be a mother to the girls. Sheila advises Lisa: "Don't try to be their mother. They each have a mother. Don't try to be their friend either. Just be in charge." In what ways is Lisa *not* in charge? What could she do differently?
3. At the end of chapter 4, after Lisa's first venture out to the neighborhood, she recognizes that she would not have been as frightened by the group of laughing teens had they been white instead of black. Have you ever had a similar experience?
4. Episodes of racism and anti-semitism run throughout the novel and touch on every single one of the characters. Did these scenes influence the way you felt about any of the characters? In what ways? Did they evoke any of your own feelings?

5. As the story unfolds, the reader slowly learns more and more about Lisa's past sorrows and disappointments. How do these experiences shape the way Lisa interacts with the girls?
6. Life in the GIFT House is finally settling down a bit when Nate shows up. Why does his appearance upset Lisa so much? He then shows up a number of other times, which enrages Lisa. Does her response seem justified? Fair?
7. Why does Nate continue interacting with the GIFT House? Does this seem like a wise decision? Why or why not?
8. Eva-Lynn's entry into the GIFT House sends everything into complete turmoil. Why do you think Sheila insists on Eva-Lynn getting to stay? What could Lisa have done to mitigate the poisonous atmosphere?
9. In many ways Coreen is both the easiest and the most closed off of the four girls. What in her background might have made her the way she is? How could Lisa or Sheila have gotten her to open up?
10. What do you think it means for Danesha to give Lisa a Christmas gift? Is this a turning point for them? Why or why not?
11. Lisa's holiday visit to her parents is very unsettling in many ways. Do you agree with the choices Lisa is making? What advice would you give her at this point? Do you think you would make a different choice?

## PART TWO

12. Sheila tells Danesha that life is like a tapestry--the beautiful picture and the loose threads and knots. How does Danesha respond to this metaphor? In what ways has your own life been a tapestry?
13. Brianna and Eva-Lynn forge a friendship that puzzles Lisa. How do you explain the friendship? How does the friendship change each of the girls? Have you ever formed a friendship with someone completely unexpected?
14. Why does Lisa walk out without even leaving a note or saying goodbye after her date with Nate? How did you feel about Lisa when she did that?
15. Lisa is hugely distressed by Brianna's pregnancy. In contrast, the other girls take the news in stride, though even they have different reactions. Sheila feels angry and terribly frustrated. And Brianna is excited. Why do you think each of the characters responds the way she does? What was your response to Brianna's pregnancy?
16. After the fight between the girls, Lisa is more concerned and focused on Brianna and Eva-Lynn and only hours later worries about Danesha. Do you fault her for that reaction? Was the fight between Danesha and Eva-Lynn inevitable? Should Lisa have handled the entire situation differently? What would you have done?
17. Which of the characters do you admire--or relate to, or sympathize with--the most? Which of the girls do you feel the most concern or empathy for? Which character did you like the least and why?
18. From the beginning of the book to the end, Lisa undergoes many challenges and many changes. In what ways does she change? In what ways does she begin to heal? What about each of the girls? Did your opinion of any of the characters change over the course of the novel? How?

19. The author purposefully ends the novel without neatly tying up loose ends, leaving many questions for the reader to consider. Where do you see Lisa in five years? Ten years? What about Brianna? Danesha? Eva-Lynn? Coreen? Nate? Lisa's parents?

20. Why do you believe the author chose the title *The Middle Step*? What does the title mean to you?