



Reading Group Guide

Dear Reader,

America is a symbol of opportunity and freedom to many, and I love her for the promise she holds. I was recently surprised to find that I love her more than I knew. I spent this summer in South Africa and was outraged by the ghosts of apartheid that haunt the country. When I experienced injustices that I had never felt in America, I found myself telling people that I couldn't wait to "go home." For the first time in my life, I was referring to America, not Zimbabwe. But I am not American, I am not even a green-card holder, yet I was calling America my home. You should have seen my face. You should have heard the pride in my voice.

I am still shadowed by the sacrifices I made to get here. The pain of adjustment not only made me smell my armpits and catch the fine whiff of my outsidersness, but also made me long for my country, even as President Mugabe was bringing Zimbabwe to its knees. Those of us who give up our homelands live with quiet knowledge nestled in our blood like an incurable disease; even as we are here, we are tied to somewhere else.

In *We Need New Names*, Darling leaves Zimbabwe in search of a better life. Her story is my attempt to marry Zimbabwe with America, to tell a story rooted in both worlds. But even in fiction, this marriage is a difficult one. Darling's story draws on my own experiences, but I also reached to America because here it is possible to walk into a classroom or bar and ask, *So where are you from?* and hear a story about leaving and arriving that sounds familiar. Darling is Zimbabwean, but it is my hope that she is also Mexican and Indian and British, that she is from anywhere else where people live and hope and dream and leave. I hope she speaks to you.

Thank you,

NoViolet Bulawayo

A conversation with Justin Torres, award-winning author of *We the Animals*:

JT: The stunning first half of the novel, set in Zimbabwe, shows the peril of Darling's daily life but maintains the innocence and preoccupations of childhood. How did you strike that balance?

NVB: Children will always endure in ways that adults aren't able to. They'll remember to play in a time of war, or the morning after their parents have a terrible fight; they don't stop living. Darling and her friends embody this spirit, and their playfulness in the face of danger creates a space to address devastating, complicated issues with clarity but also with hope.

JT: The second half of the novel, set in America, reveals fascinating things about technology: it is an expression of the plenty in America but also an avenue for violence to enter Darling's life. Why choose technology to express Darling's precarious position in America?

NVB: I can't imagine writing about a teenager in America at this very moment without the distraction and danger of technology, so Darling must deal with that. Technology is the easiest means for her to contact home, but also a new and specific hazard, and I was compelled to explore how she'd handle it, especially when contrasted with the dangers she faced as a child in Zimbabwe.

JT: Brand names, celebrities, specific material about culture—all are important in the book. Why reference real things? How does situating your story in the present and not, say, during the years that you moved to America mark the story?

NVB: I wanted readers to not only connect with Darling and her story, but recognize the space and culture as well. I set this in the present, in the wake of Zimbabwe's lost decade, because our participation in the present and the uncertainty of now lend the story a refreshing urgency. History is unfolding before our eyes while the past is, by virtue of its being "gone," no longer malleable. I also know America better now than I did when I first arrived, when I was truly an outsider. I've had difficulty writing about those years because I didn't have an emotional presence or ownership of this place, something absolutely necessary if I'm to make the page come alive.

JT: Many of my favorite passages in the book aren't in Darling's voice; they are told as collective experiences, in wonderfully poetic language. Why these shifts? Why include these voices?

NVB: *We Need New Names* is at once about the individual and the collective. I'm telling Darling's story, but the reader can't forget that other people are struggling all around her. I wouldn't necessarily describe the voices as a formal shift away from Darling, because the collective voice acts as a beam of light illuminating her experiences, giving her story a power beyond the immediate specificity of her own experiences.

JT: I admire the way you use language in *We Need New Names*. I know English isn't your native language, and I'm wondering if gaining fluency as an adult allowed you insights that others might not have.

NVB: From working on my writing and reading the works of other nonnative speakers, I've come to realize that the phrase "writing in English" quickly becomes misleading. There are many Englishes out there. Mine is the English I arrive at through Ndebele, my native language from Zimbabwe; my English gets its pulse from my intimacy with another language. My process allows me to hit notes that I would otherwise struggle with, and the story gains texture. There is value in juggling these two languages and making them work together—where one language is lacking, the other compensates.

Questions for Discussion

1. As the novel opens, we see that Darling is living in a close knit community of extended family members and friends. When she moves to Detroit, Michigan she lives in a smaller family unit, and perhaps a more conventional one. Does living with fewer people in probably more middle class circumstances give Darling a more intimate family life? Or was her family life in Zimbabwe more supportive or affirming for her? What are the advantages to living in a more open community like the community Darling is born into in Zimbabwe and is it possible for us to achieve that kind of family structure here in the United States?
2. When Darling is living in America, she Skypes with Chipo, who tells her that she can't refer to Zimbabwe as her country anymore. Do you think this is a fair accusation? Does Darling owe anything to Zimbabwe? And is she still entitled to a sense of ownership over the place she left behind?
3. How do Bulawayo's descriptions of Zimbabwe diverge from [other](#) portrayals of Africa? In the some of the tragic moments in the book—for example when Darling and her friends try to remove the baby from Chipo's belly—there are unexpected moments of levity. Does Bulawayo's method of depicting tragedy make the harrowing elements more resonate with you in an unexpected way? In recent years, elements of the media like video games and movies have been taken to task for possibly desensitizing us to tragedy. Do you think that is true? What role does literature play in how we experience and understand global tragedy and other cultures? How does Darling's voice contribute to that picture for readers?
4. Despite living in poverty, a world away from American culture, we see through the lives of Darling and her friends that lots of America pop culture makes its way firmly into the imagination of these young people—from Beyonce to McDonald's to the television show ER. Did that surprise you? How do you see pop culture moving from the United States to Zimbabwe? How are Darling's ideas about American pop culture affirmed or challenged when she arrives in Detroit, Michigan?
5. The scene in which the aid workers visit Darling's village gives insight into the sometimes dehumanizing impact of charity: "The man starts taking pictures with his big camera...they don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing...we don't complain because we know that after the picture-taking comes the giving of gifts." How did this passage make you feel? If this scene were written from the point of view of the aid workers, how do you think it would be different? What role does our intention play when we contribute to charitable causes?
6. How do you think your country of residence affects the way you read and interpreted the novel?
7. The title of the book refers to the choice that many immigrants make to give their children names that, as Darling says, "make them belong in America." How important is a name? How much weight do names hold in your family or in your culture?

8. In what ways does America change Darling's personality? Is America the reason for this shift or is it Darling herself? Does your personality change depending on where you are or who you are with?
9. How would your reading experience have been different—and how might the power of the Darling's message have been affected—if the novel hadn't been written in her voice? Are there places you think you would have understood more about the story? What did Darling's particular voice bring to this story that might not have been achieved another way? What role did her voice play in establishing the moments of humor and cultural insight in this story? The prose is also full of deliberate misspellings and phonetic language—like “destroyed” Michigan. What did those choices reveal to you about Darling's experiences?
10. Since the novel's publication, NoViolet Bulawayo—and other writers published around the same time like Taiye Selasi who wrote *Ghana Must Go* and Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie who wrote *Americanah*—have fielded questions about being labeled as “African writers.” Africa is a diverse and vast continent, and yet we oftentimes lump these writers together. Is that fair? When asked about the label, Bulawayo said, "For me, I always insist that I am an African writer because it's true; I am an African. I feel that even if I deny that label, my work will scream otherwise." She added that her aesthetic and themes were all inspired by Africa and its modes of storytelling, including the oral tradition. Do you agree with Bulawayo?