



Discussion Guide

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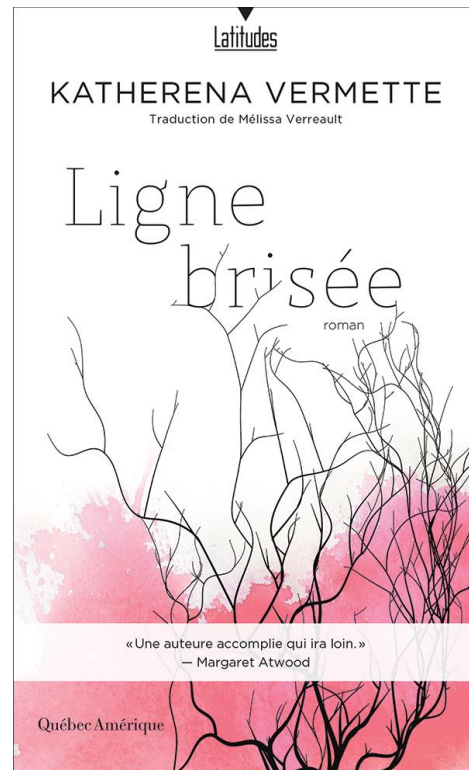
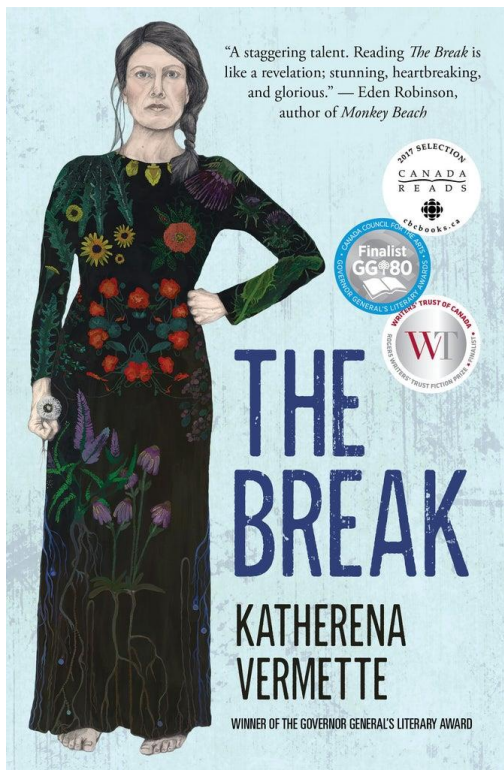
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READING GUIDE FOR *THE BREAK* BY KATHERENA VERMETTE

This guide can be used by Book Clubs that are private or library-run. Maybe you would like to use the guide to enhance your own reading experience as you follow along with Un Livrel/One eRead Canada program in April 2022.

What is Un Livrel/One eRead Canada? A digital, bilingual cross-Canada book club initiated by the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC) to promote digital reading awareness and issues for public libraries. Vi is the second book featured, and the first in a bilingual offering.



ABOUT THE BOOK

TRIGGER WARNING: This book is about recovering and healing from violence. Certain scenes of sexual and physical violence, and depictions of vicarious trauma.

Winner of the Amazon.ca First Novel Award and a finalist for the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Governor General's Literary Award, *The Break* is a stunning and heartbreaking debut novel about a multigenerational Métis-Anishnaabe family dealing with the fallout of a shocking crime in Winnipeg's North End.

When Stella, a young Métis mother, looks out her window one evening and spots someone in trouble on the Break – a barren field on an isolated strip of land outside her house – she calls the police to alert them to a possible crime.

In a series of shifting narratives, people who are connected, both directly and indirectly, with the victim – police, family, and friends – tell their personal stories leading up to that fateful night. Lou, a social worker, grapples with the departure of her live-in boyfriend. Cheryl, an artist, mourns the premature death of her sister Rain. Paulina, a single mother, struggles to trust her new partner. Phoenix, a homeless teenager, is released from a youth detention centre. Officer Scott, a Métis policeman, feels caught between two worlds as he patrols the city. Through their various perspectives a larger, more comprehensive story about lives of the residents in Winnipeg's North End is exposed.

A powerful intergenerational family saga, *The Break* showcases Vermette's abundant writing talent and positions her as an exciting new voice in Canadian literature.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATHERENA VERMETTE is a Métis writer from Treaty One territory, the heart of the Métis nation, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Her first book, *North End Love Songs* (The Muses Company), won the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry. Her NFB short documentary, *this river*, won the Coup de Coeur at the Montreal First Peoples Festival and a Canadian Screen Award. Her first novel, *The Break*, is the winner of three Manitoba Book Awards and the Amazon.ca First Novel Award, and it was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and CBC Canada Reads.



north end
love songs



this river
film



The
Strangers



river
women



A Girl
Called Echo

BOOKS AND MEDIA

Poetry

- river woman
- North End Love Songs

Novels

- The Strangers
- The Break

Graphic Novels

- A Girl Called Echo

Children's Books

- The Girl and The Wolf
- Seven Teachings Series
 - The First Day
 - What is Truth, Betsy?
 - Singing Sisters
 - Amik Loves School
 - Misaabe's Stories
 - Kode's Quest(ion)
 - Just Right

Film

- this river

AWARDS

Winner, Margaret Laurence Award for Fiction, 2017

Winner, Carol Shields Winnipeg Book Award, 2017

Winner, McNally Robinson Book of the Year, 2017

Winner, Amazon.ca First Novel Award, 2017

Short-listed, Burt Award for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Literature, 2017

Short-listed, Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, 2016

Short-listed, Governor General's Literary Award, 2016

Praise for *Katherena Vermette* and *The Break*

- Finalist, 2017 Burt Award For First Nations, Inuit, And Métis Literature
- CBC Canada Reads Finalist
- National Bestseller
- An Indigo Best Book Of The Decade
- Quill & Quire Book Of The Year (2016)
- Kobo Best Books Of The Year (2016)
- 49th Shelf Books Of The Year (2016)
- Globe And Mail Best 100 Books Of 2016
- National Post 99 Best Books Of The Year (2016)
- Walrus Magazine The Best Books Of 2016
- CBC Best Canadian Debut Novels Of 2016



REVIEWS

“Vermette captures the reader from beginning to end. She creates unforgettable characters with honor, respect and a deft hand. In so doing she holds the reader’s tender love in her capable hands and weaves us right into the story. *The Break* is unforgettable.” – Lee Maracle

“In Vermette’s poetic prose, *The Break* offers a stark portrayal of the adversity that plagues First Nations women in this country – and the strength that helps them survive.” – *Toronto Star*

“With adeptness and sensitivity, Vermette puts a human face to issues that are too-often misunderstood... Vermette is a fully matured literary talent confronting some of our society’s fundamental problems through understated prose that exudes wisdom and emotion. Every page hides beauty amid suffering; love winning out over violence and hate.”– *National Post*

“One of the great Indigenous novels” – *First Nations Voice*

“A debut novel brimming with grace and wisdom, that puts the spotlight on the systemic violence being committed in our country, [*The Break*] is both a wake-up call and a call-to-arms. Vital.” – *Globe and Mail*

“Vermette portrays a wide array of strong, complicated, absolutely believable women, and through them and their hardships offers readers sharp views of race and class issues. This is slice-of-life storytelling at its finest.” – *Publishers Weekly* STARRED REVIEW

This is a debut novel by the Governor General's Literary Award-winning Métis poet Katherena Vermette... Katherena writes with empathy and understanding about people who are living with the pain of intergenerational trauma. The Winnipeg winter she evokes is cold and cruel. But there is such love, loyalty and support in this story. If you enjoy a gripping family saga, I would recommend The Break. - Shelagh Rogers, CBC The Next Chapter

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) The book begins with a shocking act of violence and its investigation by the police. In what way does *The Break* follow the pattern of a more conventional crime or mystery novel, and in what ways does it depart from the forms of these genres?
- 2) The book is organized into four parts, and at the start of each is a short reflection by an unnamed character. How does this point of view provide insight into the events unfolding in the novel?
- 3) At the book's opening Stella is isolated in her home alone with her young children and partly estranged from her family. Why is she distant from her relatives? How do the events of the novel force her to reconsider this distance?
- 4) When we are introduced to Cheryl, she is trying to revive a series of paintings in which she represents her family members as wolf women (47) and at the end of the novel, Cheryl imagines herself and her sisters together, "just wolves with shed skin" (344). What is the intent of these paintings and what does this image reflect for Cheryl? Why does she initially have trouble finding the spark of inspiration for these works?
- 5) The image of the Manitoba Hydro towers recurs throughout the novel. When snow falls on the lines, they buzz constantly, "like a whisper you know is a voice but you can't hear the words" (5). What disparate places do these towers connect? What might they symbolize?
- 6) The book's epigraph comes from Alice Walker: "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." How would you relate this quote to the relative social power – or powerlessness – of the characters in *The Break*? Do they think that they have power? Why or why not?
- 7) What was the initial impetus behind Tommy's decision to become a police officer? Does his sense of the work change over time? How does it affect his relationship with his wife, Hannah?
- 8) The frigid Manitoba winter is so active and powerful a force in the lives of the characters that it is almost a character itself. At what moments in the story does the winter heighten or demonstrate different characters' vulnerability?

9) The novel is told from ten different perspectives; the views converge around the violent act at the centre of the story, but also dip into the past. How does this constantly shifting point of view affect the tension in the plot? Which voices are left out and why?

10) Flora, known in the novel as Kookum, is a powerful matriarch and provides members of her family with a strong sense of connectedness. What do you think is the source of her power? In what specific ways does she care for her family despite being in need of care herself? Near the close of the book, Kookum reflects, “In the end, all that matters is what has been given” (328). Is this an expression of appreciation or resignation? How does it relate to the journey she faced after the death of her daughter Rain?

11) For many characters, the lands of their traditional territories represent sustenance and healing. What is important for these characters about life in the “bush” and how do those connections relate to their lives in the city? What tensions do specific characters face in the pull of these two worlds?

12) Latent and overt racism in the criminal justice system is embodied in the character of Officer Christie, who characterizes the attack in the Break as “nates beating on nates” (72) and calls Officer Scott “May-tee.” What are the origins of Officer Christie’s beliefs? Over the course of the novel, does he demonstrate any capacity to change?

13) Jake and Sunny seem vulnerable to the draws of gang life. Over the long run, do you think that they will enter that life or avoid it? What clues do we have? How might the violence that Ziggy and Emily faced shape the boys’ paths?

14) In 2016, the federal government launched an independent inquiry into the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Its mandate is to explore the “systemic causes behind the violence that Indigenous women and girls and their greater vulnerability to that violence by looking for patterns and underlying factors that explain why higher levels of violence occur.” In what ways does *The Break* comment on these patterns or underlying factors of violence against Indigenous women, if at all?

15) Phoenix willfully ignores the idea that her unborn child will have to go into care. Instead, she dreams about pushing a stroller down the sidewalk, the way she did with her baby sister Sparrow. What does this mental image of Phoenix’s reveal about her sense of herself, her history, and her state of mind at the end of the novel?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Amnesty International Book Club featured The Break in September / October 2018, as recommended by author Angie Abdou. Here are some of their discussion questions.

- 1) Vermette often refers to shame in describing the emotions of her characters. In chapter nine when Pauline learns that her daughter has been raped, her first response is to feel shame. Why shame? Why not sadness or anger or helplessness or despair? Where else is this shame response mirrored in the novel?
- 2) Compare Christie's racism and Hannah's racism. How are they different? How are they the same? How does each justify their racial prejudice? What effects do their behaviours and comments have on Tommy? How do Christie and Hannah respond when confronted with these effects? How is the reader-experience shaped by having these two as the only well-developed, non-Indigenous characters?
- 3) How did The Break change your perceptions of victims and perpetrators of violence?
- 4) How did your feelings toward Phoenix evolve as you read the book?
- 5) In what ways have the characters given up their power in the course of the novel? In what specific ways do they begin to reclaim it? Where do you see these characters' strength at the end of the novel? What future do you see for them? How is that future pointed at in the final chapter? How might it extend beyond the pages of the book?

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- Amnesty International Book Club