



# THE GROVE

*Brooks Whitney Phillips*

Viking / Penguin Random House

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## READING GROUP GUIDE

For Book Clubs and Literary Societies

\* Publishers Weekly Starred Review \* School Library Journal Starred Review \* YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults  
Marianne Russo Award for Novel-in-Progress -- Key West Literary Seminar

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## About This Edition

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### PUBLICATION DETAILS

- Publisher: Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House
- Publication date: June 17, 2025
- Formats available: hardcover, ebook, audiobook

### RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

- YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults
- Publishers Weekly Starred Review
- School Library Journal Starred Review
- Marianne Russo Award for Novel-in-Progress, Key West Literary Seminar

### INTENDED READERSHIP

The Grove is recommended for readers aged 14 and older. Though categorized as young adult fiction by virtue of its teenage protagonists, the novel's themes -- poverty, first love, racial and class tension in the American South, and the grief of a world transforming beyond recognition -- speak with equal force to adult readers. Book clubs composed entirely of adults will find the novel as rich and demanding as any literary fiction of its kind.

### THE NOVEL IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL FICTION

The Grove arrives at a moment of renewed literary attention to the mid-20th century American South -- a body of work that has moved beyond genteel nostalgia toward the complexity and moral weight the era demands. It joins a tradition of American coming-of-age fiction that takes the particularity of a place and an era with absolute seriousness: novels in which the world of childhood is also the world of history, in which what is local is also universal, and in which what is lost is worth mourning without being sentimentalized. Its recognition by YALSA and its starred reviews from Publishers Weekly and School Library Journal confirm what readers are already discovering: this is a novel for all the readers it finds.

## A Letter to Readers from Brooks Whitney Phillips

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*Dear Reader,*

*The Grove began in a room full of women at the Key West Library. We were a writing group of different ages and different stages in our work, gathered to do what writers do in rooms like that: write something we weren't sure we could, read it aloud, and see what happened.*

*The prompt that produced the first pages of this novel didn't announce itself as important. These things rarely do. But what came out surprised me -- not because it was finished (it was the furthest thing from finished) but because it felt true in a way I recognized immediately. I had been carrying the Florida of my girlhood for years without knowing quite what to do with it. The red clay roads. The particular weight of orange-scented air in spring. The way a small community can hold you so completely that you can't quite see around it to the world outside.*

*When my writing group heard those first pages, the room went quiet in a particular way -- not the silence of confusion but the silence of recognition. That silence told me this was a story worth staying with. Years of work followed: the kind that gets done in stolen hours, in notebooks that accumulate faster than they get typed up, in the early-morning quiet before the rest of the world is awake.*

*The Marianne Russo Award from the Key West Literary Seminar was the signal I needed: what had begun as a prompt had become a book. And Viking was the home I had hoped for -- a publisher that understood this was not only a young adult novel but a novel about what it costs to grow up in a world that is changing faster than anyone can name.*

*I hope you find in Pip and Sissy something that speaks to your own experience of love and loss, of the particular grief of things that cannot be held. And I hope the conversations this guide opens are as surprising and as generous as the ones I've been lucky enough to have since this book found its readers.*

*With gratitude and love,*

*Brooks Whitney Phillips*

## About The Grove

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It is the summer of 1962 in rural Central Florida, and the world is on the edge of something. The orange groves that have sustained the Phillips family for generations are struggling. The country is changing in ways that reach even this remote community -- felt more than understood, present but not yet named. And when a traveling carnival arrives at the edge of town, sisters Pip and Sissy discover that the outside world has finally come to find them.

Told with the precision of a writer who has spent years listening to how people carry their lives, *The Grove* is a coming-of-age novel of unusual emotional intelligence. It is a story about sisterhood at its most complicated: the love that holds two people together and the resentment that can pull them apart. It is a story about poverty and land and what it means to inherit a place that is fading. And it is a story about desire -- for love, for freedom, for a life larger than the one you were born into -- and what it costs to want those things before the world has decided you are allowed to want them.

The Florida that Brooks Whitney Phillips depicts is largely gone: the orange groves devastated by the great freezes of the 1980s, the landscape transformed by development, the way of life that sustained generations replaced by something unrecognizable. *The Grove* is, among other things, an act of literary preservation -- a sustained attention to a world that deserves to be remembered with accuracy and love.

*"With love, you need the sour to savor the sweet."*

-- *The Grove* -- tagline

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## About Brooks Whitney Phillips

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Brooks Whitney Phillips is an author, journalist, and freelance writer. She wrote a syndicated column and feature stories for the Chicago Tribune and has contributed to national publications on travel, design, and the arts.

Phillips is the recipient of the Marianne Russo Award for Novel-in-Progress from the Key West Literary Seminar, one of the most important literary institutions in American letters. The award is given to a work of fiction that demonstrates exceptional literary merit and the promise of a significant contribution to American literature.

The Grove began as a writing prompt at an all-women's writing group that met at the Key West Library. Phillips has described the novel as a story she had been carrying for years before she found the room and the permission to write it. "It was always bubbling underneath," she has said. "I just needed the right moment -- the right room, the right prompt -- to let it surface."

The Grove was acquired by Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House with a history of publishing literary fiction of consequence. It was published on June 17, 2025, to starred reviews from Publishers Weekly and School Library Journal, and was selected as a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults.

Brooks Whitney Phillips is available for virtual and in-person book club visits. Visit [thegrovenovel.com](http://thegrovenovel.com) for visit information and contact details.

### A NOTE ON READING THE GROVE TOGETHER

This guide is designed for book clubs, literary societies, and reading groups of any composition. The Grove works equally well with groups of adult readers, groups of mixed ages, and groups reading it alongside other YA or literary fiction. Its themes are universal; its craft is uncompromising; its emotional intelligence belongs to no single audience.

The discussion questions in this guide are grouped by theme rather than by chapter. This approach allows groups to move through the novel's ideas rather than its plot -- to linger where the conversation is most alive. Discussion leaders are encouraged to choose four or five questions per session rather than attempting to cover all of them.

Some of the themes in *The Grove* -- race, class, desire, and the structural inequities of mid-century rural America -- may surface emotion or disagreement. This is not a problem to be managed but an opportunity to be received. The novel does not resolve its tensions, and neither should your group be expected to.

## Discussion Questions

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### Sisters and Sisterhood

01. Pip and Sissy navigate their bond in very different ways. Which sister do you find yourself understanding more readily -- and does that shift as the story progresses?
02. The sisters' love for each other exists alongside real resentment and rivalry. How does Phillips portray the ambivalence at the heart of close sisterhood without resolving it in either direction?
03. At several points the sisters keep significant things from each other. What is the cost of those silences? What do they protect, and what do they damage?
04. How does each sister define freedom -- and does that definition change by the novel's end? What has each sister learned about what freedom actually requires?
05. The novel is told from one sister's perspective. What do we understand about the other that the narrator cannot fully see? How does Phillips create this gap, and what does it ask of us as readers?

### Place, Land, and Belonging

01. How does the orange grove function as something more than a setting -- as a character with its own interiority and fate? What moments in the novel make the land feel alive?
02. The family's relationship to the land is economic, emotional, and historical at once. How does Phillips distinguish these layers without letting any one dominate?
03. What does the grove mean to the sisters that it cannot mean to their parents? How does generational distance change a relationship to a place?
04. The landscape is described in extraordinary sensory detail. Which details have stayed with you? What do they reveal about the world of the novel?
05. Central Florida in this era is depicted as a world on the verge of transformation. How does the novel hold the present and the future simultaneously?

## **Race, Class, and the World at the Margins**

01. Pip and Sissy encounter racial and class inequity mostly through glimpses -- moments that register without being fully named. Is this narrative approach a limitation or a strength? What does it make possible that explicit confrontation would not?
02. Who works in the grove, and whose labor goes unmarked in the family's understanding of their own livelihood? How does Phillips draw attention to this without making it the explicit subject of the story?
03. The Civil Rights Movement is happening elsewhere while this story unfolds. How does that geographic and experiential distance shape what the characters are able to understand?
04. How does the novel treat poverty -- with neither sentimentality nor condescension? What specific choices does Phillips make to honor the material reality of her characters' lives?
05. Are there moments where a character sees more clearly than she admits -- where understanding is present but unnamed? How does Phillips signal this to the reader?

## First Love, Desire, and Vulnerability

01. First love in this novel is closely bound up with danger and uncertainty. What makes desire and risk so inseparable for the sisters?
02. How does each sister's experience of desire reflect her broader relationship to the world outside the grove? What do the objects of their longing reveal about who each sister is?
03. The novel treats the body -- its wants, its labor, its pleasures and exhaustion -- with unusual directness. What is the effect of this?
04. Disappointment is as central to the novel's treatment of love as longing is. Does the novel suggest a necessary relationship between the two?
05. The novel does not offer easy consolation around love. What does it suggest love is actually for, in the lives of people who have very little?

## The Carnival as Catalyst

01. Why is it the carnival, specifically, that changes things? What does its particular form of beauty and transgression make possible that nothing else in the world of the novel could?
02. The carnival workers occupy an unusual social position -- itinerant, outside the established order. What do they represent to the sisters beyond the simple idea of freedom?
03. The carnival arrives and then departs. Is the novel as interested in what the carnival leaves behind as in what it brings?
04. The ferris wheel is a recurring image in the novel. What does height -- the view from above one's own small life -- mean in this story?

## Endings, Loss, and What Remains

01. What has the grove come to represent by the novel's final pages -- and is that meaning hopeful, elegiac, or both?
02. The novel is set at the beginning of Central Florida's transformation into something unrecognizable. Does it mourn that transformation? And if so, what exactly does it mourn?
03. What does the ending leave open, and what does that openness suggest about the sisters' futures?
04. The tagline -- "With love, you need the sour to savor the sweet" -- reads differently at the end of the novel than before. How? What has the novel done to change it?
05. If you had to name what the novel is, finally, about -- not its subjects or its plot, but its deepest concern -- what would you say?

## Questions for Readers Who Have Finished the Novel

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The following questions engage with the ending, with retrospective patterns, and with the cumulative effect of the whole. Groups in which all members have not finished the novel may wish to return to these at a later meeting.

01. Looking back at the novel's opening pages with the whole story in mind: what was already present that you didn't fully see on first reading?
02. The novel's central loss is prepared for long before it arrives. How does Phillips create this sense of inevitability? What is the relationship between inevitability and grief?
03. Does the novel ultimately offer its characters hope? And if so, what kind -- the kind that comes from possibility, or the kind that comes from learning to see clearly?
04. Which moment in the novel do you find most difficult to hold, and why?
05. How has your sense of either sister changed from your first impression to the last page? Which of those changes feels most earned?
06. The novel ends where it does rather than further along in the sisters' lives. Why does it end here? What would be gained or lost by extending it?
07. If you could ask Brooks Whitney Phillips one question about the writing of this novel, what would it be?

## Themes and Motifs

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### Impermanence and the Fading World

At every level of the novel -- the family's financial precarity, the decline of the groves, the transformation of the larger landscape -- *The Grove* is a book about things that are ending. Phillips treats this impermanence not as cause for simple nostalgia but as a condition that shapes character: what it is to grow up in a world whose erasure is already underway, even if you cannot yet see it clearly.

### The Body and Labor

The novel is unusually attentive to physical experience -- to the labor of growing things, of maintaining a household on limited resources, of the particular exhaustion of women's invisible work. This attention connects the private experience of the body to the larger economic and social structures that shape it.

### Visibility and Invisibility

Who is seen, and who is not, is one of the novel's central preoccupations. The migrant workers in the grove are present but unacknowledged; the sisters themselves are often invisible to the adult world around them; the Civil Rights Movement is happening but not yet visible from where the characters stand.

### The Inside and the Outside

The grove is the world the sisters know; the carnival is the world they do not. This spatial opposition organizes the novel's emotional geography. The sisters' development is measured by how much of the outside world they are able to see, and what seeing it costs.

### The Sour and the Sweet

The novel's central tagline -- "With love, you need the sour to savor the sweet" -- is the novel's deepest philosophical proposition: that genuine joy is inseparable from genuine grief, and that a life that has not encountered loss cannot fully experience love. This is what the sisters are learning, at great cost, throughout the book.

## Symbolism Analysis

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### The Orange Grove

The grove is home, inheritance, confinement, and identity simultaneously. It is what the family has and what it is threatened with losing; it is the source of their livelihood and the boundary of their visible world. As the grove's health becomes uncertain across the novel, the symbol expands: the grove is also what cannot be held, what time and weather and economic forces will eventually take.

### The Carnival

The carnival represents possibility and danger in equal measure -- the outside world arriving in all its glamour and moral complexity. Its lights are beautiful; its workers are free in ways the sisters can barely imagine; and its departure leaves something in its wake that cannot be unfelt.

### The Ferris Wheel

Height, and the view from height, is the ferris wheel's deepest meaning. On a ferris wheel you can see beyond the treeline -- can see, for a moment, that your own life is small and the world is larger. This is both exhilarating and terrifying, and Phillips uses it to mark a threshold: the moment a character crosses from the world she was born into to the knowledge that another world exists.

### Orange Blossoms and Frost

Orange blossoms -- heavy, sweet, arriving every spring -- are the smell of both beauty and labor; they are what the grove promises and what it demands. Frost is the opposite: the uncontrollable force that makes promises meaningless. Together, these two forces organize the novel's emotional rhythm -- the expectation of sweetness and the ever-present threat of its destruction.

## Character Discussion Guide

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### Pip

Pip is the sister through whose consciousness the novel's world is organized. She is observant in the way of people who have had to be -- who have learned to read their environment carefully because the consequences of misreading are real. Her desire for something beyond the grove is real, and so is her love for it.

### Sissy

Sissy is the sister the novel circles rather than inhabits directly. We understand her through Pip's love and frustration and admiration -- through a narrator who sees her clearly in some moments and not at all in others. Sissy's desires are different from Pip's, and her relationship to the grove and to the carnival's possibilities is her own. She is, in the fullest sense, her own person -- which is the most important thing the novel eventually understands about her.

### The Community

The world of the novel is populated with the particularity of someone who has listened carefully to how people like this actually speak and move and organize their lives. The adults around the sisters -- parents, neighbors, workers in the grove -- are not backdrop but context: a social world the sisters are embedded in and beginning, slowly, to see clearly.

### Discussion Questions

01. Which character in the novel do you find most surprising? What surprised you about them?
02. How does the novel use minor characters to illuminate the sisters' situation? Who stands out?
03. At the end of the novel, how would you describe each sister in one sentence? Compare with how you would have described them at the beginning.

## Historical Context Notes

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### Central Florida in 1962

The Florida that *The Grove* depicts was not the Florida most people know today. In 1962, Central Florida had no theme parks, no sprawl of hotels and interstate exchanges. The Walt Disney World Resort would not open until 1971, and when it did, it would transform the region into one of the world's most visited tourist destinations. In 1962, it was still a place of orange trees and cattle ranches, of quiet county roads between small towns with populations in the hundreds.

### The Citrus Economy

Florida's citrus industry in the early 1960s was at near-peak production. The state produced the majority of the nation's orange juice. For smaller family operations, the economics were precarious: a single hard freeze could destroy a year's crop, prices fluctuated with national markets, and the labor of picking -- done largely by migrant workers, many of them Black or Caribbean -- was exploitative in ways that grove-owning families rarely examined directly.

### The Civil Rights Era

The early 1960s were a period of enormous pressure on the rural South. The Civil Rights Movement was reshaping what was permissible. In isolated communities like the one in *The Grove*, this national movement was felt more than understood -- present at the edges of awareness, shaping the structures of everyday life in ways the characters experience without yet having language for.

### Florida Crackers

The people of rural Central Florida in this era were often called "Florida Crackers" -- a term with complex origins that came to refer to the old-stock families of the state's interior. They were people of the land, shaped by rhythms of harvest and frost, holding onto a way of life that was already beginning to slip away.

## Suggested Further Reading

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The following titles are suggested for readers who wish to explore the themes, history, and literary tradition that The Grove inhabits.

### FLORIDA LITERATURE

-- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937) -- Set in Eatonville, Florida, Hurston's masterpiece follows Janie Crawford through three marriages and the discovery of her voice. No novel captures the interiority of a Black woman's life in rural Florida with more precision or beauty.

-- *A Land Remembered* by Patrick D. Smith (1984) -- Smith's epic spans three generations of a Florida family across 125 years, from the scrub frontier to the citrus era to the real estate boom. An essential portrait of the state's transformation.

-- *Swamplandia!* by Karen Russell (2011) -- A strange and luminous novel set in the Florida Everglades. Russell's Florida is fever-dream vivid, and her eye for the rural grotesque is unsparing.

### COMING-OF-AGE FICTION

-- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960) -- The most canonical American coming-of-age novel of the Southern 20th century, told from a child's perspective at the moment she begins to understand the moral complexity of the world she was born into.

-- *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith (1943) -- Shares with *The Grove* a focus on poverty, female desire, and the complicated love of family in hard times.

-- *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd (2002) -- Set in South Carolina in 1964, this novel's Civil Rights era setting and exploration of female community make it a natural companion to *The Grove*.

### SOUTHERN FICTION

-- *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward (2011) -- Ward's portrait of rural poverty and Southern Black life is as precise as it is devastating, and her prose is among the most powerful in contemporary American fiction.

-- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987) -- Morrison's masterpiece of the Reconstruction-era South. Essential for any serious reading of American history through fiction.

-- *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982) -- Its focus on sisterhood, resilience, and the discovery of voice makes it a powerful conversation partner for *The Grove*.

## Book Club Hosting Tips

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- Consider serving citrus-themed refreshments as a nod to the novel's setting: orange tea, lemon bars, fresh citrus slices. The sensory connection to the world of the novel is not a gimmick -- it is a way of bringing the body into the conversation before the first word is spoken.
- Allow the first fifteen minutes for settling in and brief impressions before moving to the discussion questions. Asking "What stayed with you?" before "What do you think the novel means?" opens more honest and interesting conversation.
- Don't feel obligated to cover every question in this guide. Choose five or six that feel most alive for your group, and stay with them until they are genuinely exhausted.
- If some members haven't finished the novel, acknowledge it directly and use the "Questions for Readers Who Have Finished" section only at the end, after all members have read through.
- Consider beginning or ending with the tagline: "With love, you need the sour to savor the sweet." Ask what it means before reading the novel, then return to the question after. The difference will be the conversation itself.

## Discussion Leader Tips

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- Questions about race and class may surface discomfort. Acknowledge this directly: the novel is designed to generate this discomfort, and it does not resolve it. Your group need not resolve it either.
- Silence can be generative. If a question produces quiet, wait. The most interesting responses often come after the first long pause.
- Track who has and hasn't spoken. Invite quieter members: "We haven't heard from you yet -- what's your reading of this?"
- If the group gets stuck, return to the text: "Does anyone remember a specific moment in the novel where you felt that?"
- End by asking what members will carry away rather than what they have concluded. The Grove is a novel that stays with you; make room for that in how you close.

## Suggested Meeting Structure

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### 90-MINUTE FORMAT

- 0-15 min: Welcome; brief first impressions ("What stayed with you?")
- 15-35 min: Discussion of the sisters and their relationship
- 35-60 min: Core thematic questions -- race, class, place, desire
- 60-75 min: The ending; questions for readers who have finished
- 75-85 min: Themes, symbolism, the author's craft
- 85-90 min: What you'll carry away; next steps

### 60-MINUTE FORMAT

- 0-10 min: First impressions and general reactions
- 10-38 min: 4-5 core discussion questions, chosen in advance
- 38-52 min: Themes and symbolism
- 52-60 min: What you'll carry away; announcements

## Invite Brooks Whitney Phillips to Your Book Club

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Brooks Whitney Phillips is available for virtual and in-person book club visits. If your group is reading *The Grove*, please reach out through [thegrovenovel.com](http://thegrovenovel.com) to arrange a conversation. Virtual visits can accommodate groups nationwide.

When contacting Brooks, please share: your group's name and approximate size, your preferred date and format (virtual or in-person), and any specific themes or questions you'd most like to explore with her.

**The Grove**

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