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UCF Alumni Book Club

When No One Is Watching by Alyssa Cole

Book Discussion Guide

Book Description

Sydney Green is Brooklyn born and raised, but her beloved neighborhood seems to change every time she blinks. Condos are sprouting like weeds, FOR SALE signs are popping up overnight, and the neighbors she's known all her life are disappearing.

To hold onto her community's past and present, Sydney channels her frustration into a walking tour and finds an unlikely and unwanted assistant in one of the new arrivals to the block—her neighbor Theo.

But Sydney and Theo's deep dive into history quickly becomes a dizzying descent into paranoia and fear. Their neighbors may not have moved to the suburbs after all, and the push to revitalize the community may be more deadly than advertised.

When does coincidence become conspiracy? Where do people go when gentrification pushes them out? Can Sydney and Theo trust each other—or themselves—long enough to find out before they too disappear?

About the Author

Alyssa Cole is a New York Times and USA Today Bestselling author of romance (historical, contemporary, and sci-fi) and thrillers. Her Civil War-set espionage romance *An Extraordinary Union* was the American Library Association's RUSA Best Romance for 2018, and *A Princess in Theory* was one of the New York Times' 100 Notable Books of 2018. She's contributed to publications including Bustle, Shondaland, The Toast, Vulture, RT Book Reviews, and Heroes and Heartbreakers, and her books have received critical acclaim from The New York Times, Library Journal, BuzzFeed, Kirkus, Booklist, Jezebel, Vulture, Book Riot, Entertainment Weekly, and various other outlets. When she's not working, she can usually be found watching anime or wrangling her pets.

Book-Specific Questions

- Share your thoughts on Sydney's relationship with her ex-husband Marcus. How did you feel this contributed to the story?
- Did you feel Sydney was a reliable narrator?
- Share your thoughts on the pacing of the events in the novel, all this happened in one week.
- What did you think of the scene in the Uber? Did you think that was all in Sydney's head?
- How did you feel about the scene at the garden?
 - Theo was the one who actually told someone about the lot, this is sort of brushed over during a busy part of the novel. Thoughts?
- Letter at the beginning of the novel: "I think it's best to read *When No One is Watching* without knowing too much going in." Did you read a lot about this novel before you started?
- Did you like the chapters switching back and forth POV between Theo/Sydney? Would preferred to just have Sydney, or do you think we needed Theo's view of the story? Is there anyone else's POV you'd like to see?
- This author typically writes romance novels, what did you think of this story as a thriller? Was there enough romance? Too much for a thriller? Did there need to be a romantic relationship between Theo and Sydney?
- Share your thoughts on what happened with Sydney's mother. When did you start to suspect something was up?
- Did you find some of the interactions with the new neighbors relatable to any of your own personal experiences?
- What was the most shocking part of the novel for you?
- At what point in the book did you have an idea what was going on? What was the key clue that gave it away?
- Thoughts on the ending? Was it too rushed? Did you feel satisfied with the ending?

- Are there lingering questions from the book you're still thinking about?
- Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

Questions From Book Reading Guide

- Sydney returns to her Brooklyn neighborhood only to discover that the surrounding areas have changed incredibly fast in the few years she was gone, and her own block is changing before her eyes.
 - How has the neighborhood where you currently live, or the area where you grew up, changed over the past few years?
 - In what ways were those changes good or bad for the people living in those neighborhoods?
- In the story, people living in Gifford Place use the app OurHood, similar to real-life apps like Nextdoor, to share information.
 - Do you use these kinds of apps?
 - If so, do you think they help build a sense of community or cause rifts? What has been your experience?
 - Did you like the segments in between chapters with chats from the App? Did you feel like it added to the story?
- What is it about Theo's and Sydney's backgrounds and personalities that draws them together?
- Theo has had a rough life but thought he'd finally started to turn things around, with his relationship with a rich, successful woman, a better job, and home ownership.
 - In what ways has Theo's past experience left him unprepared for the way his life starts to spiral out, and in what ways is it helpful?
- Sydney and Theo are researching Brooklyn history for Sydney's tour, which is designed to highlight the Black American history that has been erased from history books.
 - Would you say that you've been exposed to much information about Black American life throughout history, outside of the general Black History Month staples?
- While evil does lurk in Gifford Place, many of the methods used to take homes are commonplace in reality: skyrocketing rent, pressure from realtors, property tax increases, scam loans, and using arrest (and the costs that come with legal fees and bail funds) to force people's hands.

- Have you ever witness any of these tactics in your own community?
- What do you think communities can do to push back against this?
- At the end of the book, we see reports from all around America about communities being destroyed by gentrification. What do you imagine happens next, once people begin to band together?

Resources

Author Website

<https://alyssacole.com/>

Audio Excerpt

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fyu5rWLCAMU>

Additional Reading Material

"Why Black Homeowners in Brooklyn Are Being Victimized by Fraud"

Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/nyregion/deed-theft-brooklyn.html?fbclid=IwAR3dSEmT8-Mt7jAKtFrWXa4gg2mYIbA7JYnhavNFQdcaJHnYXTmYZIacdLs>

There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up by Lance Freeman

The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History by Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby

Various Articles on the architectural history of Brooklyn at brownstoner.com

<https://www.brownstoner.com/author/montrosemorris/>

"To Be a Slave in Brooklyn"

Brent Staples

<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/24/magazine/to-be-a-slave-in-brooklyn.html?fbclid=IwAR3adHb4Zhm575EbfMqZyV8JoY7B43jJd7P7Jyh4WpEgLmHGohB1ge3kwSw>

Brooklyn's Promised Lane: The Free Black Community of Weeksville, New York by Judith Wellman

A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn by Craig Steven Wilder

There Goes the Neighborhood, season 1 (podcast)
<http://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/neighborhood/season-one>