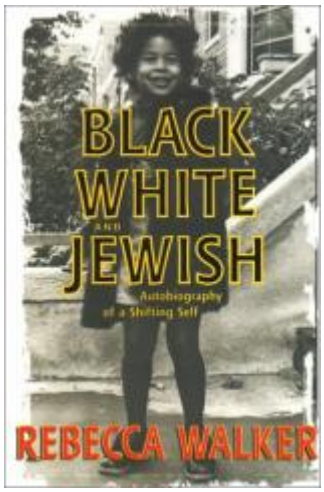
Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self

by Rebecca Walker



About the Book

Set on Kudufontein, a remote farm on the border between South Africa and an unnamed country in the 1970s, **A Blade of Grass** is a charged and complex exploration of apartheid and its consequences. The story centers on Märit Laurens, a young woman of British descent, orphaned and recently married to Ben, whom she joins to live on their newly purchased farm. Not long after their arrival, violence strikes at the heart of Märit's world, leaving her alone and isolated. Devastated, alone, but determined to keep the farm running, Märit turns for companionship and guidance to her young black housekeeper, Tembi, who is in a similar predicament but for different reasons.

Soon Märit finds herself in the middle of a simmering battle between the local Afrikaner community that surrounds her farm and the black workers who live on it, with both vying for control over her land in the wake of tragedy. Facing obstacles of biblical proportions, Tembi and Märit forge a close bond, relying on each other, what's left of their land, and their wits to survive.

Strangers and wanderers insinuate themselves into their sheltered world, including Michael, the mute musician who charms their farmyard animals, and Khoza, a mysterious, sinister figure who upsets the tenuous peace and security Tembi and Märit have found in each other. Perhaps the greatest threat to their world is the encroaching civil war and its soldiers who stir up conflicting loyalties that turn Märit and Tembi's fight for the farm into a struggle for their lives.

Discussion Guide

1. While most teenagers struggle to move away from their parents, Rebecca Walker searches for closeness with her immediate and extended families. Why is it so difficult for her to enjoy the independence she is given?

2. Rebecca recalls how a drunk student walks into her dorm room at Yale and asks if she is "really black and Jewish." After he leaves, Rebecca sits in the dark wondering whether she is "possible." Self -doubt appears to be a recurring theme in her life. How do her self-perceptions change as she moves between her parents' houses, from Brooklyn to Atlanta to Washington DC to San Francisco to Bronx to Larchmont and back to San Francisco? Discuss her experiences in different neighborhoods and how her self-acceptance is shaped by social acceptance.

3. Rebecca becomes sexually active earlier than an average teenager. What is the meaning of sex in her life? How has it changed since her early experiences? Does she manage to find her true identity through her lovers? Discuss her experience with Michael and with Andrew. How does the color of their skin (Michael is black, Andrew is white) affect their relationships with Rebecca?

4. What was your reaction to Rebecca having an abortion at the age of 14? Can you explain why she didn't grieve for her unborn child?

5. Rebecca is candid about her experimentation with drugs. Do you think she really had a choice not to take them? Discuss how our peers can sometimes make decisions for us and why we accept their decisions.

6. What does it mean to Rebecca to be a "movement child"? How-- if at all-- does the meaning change from the beginning of the book, when she sees her parents happily married, to the end, when she struggles with their uneasiness during her graduation party?

7. Throughout her childhood and adolescence and after her parents divorced, Rebecca must make choices between her mother's African American heritage and her father's Jewish heritage. Has she found peace with herself being biracial and thus "the translator, the one in between, the one serving as the walkway between two worlds"? Or, has she chosen one over the other? Why does she feel more of an affinity towards her black ancestors?

8. The book begins and ends with a discussion of memory. What is the meaning of memory in Rebecca's life? Does she refer to her brain's ability to retain information or to some deeper innate knowledge? What knowledge is it? What is "genetic memory"? What role does it play in our lives? How does the discussion on memory at the beginning differ from the one at the end?

9. What is significance of the subtitle? Why does Rebecca refer to her self as "a *shifting* self"? Has she found a place where she is no longer "shifting"?

Author Bio

Rebecca Walker was educated at Yale University, and her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and publications, including *Harper's*, the Utne Reader, *Vibe*, and *Spin*. She has hosted television forums and produced segments for national and public television, and is a founder of Third Wave Foundation, the only national activist philanthropic organization for young women between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Walker has lived most recently in New York City and now resides in northern California.

Rebecca Walker was educated at Yale University, and her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and publications, including *Harper's*, the Utne Reader, *Vibe*, and *Spin*. She has hosted television forums and produced segments for national and public television, and is a founder of Third Wave Foundation, the only national activist philanthropic organization for young women between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Walker has lived most recently in New York City and now resides in northern California.

Critical Praise

" The daughter of famed African American writer Alice Walker and liberal Jewish lawyer Mel Leventhal brings a frank, spare style and detail-rich memories to this compelling contribution to the growing subgenre of memoirs by biracial authors about life in a race-obsessed society. Her artfulness in baring her psyche will, spirit and sexuality will attract a wealth of deserved praise. "-***Publishers Weekly***

Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self
by Rebecca Walker

Publication Date: December 28, 2000
Genres: Memoir, Nonfiction
Hardcover: 288 pages
Publisher: Riverhead Hardcover
ISBN-10: 1573221694
ISBN-13: 9781573221696