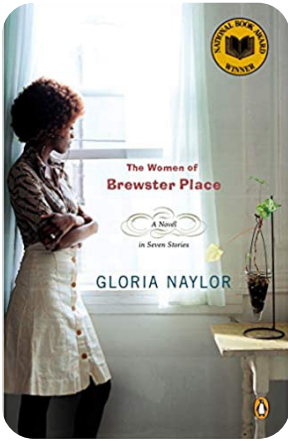


## A WISE book discussion

### *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor



*The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor chronicles the stories of seven Black women and how they all came to live in a tenement called Brewster Place. While each woman's journey to Brewster Place is unique, they all contend with the realities of being a Black woman in the United States following the Civil Rights Era. The book explores the ways that race, gender, sexuality, class, and violence impact the women both independently and collectively.

When Mattie is young in Tennessee, Mattie's mother tells her that Mattie's father, "lives and breathes" for Mattie. Mattie herself mentions many times that her father loves her and wants to protect her. Even so, when she gets pregnant, Mattie's father beats her nearly to death when she refuses to reveal the identity of her baby's father. **What is this teaching Mattie about love? What might she come to expect in her romantic relationships?**

Eugene, the father of Ciel's child, is constantly referring to Mattie as a "fat bitch," and is very hostile towards her. He repeatedly tells Ciel that he does not want Ciel or her daughter spending time with Mattie. **Why does Eugene target Mattie specifically? Why might he want to isolate Ciel from her? What is the significance of the word "bitch" in our culture? Why does he use that word in particular? How else does Eugene maintain power over Ciel?**

Etta Mae leaves her hometown because she was ostracized for being "a Black woman who is not only unwilling to play by the rules, but whose spirit challenged the very right of the game to exist." She is independent, looks white people "straight in the face," has sex outside of marriage, and only smiles when she is genuinely pleased. **What rules are she refusing to follow? How are these rules specific to her as a Black woman?**

When Kiswana's wealthy mother comes to visit her, they have an argument about Kiswana's choice to live at Brewster Place instead of in the more affluent part of town with her parents. They argue about whether it is necessary for Kiswana to live in poverty in order to advocate for other poor Black people. At the end of the argument, Kiswana realizes that, "her mother had trod through the same universe that she herself was now traveling." **What does she mean by this statement? What does her realization suggest about the oppression of Black women?**

Cora Lee's sister tells their mother that Cora was "doing nasty" with the Murphy boy behind the steps. Cora Lee describes the encounter as "the thing that felt good in the dark," but adults - mostly women - around her imply that sex is "dirty," shameful, and "disgusting." **Why are these particular words used to describe sex women are having? How does that impact women and girls? How is it different than the ways people talk about men and boys having sex? How does it support victim-blaming?**

When the neighbors at Brewster Place realize that Lorraine and Theresa are lesbians, many of them start to shun the two women, gossip about them, and call their relationship "sinful" and "unnatural." C.C. Baker is threatened by Lorraine because she has no interest in men and therefore is beyond "the length of [his] power." When he and his friends gang rape Lorraine in the alley, they are using sexual violence to punish her for making them feel threatened and for violating gender norms. **What gender norms did Lorraine violate? What are other ways that violence is used to uphold gender norms? Why is Lorraine's sexuality threatening to C.C. Baker and his friends and their power?**

Would you like a WISE educator to help facilitate a conversation with your book group?  
Please contact Kate at 603-448-5922 ext. 111 and we can explore these and other thoughts together.