

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO



FROM THE AUTHOR

Forgive Me Not is the story of a family—a family impacted by many events. This novel is narrated by teenage siblings, Violetta and Vincent Chen-Samuels. In writing this book, I aim to respond to questions about what forgiveness and justice might look like, and I chose to have this book take place in an alternate landscape that's very similar to our own present day. Tough themes are tackled in the text, primarily the criminal justice system, forgiveness, fitting in, grief, and the pressures of perfection. I hope this educator's guide helps model some classroom discussions about the characters, setting, and topics, or that it might provide suggestions on potential ways to encourage analysis and expression. Thank you so much for reading.



PRAISE FOR FORGIVE ME NOT

“Jennifer Baker crafts a riveting, heartbreaking, and ultimately redemptive tale with nuanced characters that are perfectly flawed and relatable . . . A groundbreaking debut that will stay with the reader long after the story ends.”

—**RENÉE WATSON**,
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
The 1619 Project: Born on the Water

“[An] overarching interrogation of blame, guilt, and self-forgiveness.”

—**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**

“A potent reminder of the personal and societal harm caused by dehumanizing systems.”

—**RANDY RIBAY**, author of
National Book Award finalist *Patron Saints of Nothing*

“Shines a necessary and dignifying light on the young people trapped in a broken system of justice. This novel radiates with the redemptive power of love and forgiveness.”

—**BRENDAN KIELY**,
coauthor of the *New York Times* bestselling
All American Boys and *The Other Talk*

★“A powerful and passionate statement about real justice embedded in a well-constructed plot populated by vivid characters.”

—**BOOKLIST**,
starred review

“Baker’s writing excels at showing rather than telling through vivid details.”

—**KIRKUS REVIEWS**

This Educator’s Guide was edited and reviewed by Jess deCourcy Hinds, a school librarian, writer, and adjunct faculty in youth literature at the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at Queens College, CUNY.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Can you point to three examples in the book where Violetta seems like a “typical” teenager—someone who is relatable and vulnerable? What does this character have in common with other kids/teens you know? Does Violetta remind you of yourself at all? Find three quotes in the book to support your statements.
- 2.** In *Forgive Me Not*, the criminal justice system resembles the one in the United States, but the main difference in this fictional world is that the victims get to decide how perpetrators are punished. What do you think about this alternate reality? What are some of the positive aspects of this other system? What might be the drawbacks?
- 3.** Counselor Susan tells Violetta “You are not your worst mistake” (p. 133). Do you agree or disagree with this statement in general? What does it mean to you? What does this mean to Violetta? Does Violetta begin to believe this about herself—and does her family begin to believe it too?
- 4.** Go back through the book and reread Violetta’s letters to her deceased sister, Vivian (pp. 100, 197, 331). What did you learn from these letters? Did they show you anything about Violetta’s character that you didn’t know before? Why do you think someone who is grieving might write letters to someone who died?
- 5.** On page 86, Violetta reveals some of her deepest feelings to Cassie. On page 344, Vincent also confides in Levi. Why do you think they choose to share their feelings with some people and not others? Why is it hard for Violetta and Vincent to talk (or write) to some people about what they’re experiencing?
- 6.** While reflecting on the ways people can change in detention, Violetta asks, “Do I look like I deserve to be here because they’ve made me look that way?” (p. 220). Who is the “they” in that sentence? Name a few examples (either from *Forgive Me Not* or elsewhere) when you saw someone’s appearance being used in a stereotypical way, or to fulfill a narrative about them. (See #6 in Activities for an exercise related to this question.)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

7. Violetta and Vincent often think about what they've done in the past, and their regrets. Violetta replays a lot of her actions to consider why she is where she is. Choose an example where Violetta or Vincent's memories help her reach a better understanding of herself.

8. Violetta and Vincent's parents have high expectations for them. How does the pressure of being "good" or appearing "perfect" affect them and the decisions they make? How do their decisions influence the events in the book?

9. Violetta's parents are led to believe the Trials will help her. Do you think the Chen-Samuels really understand—or do they *misunderstand*—the Trials? Do you think people who work in the detention system might also misrepresent what the Trials are about?

10. Does Violetta have support systems within detention and outside of it? If so, in what ways do they help her come to terms with where she is and what she's done? Look especially at pages 268 and 304, and identify one additional conversation or action that helps Violetta maintain a sense of selfhood or self-respect.

11. What does the title *Forgive Me Not* mean to you? Did your interpretation of the title change after reading the novel?





ACTIVITIES

- 1. Do Now (5-minute class opener). Letter writing.** In *Forgive Me Not*, letters are an outlet for Violetta’s grief, and are integral to her understanding her feelings and actions. Write a letter to someone who is no longer in your life—someone you are out of touch with, or even someone who is deceased. Tell this person how you are doing now, and what you remember about your experiences with them. [A note to educators: this activity could be triggering for some students, so proceed with caution and recommend guidance counselor follow-up if needed.]

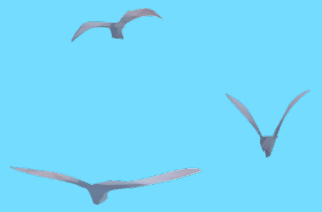
Follow-up discussion in small groups: Did you learn something from communicating with someone you haven’t spoken with for a long time, or someone you cannot speak with? Does letter writing make people feel closer to you, or does it make the distance feel greater—or a mix of both? How did your letter writing experience help you imagine what Violetta might have been feeling when communicating with her sister?

- 2. Do Now (5-minute class opener).** Watch a clip from [The Innocence Network](#) documentary and freewrite on what “innocence” and “guilt” mean after listening to one of the four stories profiled.

- 3. Do Now (5-minute class opener).** Imagine that this book will be made into a TV series or movie, and you have to create the opening scene for it, or the trailer for the whole movie. What would your opening scene or trailer look like? You can illustrate each scene (stick figures are fine) using [storyboards](#).

- 4. Do Now (5-minute class opener).** Watch this book trailer for [The Talk](#) by Alicia D. Williams. **Discuss/write:** How does this children’s picture book help us understand society’s expectations of even the youngest BIPOC children? What connections can you make to *Forgive Me Not*?

ACTIVITIES CONTINUED



5. Group Work: *Forgive Me Not* is split into three sections: The Sentence, The Trials, and The Verdict. Draw a Venn diagram or create a [digital concept map](#). Then, in your group, brainstorm about what happens in each section and fill in your diagram. Try to include mostly words or phrases such as “regret and pain,” rather than full summaries. Flip back through each section to refresh your memory of what happens, and how the mood or tone of each section is different.

7. Further Research: In the Author’s Note at the end of the book, the author writes about an event during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when “a judge deemed a fifteen-year-old Black girl in mental distress in need of ‘zero tolerance’ for missing probation (i.e. being unable to do her homework due to depression) and thus sentenced to juvenile detention.” Read the [ProPublica](#) news story and reflect on what happened and why.

6. Group Work: In many ways, Violetta and Vincent are defined by how others view them. Using a [circle chart](#) or some other graphic organizer, brainstorm about representations of who these teenagers are:

- How do the teens see themselves? What are their innermost secrets?
- How do their parents see them?
- How do other teenagers at school see them?
- How does society see them? What are some of their expectations or stereotypes?

8. Further Research: On page 45, Counselor Susan tells the story of a boy named LeVaughn whose personal experience changed the criminal justice system in Baker’s alternate reality story. Can you do research into any real court cases that impacted laws or the criminal system? What else do you learn through your general research about how minors are treated by the system?



BOOK GLOSSARY

ABOLITION

The act of ending a practice or institution. The term is also used in reference to the current criminal justice system.

DEPT. OF CORRECTION (DOC)

In *Forgive Me Not*, this is the sector that determines adolescents' crimes and liaises with victims. (Each state in the USA has a DOC.)

DETENTION SERVICES

A department that convicts people of crimes. In *Forgive Me Not*, this is the body that oversees Violetta's incarceration.

INCARCERATION

The state of being imprisoned. Violetta's time in the detention center is a form of incarceration.

JUDICATOR

A person who is a judge or acts as a judge. In *Forgive Me Not*, the judicator is the liaison between the victims of a crime (or crimes) and the Department of Corrections. Randall acts as someone placing judgment for Violetta's crimes alongside her family.

MINOR

A person who has not yet reached the age of adulthood, commonly ruled to be eighteen in the United States. The Trials in *Forgive Me Not* are said to be for anyone between the age of thirteen and seventeen.

PROBATION

A period after release for incarceration where someone is still under supervision by the state.

RECIDIVISM

The rate at which someone who has formerly been incarcerated will be convicted of another crime. In *Forgive Me Not*, the Trials are said to reduce recidivism.

REHABILITATION

In relation to criminal justice, rehabilitation refers to efforts to reduce recidivism. In *Forgive Me Not*, the Trials are claimed to be an "effective" form of rehabilitation.

SENTENCING

Judgment from a criminal proceeding that may specify the punishment for someone deemed an offending party (or offender).

VERDICT

A decision on an issue in a civil or criminal case.



ONLINE RESOURCES

CULTURAL HISTORY RESOURCES:

- The 1619 Project (*The New York Times*): <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>
- Asian Americans (documentary): <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/asian-americans-pbs/>
- The Asian American Education Project: <https://asianamericanedu.org/>
- Chinese American History Curriculum (Immigrant History Initiative): <https://www.immigranthistory.org/chineseamerican.html>
- StoryCorps Griot archive (African American stories): <https://storycorps.org/stories/?collection=storycorps-griot>
- Zinn Education Project (promotes teaching people's history in classrooms): www.zinnedproject.org



JUSTICE RESOURCES:

- Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, “March is National Criminal Justice Awareness Month (United States)”: <https://www.acjs.org/page/NationalCJMonth>
- Asian Americans Advancing Justice, “Combating Criminalization and Profiling of Asian Americans Under National Security Pretexts”: <https://www.advancingjustice-aajc.org/combating-criminalization-and-profiling-asian-americans-under-national-security-pretexts>
- The Marshall Project: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/>
- The New Jim Crow Resources: <https://newjimcrow.com/study-guides>
- ProPublica Criminal Justice Series: <https://www.propublica.org/topics/criminal-justice>
- The Sentencing Project (research page): <https://www.sentencingproject.org/research/>
- Social Justice Books: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/young-readers-editions/>
- StoryCorps Justice Project archive (stories of youth of color involved in the juvenile or adult justice system): <https://storycorps.org/stories/?collection=justice-project>
- Vera Solutions & Research (advocates, researchers, and activists working to end mass incarceration): <https://www.vera.org/solutions-research>

SUGGESTED READING LIST

(Listed in alphabetical order by author)

FICTION/NONFICTION/POETRY

- *The New Jim Crow: Young Readers' Edition* by Michelle Alexander
- *Bastards of the Reagan Era: Poems* by Reginald Dwayne Betts
- *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* by Michael Bronski and Richie Chavat
- *We Are Not Free* by Traci Chee
- *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People* by Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz, Jean Mendoza, and Debbie Reese
- *Somebody's Daughter* by Ashley C. Ford
- *The Trial* by Franz Kafka
- *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds
- *Invisible Son* by Kim C. Johnson
- *Gone Wolf* by Amber McBride
- *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers
- *Punching the Air* by Yusef Salaam and Ibi Zoboi
- *Just Mercy: A True Story of the Fight for Justice (Adapted for Young Adults)* by Bryan Stephenson
- *Dear Justyce* by Nic Stone
- *A Different Mirror for Young People: A History of Multicultural People in America* by Ronald Takaki
- *From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial that Galvanized the Asian American Movement* by Paula Yoo

SCHOLARLY/HISTORICAL REFERENCE TITLES

- *A Black Woman's History of the United States* by Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross
- *Burning Down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison* by Nell Bernstein
- *Asian American Histories of the United States* by Catherine Ceniza Choy
- *The Making of Asian America* by Erika Lee
- *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique W. Morris
- *A Disability History of the United States* by Kim E. Nielsen
- *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* by Paul Ortiz
- *Reading, Writing, and Racism: Disrupting Whiteness in Teacher Education and in the Classroom* by Bree Picower

