



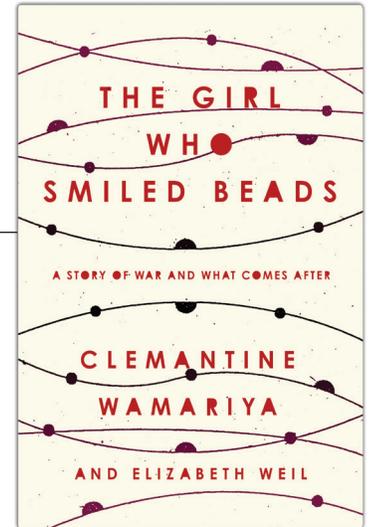
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Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

The Girl Who Smiled Beads

A Story of War and What Comes After

by Clemantine Wamariya and Elizabeth Weil



Crown | Hardcover | 978-0-451-49532-7 | 288 pages | \$26.00

Also available in e-book format and as an audio download

“Wamariya and the journalist Elizabeth Weil set out to sabotage facile uplift. . . . The fractured form of her own narrative—deftly toggling between her African and American odysseys—gives troubled memory its dark due.” —Ann Hulbert, *The Atlantic*

“Wamariya tells her own story with feeling, in vivid prose. She has remade herself, as she explains was necessary to do, on her own terms.” —Alexis Okeowo, *The New York Times Book Review*

about the book

Clemantine Wamariya was six years old when her mother and father began to speak in whispers, when neighbors began to disappear, and when she heard the loud, ugly sounds her brother said were thunder. In 1994, she and her fifteen-year-old sister, Claire, fled the Rwandan massacre and spent the next six years migrating through seven African countries, searching for safety—perpetually hungry, imprisoned and abused, enduring and escaping refugee camps, finding unexpected kindness, witnessing inhuman cruelty. They did not know whether their parents were dead or alive.

When Clemantine was twelve, she and her sister were granted refugee status in the United States; there, in Chicago, their lives diverged. Though their bond remained unbreakable, Claire, who had for so long protected and provided for Clemantine, was a single mother struggling to make ends meet, while Clemantine was taken in by a family who raised her as their own. She seemed to live the American dream: attending private school, taking up cheerleading, and, ultimately, graduating from Yale. Yet the years of being treated as less than human, of going hungry and seeing death, could not be erased. She felt at the same time six years old and one hundred years old.

In *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*, Clemantine provokes us to look beyond the label of “victim” and recognize the power of the imagination to transcend even the most profound injuries and aftershocks. Devastating yet beautiful, and bracingly original, it is a powerful testament to her commitment to constructing a life on her own terms.

Penguin Random House Education, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

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QUERIES: commonreads@penguinrandomhouse.com

• about the authors

Clemantine Wamariya is a storyteller and human rights advocate. Born in Kigali, Rwanda, displaced by conflict, Clemantine migrated throughout seven African countries as a child. At age twelve, she was granted refugee status in the United States and went on to receive a BA in Comparative Literature from Yale University. She lives in San Francisco.

Elizabeth Weil is a writer-at-large for *The New York Times Magazine*, a contributing editor to *Outside* magazine, and writes frequently for *Vogue* and other publications. She is the recipient of a New York Press Club Award for her feature reporting, a Lowell Thomas Award for her travel writing, and a GLAAD Award for her coverage of LGBT issues. In addition, her work has been a finalist for a National Magazine Award, a James Beard Award, and a Dart Award for coverage of trauma. She lives in San Francisco with her husband and two daughters.

• discussion questions

1. In the Prologue, what does Wamariya say is “[o]ne of the most valuable skills [she had] learned while trying to survive as a refugee” (5)? What does she mean when she says that she “was whoever anyone wanted [her] to be” (1)? What were some of the different roles that she had to take on in order to survive?
2. Who is Mukamana and why are her stories important to Wamariya? Which of Mukamana’s stories is her favorite and why? What does Mukamana help her to understand that no one else does? What question does Mukamana always ask her with each story that she tells? Why is this question so valuable to Wamariya?
3. Evaluate the theme of time. What does Wamariya say that time refused to do for her? What does she begin to do in an effort to create the sense of a linear timeline of her life? What is *katundu* and what role does it play in Wamariya’s efforts to find order in her life story? What does she mean when she says that her *katundu* is her “ballast, exogenous memory, [her] solace, [her] hope” (34)? Does *katundu* ultimately help her to find a sense of order and connection in her life? How does the structure of the book support or reflect Wamariya’s ideas of time and memory?
4. Why does Wamariya say that “[g]enerosity was suspect” (39)? Why do she and her sister Claire often choose to refuse offers from others? When they return to the slum in Zambia where they once lived and Wamariya jumps out of the cab to hand out sticks of gum to the children she sees, why does she presume that their parents probably read her generosity as “the first move in a power play” (35)?
5. Why does Wamariya say that she needed Mrs. Kline? What does she recognize in Mrs. Kline that she had valued and what does she feel that she needed Mrs. Kline to help instill in her? What is *konona* and how do Wamariya’s experiences with Mrs. Kline help her in her mission to refuse any “story of ruin and shame” (61)?
6. What was life like in the refugee camps that Wamariya and her sister Claire were forced to live in? What dangers did they face and what hardships did they have to endure? What skills did they need to employ in order to survive? What does Wamariya say was often the only way out? What question, born during this time, does she say was “the only one in [her] life” (79)?
7. Why does Wamariya say that she resents and reviles the word *genocide*? What does she mean when she says, “You cannot bear witness with a single word” (95)? Although many people liken the events in Rwanda to the Holocaust, why does Wamariya suggest that this can be problematic? Despite this, how does Wamariya feel about Elie Wiesel’s *Night*

- when she begins reading it at sixteen years old? What fascinates her about Wiesel's view of himself and his description of his experiences?
8. When Wamariya studies the history of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda from Kenilworth, what does she learn about the events and ideas that ultimately led to this conflict? What does Wamariya say is the "moral stain" that the world must live with since the events in Rwanda?
 9. What insights does Wamariya offer in her memoir on the topic of forgiveness? Why does she argue with her sister Claire about this subject? Whose opinion do you agree with more? Why does Wamariya feel that forgiveness should sometimes be withheld? Alternatively, what role does it play in peacekeeping and the healing of a country and its people after trauma?
 10. What does Wamariya's mother teach her children in order to counter notions of possession and entitlement? How does her mother's philosophy play into Wamariya's view of the world? What does Wamariya say that survival requires? What is the only road to equality?
 11. Of what story are the dolls in the lobby of the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls a reminder? Who does Wamariya think is the girl at the heart of this story? What happens in Wamariya's version of the story and what does this allow her to believe?
 12. What work by W. G. Sebald was Wamariya's "flashlight, [her] looking glass, [her] everything" (223)? How are the book and Sebald's theory of memory influential in shifting Wamariya's thoughts about herself and her experiences? What method does he suggest?
 13. In addition to the works by Wiesel and Sebald, what are some of the other books or writings that Wamariya mentions in her memoir and why are they notable to her? What can she relate to—or not—in these particular pieces of writing? How do they help her to better understand herself and her own experiences? What might this suggest about the universal potential and power of literature and the imagination?
 14. Explore the motif of "being seen." What do Wamariya and her sister Claire do in order to be seen and why are these actions so important to them? How does this differ from the "potent Catholic-Rwandan-postcolonial ethos" that Wamariya remembers from her childhood (12)? What does it mean to "be seen"?
 15. Why does Wamariya decide to arrange a second reunion with her mother? What does she do to prepare for this reunion? How are her efforts received? What is their relationship like at that time? Does the reunion go as Wamariya hoped and expected?
 16. How do Claire's experiences as a refugee differ from her sister's? Which of Claire's skills and traits does Wamariya value most and try to emulate? Why do you think that Claire says that "when [she remembers their] experiences, [she's] alone"?
 17. What does Wamariya's memoir reveal about privilege and entitlement? What kinds of questions are commonly asked of Wamariya and what does she believe that this often exposes about those asking the questions and the way that many people commonly think of refugees? Why does the transaction of telling her story often bother her? What does she say that those who consider themselves more powerful than she fail to understand about that transaction?
 18. How does Wamariya's memoir help to dispel the notion that refugees are only victims and to instead create a more humanizing and whole definition of the person who is a refugee? Beyond wanting to atone for their wrongs, what does Wamariya say that outsiders need to do in order to prevent further violence and trauma in the future?

19. Consider the ending of the book. What does Wamariya say is “all a person can do, really” (261)? Why do you think that Wamariya chose to conclude the book in the way that she did? What do the final lines of the book reveal about history and about her journey to understand herself and the events of her life?
20. Compare Wamariya’s memoir to historical accounts of the time period captured in the book. What do you think that the genre of memoir is able to offer that historical accounts cannot or do not? What does this ultimately suggest about the significance and power of personal storytelling?

— about this guide’s writer

Je Banach is a senior member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers’ Workshop. She has written for PEN, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom’s literary series. She is the author of more than seventy literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.



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