

VINYL MOON

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE

DISCUSSION GUIDE

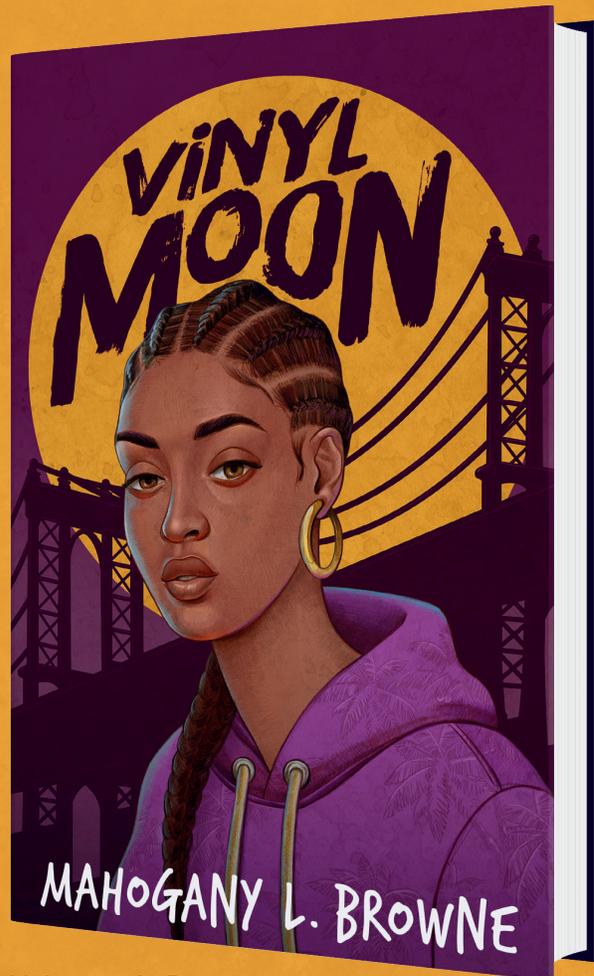
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ABOUT THE BOOK

When Darius told Angel he loved her, she believed him. But five weeks after the incident, Angel finds herself in Brooklyn, far from her family, from him, and from the California life she has known.

Angel feels out of sync with her new neighborhood. At school, she can't shake the feeling that everyone knows what happened—and that it was her fault. The only place that makes sense is Ms. G's class. There, Angel's classmates share their own stories of pain, joy, and fortitude. And as Angel becomes immersed in her revolutionary literature course, the words of Black writers like Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Zora Neale Hurston speak to her and begin to heal the wounds of her past.



Mahogany L. Browne
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mahogany L. Browne is the executive director of JustMedia, a media-literacy initiative designed to support the groundwork of criminal justice leaders and community members. This position is informed by her career as a writer, organizer, and educator. Mahogany founded the diverse literary festival the Woke Baby Book Fair. She is also the author of *Chlorine Sky*, *Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice*, *Woke Baby*, *Black Girl Magic*, *I Remember Death by Its Proximity to What I Love*, and *Vinyl Moon*. Mahogany is based in Brooklyn, New York, and is the first-ever poet in residence at Lincoln Center. Learn more about Mahogany L. Browne at mobrowne.com or on Twitter at [@mobrowne](https://twitter.com/mobrowne).



photo credit: Jennie Bergvist

DEAR READER,

I wrote *Chlorine Sky* and I was so overwhelmed with the process that I just wanted to see what the world had to say. And now I feel like we are friends. Like I can talk to you about most things.

And so here I try to be as brave as you. I wrote *Vinyl Moon* because so many girls I grew up with have survived traumas and bullying and big sistering and various obstacles, coming out on the other side a shell of themselves. So many young people I know have returned to their dreams after high school or college or tenth grade with a whirlwind of questions unanswered and still found the strength to find themselves whole and shining in laughter, new friends, and music.

Vinyl Moon is about the act of rediscovery. It is a story about what it means to not give up on yourself because there is always a song waiting to be danced to. There is always a fight toward the light. I love books that center our stories on glow and not just gore. I love books that center tough and memorable or mundane and quiet. Voices like ours, dear reader.

Today, there are so many people who forget the value of their voice, the power of their solitude. Their words dissipate, lost under the weight of the world. This is our chance to begin again. This is our today, *again*.

I hope I didn't confuse you with the repetition. I get caught up in the music of my own hopefulness sometimes. And, sometimes, I look toward my elders. Maybe an advisor or a librarian.

When I was in high school, I would skip class to go sit in Ms. Crowder's college prep office. It was pretty funny to skip my AP Lit course, where I was misunderstood and admonished for pairing hip-hop lyrics with the epic poem by Dante Alighieri. I found Ms. Crowder's space to be a haven where I could go dream about running away to a dorm on a college campus far away from my single-parent household and the strict rules of English class.

I was a writer. I was an artist. I loved to observe and rewrite the world. I wrote stories, like these, before I ever knew there was an audience who needed them. I wrote stories that no one seemed to tell young people in public.

I was angry at the ways I watched my friends be mistreated. I was so angry that no one seemed to care that a girl could be thrown to the ground for the excitement of a crowd. Ms. Crowder allowed me in her office every now and again. Sometimes she'd say, "Go to class. I'll be here after school waiting for you." And sometimes I think she could see on my face that I needed her room full of brochures featuring colleges I would only dream about. (Imagine my delight when I was invited to perform on the stages at Vanderbilt, UC Berkeley, FAMU, Syracuse, NYU, Columbia, and Yale.) And I think Ms. Crowder knew I was lonely and afraid and just trying to find my way.

This is a story about finding your way. This is one of so many of our stories. I hope it brings you closer to sharing your voice. I hope it lights a candle in the cavern where you hide yourself. I hope it feels safe to read these voices and know they are thinking about you being and breathing. Wherever you are.

Remember, if you can hear the music of Angel and Sterling and Brooklyn and California, if you can locate the moon—this is for you, too.



Mahogany L. Browne

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. The dedication for *Vinyl Moon* reads: “This book is dedicated to the act of showing up for yourself. Every book I write is a love letter to the teachers who never gave up on me.”

Discuss or reflect upon what it might mean to show up for yourself. How does a person show up for themselves? Give an example of how you have shown up for yourself in the past or how you want to show up for yourself in the future. What situations or fears get in the way of us showing up for ourselves?

Consider: Who are your teachers? Think outside the box about who a “teacher” is. Who has taught you important lessons? Who has helped you imagine your best self? Who has shown you it’s okay to be yourself? Who has stuck by you and supported you? Identify one person and write a letter (that you can choose to share) to this person who has taught you something important.

2. Music is an integral part of Angel’s journey as she grows into her voice. In *Vinyl Moon*, mixtapes and playlists are both critical. Here are a couple of exercises you can try to connect your life to music.

List five positive moments in your life, and think of three moments that were challenging in a good way and helped you grow. Pick a song to represent each of these eight moments. Weave them together in a playlist, putting them in an order that makes sense to you. What would you title your playlist?

Invite a few people you know well to tell you about a song that is meaningful to them. Write a short reflection on what you’ve learned about the people you asked. What’s important to them? How is that similar to or different from what’s important to you? How do they express themselves through their musical tastes?

Research the history of a musical genre you like. Be especially curious about artists and songs that you haven’t heard before. Try making a playlist that is half songs you’ve never heard before but like and half songs that you know well. Write or discuss: What did you learn from your research? What sources did you use? What choices did you make with your playlist, and why?

3. *Vinyl Moon* explores a spectrum of relationship types: some that sustain Angel and help her heal and others that hurt her. As a pre-writing exercise, focus on relationships that strengthen or support your physical or mental health. In what ways have you helped sustain those around you? Have you ever cared for someone who was healing from an injury or a negative experience? What types of support were you able to offer them? What does it mean to support each other?
4. Angel’s teacher Ms. G. explains, “In the beginning of class, we do a check-in. This way the class can know how you’re feeling. It’s easy; use the scale one-to-ten. Just so folks know how you are, ya know? Some days I’m a five! I’m just happy I made it to class on time, and some days, I had a good cup of chai, and I’m fearless, honey! I’m a nine! But there is no wrong answer, okay?” She goes on to say, “And you don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to. Take your time.” (p. 9)

Check-in now: On a scale of one to ten, ten being the best, how are you feeling? What’s going on inside and outside of you that leads you to the number you chose?

Why is it important when sharing your feelings with others to not talk about anything you don’t want to talk about and to take your time?

5. *Vinyl Moon* is set in Brooklyn, New York. Where do you live? Describe your school. What is important or valuable to you about your cultural background and community? How do you think your community affects and inspires you?

DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

1. In the opening pages of *Vinyl Moon*, what do we learn about Angel? How is she feeling, and what changes has she recently gone through? Do you think she might gain anything from being in a new environment? Use examples from the text to support your claims. As a writing exercise, think about a time when you were new somewhere. What was that experience like? How did you feel? Did you talk to anyone? If you did, do you think they helped shape your experience? How?
2. At Benjamin Banneker High School, each teacher has a set of defining objects in their classrooms: for example, Mr. Jackson's room is full of plants because he teaches botany. What are some other defining characteristics of Mr. Jackson's, Ms. G's, and Ms. B's rooms? Describe the kind of environment these teachers created at Benjamin Banneker. What different parts of herself is Angel able to access with each teacher and in each classroom?

Draw one or all three of the rooms—each on a separate sheet of paper. Imagine yourself in one of them. What would you be excited to learn or think about in this room? What would you talk to that teacher about (Ms. B, Ms. G, or Mr. Jackson)? Write that teacher a letter or a poem, opening a dialogue and sharing your thoughts.

Imagine yourself as a teacher at Benjamin Banneker. What would you teach? What would be the defining characteristics of your room? Draw it. Write a letter to your future students about what lessons you hope to instill in them and what you would want them to remember most about you.

3. *Vinyl Moon* centers on Black women and girls who are distinct in experience, appearance, culture, background, and even language. How does the book reflect love for Black women and Black girls? How is love shown and expressed? Pick three women in your life who love you; how would you describe their actions and behavior toward you?

4. Eva is a body image activist who “fights against a beauty monolith.” (p. 76) What is the “beauty monolith” that Eva is fighting against, and why does she think it’s essential to do so? What does Angel reflect on during this part of the book? At the end of this chapter, what is the “everything” that Angel thanks Eva for? How do different characters in *Vinyl Moon* express themselves through their clothing and hairstyles? Use specific examples. If this book is making a statement about beauty, specifically for Black girls and girls of color, what do you think the statement is? Why? Put it in your own words. How do you define *beauty*? What is beautiful about yourself? Why is this sometimes hard to recognize?

5. Poems intersperse *Vinyl Moon*. What do you learn from the poems in this book? Why do you believe the author chose to use poetry? What happens in the poems that does not happen, or happens differently, in the prose sections of the book?

Write a short poem each day for one week, month, season, or even a whole year. Try to check in with yourself daily using the feelings scale, and write something short and authentic about what you are feeling, thinking, and experiencing.

As you read *Vinyl Moon*, create a reading log in which you record your own ideas, memories, images, feelings, and reactions to different parts of the book. In your log, you can reflect, respond, draw, write poems, write lyrics, ask questions, or copy down sections that make you feel something so you can hold on to them.

6. Reflect on these two quotes: (1) “Uncle is always honest. . . . Back home, adults lie to their children all the time.” (p. 60) and (2) “Words are easy to fake. But actions tell you everything you need to know about a person.” (p. 61) How do you interpret these statements? What has your own experience taught you about honesty, lying, and the importance of people’s actions? Consider Amir, Darius, Uncle Spence, Sterling, and Biz. Do their actions match their words? What positive characteristics do different male characters exemplify?

DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

7. Brooklyn is a gorgeous tapestry of sights, landmarks, history, food, music, and people. Pick out three quotes that represent Brooklyn. Explore sensory descriptions, noting Angel's experiences and appreciation of her new borough. Bring this same quality of wonder and appreciation to a piece of writing or a descriptive presentation about your community. What does it sound and smell like? Describe the landscape. Who are its people, and how do you fit within it? What is its history, and what do you anticipate will change?
8. Many different types of love exist between the characters in *Vinyl Moon*—from the nameless partners sitting in Cheryl's Global Soul to Kamilah's fierce adoration for her son, Avion, to Angel's close relationship with her younger brother Amir to the budding romance between Dr. P and Uncle Spence to the whole-group or individual dynamics between the girls in H.E.R., and many more. What relationships in the book speak most to you, and why? Which relationships in this book reflect your own life? How? Draw parallels. What do you learn about care and love as you follow different characters' journeys throughout the book?
9. How do Angel's lists of Twenty Questions for Eva and Sterling compare? After reading the lists, what do you think Angel considers important? What do we learn about Eva and Sterling? Why is curiosity important in a friendship and in a relationship? Make a list of twenty questions you'd like to be asked. Make a list of twenty questions you'd like to ask somebody you're getting to know.
10. We learn that Uncle Spence chose to leave his sister Elena to pursue his dreams after Elena chose not to leave Angel's abusive father. What do you imagine was difficult for him—then and now—about this choice? Use examples from the text as evidence. What effect did his choice have on Elena? On Angel? On Uncle Spence himself? Do you believe he made the right choice? Why or why not? What experience or belief led you to that conclusion?
11. What do we learn about Angel's mother, Elena? List details you find in the text, including page numbers. How does Angel feel about Elena? How does Angel's relationship with Elena shift over the course of the book, if it does shift? What does Elena's letter to Angel at the end of *Vinyl Moon* reveal? Does it change or solidify what you believe about their relationship? How do you think Angel might or should react to Elena? Do you believe Elena loves Angel?
12. Throughout *Vinyl Moon*, we learn about Angel's relationship with Darius. As you read the book, keep track of what you notice about their relationship. What would you consider major events between them, and why? What control does Darius exert over Angel? Use evidence from the text to support your answers. Angel expresses guilt, among other feelings, at the beginning of *Vinyl Moon*, which she describes this way: "It makes me think about the little things again and again. It makes me slip around in my brain for hours, wondering if I did things this way or that, maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't have messed my life up." (p. 3) Please reflect on this quote, and consider how it might be tied to the larger narrative of domestic abuse. What has this book taught you about domestic abuse? What has it shown you about ways that a person might heal from being abused?
13. Angel "realized: *I decide the vibe.*" What meaning do you take from this statement? She says, "I could make people feel the way I felt when reading a good book or listening to a dope DJ. It was the beginning of something beautiful. And I want to make beautiful things." (p. 93) Why is this realization important for Angel? Did you see this coming? Why or why not? If you were to decide the vibe—of your life, of what you make, of how you imagine your future—what, today, would you decide on, and why?

POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. Angel writes, “Books make you tap into your own memories. Those memories come with old feelings—feelings you think you’ve put to bed.” (p. 53) What memories, thoughts, or imaginings have come to you as you’ve read *Vinyl Moon*? Make notes about them or write poems or stories or memories as they arise. (If difficult feelings or memories come up, be sure to reach out to a trusted adult. You might also find the resources at the end of this guide helpful.) This is Angel’s story. What is your story? Write it.
2. Explore the musical artists and DJs that pop up throughout the text. Try to make a playlist for yourself that includes the work of these artists. Then add your own flavor—music that incorporates and responds to the *Vinyl Moon* soundtrack. Find the lyrics that speak most to you and write lyrics that can go over the same song, reflecting your experiences. Remember, you decide the vibe.

Here are some of the genres, artists, and DJs listed:

Genre: Afrobeats

Artists: Kendrick Lamar, Summer Walker, E-40, Keak Da Sneak, Mozzy, Lil Wayne, Drake, Lil Rhapsody Nina Simone, Lauren Hill, Beyoncé, Cardi B, Frank Ocean, Gary Clark Jr, Celia Cruz, James Blake, Billie Holiday, Biz Markie, Kane, Tribe, Rakim, Jay-Z, Missy Elliot, RunTellDat, Buddy (“Black”), NWA, hyphy, Funkadelic, Bootsie Collins, Tupac Shakur, Erykah Badu, Kehlani, J. Cole, Wale, DaBaby, Burna Boy, Sade, Luther Vandross, Method Man, MF Doom, Mary J. Blige, Heavy D, Alicia Keys, Zo!, Michel’le

DJs: Reborn, JiggyStax, RL Grime, Noize, Va\$htie, Spinall

Other: *Hamilton* (“Right Hand Man”)

3. Explore the literature of *Vinyl Moon*. Read, read, read. What do you discover? What do you learn about yourself?

Here are some of the writers (and books) mentioned: Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*), Sandra Cisneros (*The House on Mango Street*), Jesmyn Ward (*Salvage the Bones*), Sapphire (*Push*), Howard Zinn (*A People’s History of the United States*), Tayari Jones (*Silver Sparrow*), Jason Reynolds, Walter Dean Myers, Lorraine Hansberry, June Jordan, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin

4. At the end of *Vinyl Moon*, Angel gives herself a DJ name—“A name acknowledging who I used to be, and a welcome to who I am becoming,” she says (p. 127)—and an image to go with her new DJ name. Using all you’ve learned throughout the book, why do you believe Angel chose Angel Reign as her DJ name, and why do you believe she chose the image of a red sun that can be read as either setting or rising to represent her? Names and corresponding images are powerful, especially when we choose them for ourselves. If you were to choose a new name, what would it be and why? And what image would you choose to accompany it?



RESOURCES

The National Domestic Violence Hotline

1.800.799.SAFE (7233) or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)
thehotline.org

The Hotline is a nonprofit organization that provides crisis intervention, information, and referral to victims of domestic violence, perpetrators, friends, and families. The Hotline is toll-free, confidential, and anonymous.

Love Is Respect

loveisrespect.org

Love Is Respect is the national resource to disrupt and prevent unhealthy relationships and intimate partner violence by empowering young people through inclusive and equitable education, support, and resources.

Urban Word

urbanword.org

Urban Word elevates youth voices as leaders at the intersection of the literary arts and civic engagement, providing tools and platforms for critical literacy, youth development, and leadership through free and uncensored writing, social impact, and performance workshops, and other opportunities.

National Youth Poets

(Academy of American Poets)
poets.org/national-youth-poets

This project contains two national initiatives: the National Youth Poet Laureate and the National Student Poet programs.

Black-Owned Brooklyn

blackownedbrooklyn.com

This project seeks to uplift and preserve rich stories that are often erased in gentrified Brooklyn and encourage you to learn more about—and participate in—the creativity, joy, and self-determination throughout our community.

Building Beats

buildingbeats.org

DJ and digital music education for youth (specific to NYC)

PRAISE FOR VINYL MOON

★ “Browne offers snippets of Angel’s life before and after the incident, bringing readers into her growth and portraying with nuance a group of Brooklyn teens unpacking their traumas and finding their joy.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

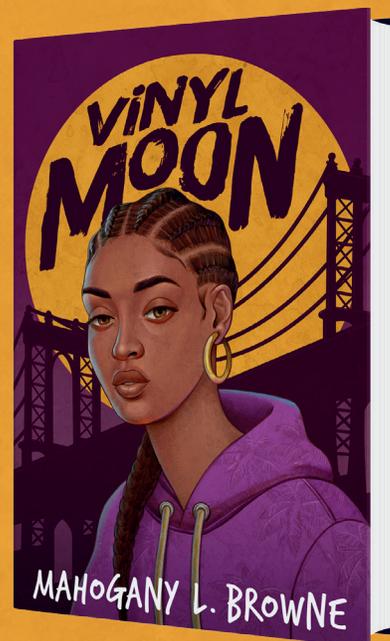
“A beautiful love letter to Brooklyn, Black authors, and the beats that create the soundtrack of a young life evolving.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Browne’s story of Angel, a phoenix rising from the ashes of trauma and deceit, is about learning how to love the world around you again by remembering how to love yourself.”

—Brendan Kiely,

New York Times bestselling coauthor of *All American Boys*



PRAISE FOR CHLORINE SKY

★ “Her observations about the intensity of peer scrutiny and the ability of a rumor to wreck a young life are penetrating.”

—*The Bulletin*, starred review

“A coming-of-age novel for black girls who have been told they’re too much and yet never enough.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A contemporary look at changing teenage friendships and finding ways to accept yourself.”

—*School Library Journal*

“A story about heart and backbone, and one only Mahogany L. Browne could bring forth.”

—Jason Reynolds,

New York Times bestselling author of *Long Way Down*

“A profound reminder that sometimes the most revolutionary thing a girl can be is herself.”

—Nic Stone,

New York Times bestselling author of *Dear Martin*



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