



HUM 
IF
YOU DON'T
KNOW **A NOVEL**
THE

WORDS

BIANCA MARAIS

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Robin is a product of her environment** and adopts the racist ideology of those around her. How do these prejudices and preconceived notions about black people inform the way she acts? How does her behavior and thinking change throughout the book, particularly toward Beauty?
- 2 Compare 1970s South Africa to today's world.** How have matters surrounding racism and homophobia changed since then? In what ways have they remained the same? What can we do individually and in our communities to facilitate forward thinking and change?
- 3 Robin and Beauty come together,** against all odds, to create a family of their own. How does this book challenge norms of the conventional nuclear family? How does Beauty's role as the mother of Nomsa differ from her role as Robin's caretaker? What does *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* tell us about human connection in the face of adversity?
- 4 The pass laws and the Group Areas Act** meant that Beauty and her children had to live in the Bantu homeland of the Transkei, approximately 600 miles from where her husband worked in the gold mines. How much of Beauty's family life is affected by the laws of apartheid? Did this have an impact on Nomsa's decision to become a freedom fighter? Once apartheid ended in 1994, how much do you think the state-legislated disintegration of families continued to affect South African society and black cultures?
- 5 What purpose does Cat serve in Robin's life,** and what necessitated her appearance? How does Robin use Cat to navigate her home life with her parents, and then her life with Edith? Is Cat an effective coping mechanism? Are there any downsides to her presence?
- 6 Compare Beauty and her daughter, Nomsa.** As the plot unfolds and more of Nomsa's character is illuminated, what similarities between the two come to light? How does your perception of Nomsa change throughout the book, and why?
- 7 What is the significance of the book's title,** and why do you think it was chosen? How does it relate to the book's central themes?
- 8 How does the narrative change** between Robin's and Beauty's alternating perspectives? What stylistic choices does the author employ to differentiate each voice from the other? Who is a more reliable narrator?
- 9 How does the White Angel help Beauty** in her search for Nomsa, and how much does she hinder it? Does her need to control the situation say anything about Maggie and her subconscious attitude toward black people? Does Robin really save the day at the end of the story? Do her actions make everything right, or are they more a child's way of trying to fix what cannot be mended?
- 10 What do you make of the ending,** and why do you think the author chose to conclude the novel at this moment? If there were an epilogue, where do you think we'd find the characters?

BIANCA MARAIS IN HER OWN WORDS



I WAS BORN IN 1976, the year of the Soweto Uprising, when thousands of black students marched through Soweto to protest against the apartheid government. Even though the march was peaceful, the police opened fire on them, killing close to a hundred children, some of them as young as twelve years old. While on the same day, a mere twenty miles away, my care as a five-month-old white baby had been entrusted to one of the very people the apartheid government had decided was less than human: our maid, Eunice.

I had two wonderful, loving parents, but they both worked full-time, and since we didn't have access to kindergarten or preschool in our neighbourhood, most of my care fell to Eunice. As I grew up, she not only fed, bathed and clothed me, but also spent a lot of time protecting me from my older brother, who seemed hell-bent on making my life miserable.

When I was two, and my brother decided I would look much more aesthetically pleasing if I was completely purple—and got to work on me like a little Picasso during his Blue Period—it was Eunice who spent weeks dabbing oil-soaked cotton wipes on my sensitive skin to remove the permanent marker. This was apparently the 1970s way of restoring a child to

factory settings. Then when I was five, and my brother made me glittery paper wings and unceremoniously shoved me off the roof to see if I could fly—spoiler alert: I couldn't!—it was Eunice who tended to the wounds, and then stopped him from yelling at me for being stupid enough to plummet to the ground and break the wings in the process.

Later, when my brother grew bored with trying to kill me, it was Eunice who helped me rehearse for school plays and ballet recitals (though she was legally prohibited from ever sitting in an auditorium with white people to watch me perform) and it was Eunice who helped me with my homework (though she'd been deprived of a proper education herself due to the Bantu Education Act). And in spite of doing all this, it was Eunice who was assaulted by the police in our home because of a neighbour's report that she was abusing me (a conclusion reached from having heard me throwing a lot of tantrums).

Eunice will be ninety-four this year, and she's still a huge part of my life. She was the person I spent a quiet night with on the day before I got married, and she was guest of honour at the wedding, nine years after the end of apartheid. I took Eunice for her very

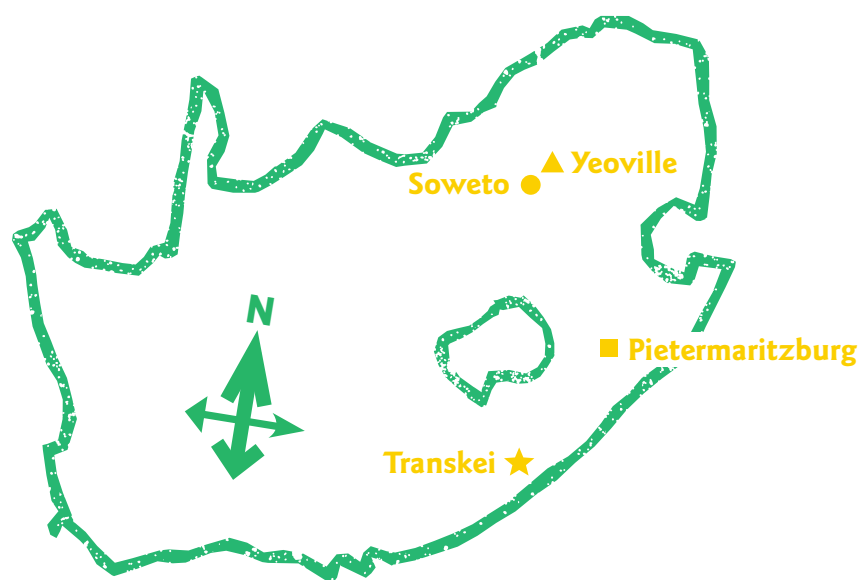
first meal in a restaurant, as well as her first trip to the cinema (where she chose to see *Rush Hour 2* and yelled at the screen throughout, after which she tried her newly learnt kung fu moves on passersby as we exited the mall). While it meant the world to me to share in these milestones with her, it was also deeply humbling to see her experience things for the first time in her eighties that I had been experiencing and taking for granted since I was a child. We still chat regularly over the phone, though I have to shout now because she's a little hard-of-hearing. She's led such an incredibly difficult life, and yet she laughs more than anyone I know. She complains only when the pain in her knee acts up, or when she feels her sacrifices have been lost on her grandchildren.

After my husband and I moved to Toronto from Johannesburg in 2012, a story came to me about a nine-year-old white girl, Robin, and a black Xhosa woman, Beauty, whose paths cross after the Soweto Uprising. Their lives become entwined when Robin's parents are murdered and Beauty's activist daughter goes missing. Beauty is in need of a pass book to stay in Johannesburg legally while she searches for her daughter, and Robin is in need of someone to care for her. Both their problems are solved when Beauty is hired in a secret arrangement to become Robin's guardian.

I began writing this book both as a tribute to Eunice—a way for me to try to truly understand the life she has led—and as a way for me to come to terms with the many conflicted emotions I had about my own privileged past. And it was only during writing the book that I realised, with much shame, how much I'd gotten it all wrong. All the while as I grew up, I thought the tragedy of apartheid was the many inhumane ways in which it had prevented Eunice and me from sharing in each other's lives, when in fact the real tragedy was that I was in Eunice's life at all.

In a fair world, Eunice would not have seen her five children only once a year at Christmas, when she returned to the Bantu homeland of the Transkei. In a fair world, Eunice would have been able to raise her own children instead of having to lavish all of her maternal affection on someone else's—let alone the children of the oppressor.

In writing this book, I did a lot of research to get the historical facts right, but more important than that was approaching writing the black character of Beauty with great respect and a deep understanding of how ill equipped I was to do so. I consulted sensitivity readers and cultural experts throughout the process, and I hope that I have done Beauty justice. She was inspired by Eunice, and writing her was the most humbling and enlightening experience of my life.



**THE HUM IF YOU DON'T
KNOW THE WORDS**

**MAP OF
SOUTH
AFRICA**