

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



BOOK CLUB
DISCUSSION
GUIDE

March/April 2018

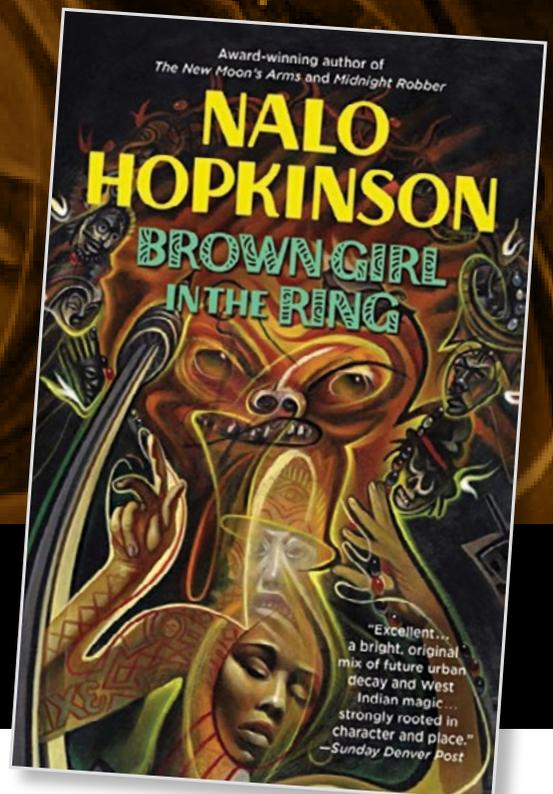
BROWN GIRL IN THE RING



© David Frinley 2016

By **Nalo Hopkinson**

Recommended by
Sarah Raughley



Cover of the 2013 re-edition, painted by Rudy Gutierrez



Strong women who make change in the world

The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce our March/April title *Brown Girl in the Ring* by Nalo Hopkinson. In time for International Women's Day, this title has been recommended by guest reader Sarah Raughley, with whom you will explore the novel and read beyond the book to learn more about gender inequalities that Amnesty works hard to bring to light and address.

In this guide, you will find Raughley's essay on why she has chosen this book for our book club, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take to speak out for women human rights defender Azza Soliman in Egypt.

Brown Girl in the Ring is set in the future in metropolitan Toronto. The rich and privileged have fled the city, barricaded it behind roadblocks, and left it to crumble. The inner city has had to rediscover old ways—farming, barter, and herb lore. But now the moneyed need a harvest of bodies, and so they prey upon the helpless of the streets. With nowhere to turn, a young woman must open herself to ancient truths, eternal powers, and the tragic mystery surrounding her mother and grandmother. She must bargain with gods, and give birth to new legends.

Themes of feminism and racialized women, and the use of magic, "Obeah," or seer women are prevalent throughout this novel. Nalo Hopkinson presents strong female characters who take control of their fate to make change in the world. Her novel is a work of feminist science fiction and shows a realistic perception of the struggles women face as single parents, as well as the struggles women with different cultural beliefs face in society.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International

Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

We think you will really enjoy *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Happy reading!

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

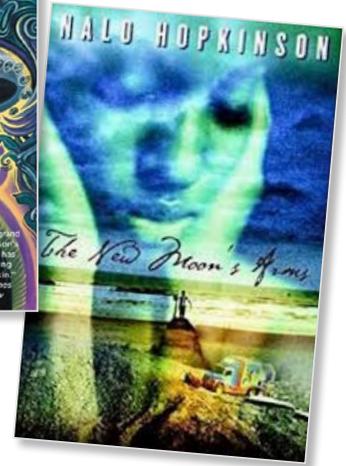
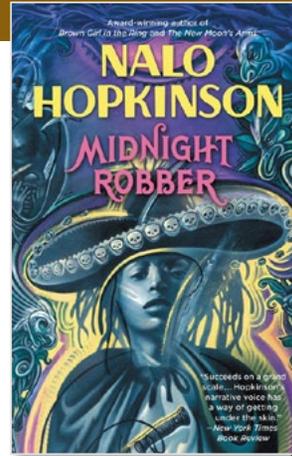


Featured author

Nalo Hopkinson

Nalo Hopkinson is a Jamaican-born Canadian speculative fiction writer and editor. Her novels (*Brown Girl in the Ring*, *Midnight Robber*, *The Salt Roads*, and *The New Moon's Arms*) and short stories such as those in her collection *Skin Folk* often draw on Caribbean history and language, and its traditions of oral and written storytelling.

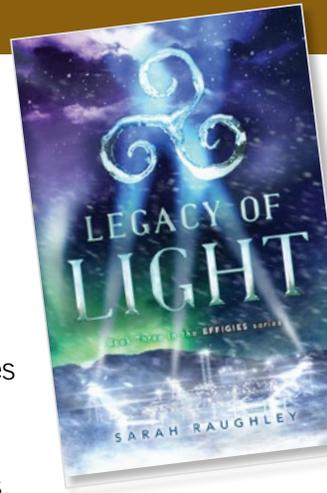
She currently lives and teaches in Riverside, California.



Guest reader

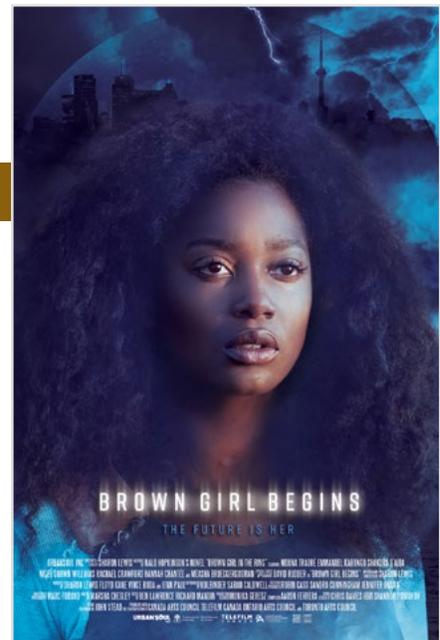
Sarah Raughley

Sarah Raughley grew up in Southern Ontario writing stories about freakish little girls with powers because she secretly wanted to be one. She is a huge fan girl of anything from manga to sci-fi/fantasy TV to Japanese role-playing games, but she will swear up and down at book signings that she was inspired by Jane Austen. On top of being a Young Adult writer, Sarah has a PhD in English, which makes her doctor, so it turns out she didn't have to go to medical school after all.



Look for the feature film based on the novel

Brown Girl Begins, is director Sharon Lewis' Afrofuturist feature debut, and a prequel to Nalo Hopkinson's award-winning novel *Brown Girl in the Ring*. The gala premiere of the film was February 24th 2018 in Toronto at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The film will be in theatrical release from March 2nd in Toronto.





Sarah Raughley's reflections on *Brown Girl in the Ring*

*You can't go wrong with a book about blood-thirsty zombies, but *Brown Girl in the Ring* is so much more than that. Published in 1998, Nalo Hopkinson's dystopian Afro-futurist novel nevertheless sheds light on social and political issues we currently face today. The story follows Ti-Jeanne, a Caribbean Canadian girl as she navigates her life as a new, young mom living in the Burn: the ruined core of downtown Toronto walled off from the rest of the city and isolated from Canada like a quarantined virus.*

Making matters more complicated, Ti-Jeanne sees visions—a trait she inherited from her disappeared mother Mi-Jeanne. Though her grandmother, Gros-Jeanne, continually encourages her to understand her psychic abilities through a lens of Caribbean spirituality, Ti-Jeanne, caught and confused between her dual identities of Caribbean and Canadian, runs away from each attempt until she has no choice but to stand and fight against the vicious gang lord Rudy Sheldon, to protect herself and the place she calls home.

One can think of Ti-Jeanne's story as a coming-of-age narrative, even a Bildungsroman. But for Hopkinson, Ti-Jeanne's coming of age threads the social and political issues faced by the marginalized black poor through a vibrant celebration of Caribbean cosmology. And really, in this era of populism spreading throughout the West, when anti-black and anti-immigration discourse seems to be an all-time high, there's no better time

*to read, analyze, and discuss this book. Think about it: we live in a time where African and African diasporic countries can be proudly declared as "sh*tholes" by a Head of State eager to keep brown bodies from coming through his borders into his country. *Brown Girl in the Ring* perhaps teaches us that this cruel sentiment isn't as new as one would think. It's not, after all, simply the economic collapse and riots that caused the downfall of Hopkinson's dystopian Toronto—but the callous abandonment of politicians, business, law enforcement and affluent white citizens who ran to suburbs, leaving the marginalized poor to fend for themselves. This 'white flight' could be seen as the reverse solution of anti-immigration sentiments that nonetheless achieve the same goal: the separation of the white, the rich, and the powerful from the racialized, the poor, and the weak.*

Ti-Jeanne is not only marginalized by her race but by her gender as she struggles to keep her new child alive in her fight against a crime lord who murders the weak inhabitants of the Burn on behalf of the predatory Premier of Ontario. However, as she realizes her own strength and gains courage in her culture, readers will see the other side of the coin that is the dystopian Burn: the hopeful Afro-future where new systems and alliances can rise out of the ruins of old relations of power. Despite everything, Hopkinson's dystopian future is one filled with hope.

And there is never a shortage of need for hope.

—Sarah Raughley



Discussion questions on *Brown Girl in the Ring*

Discussion questions from guest reader Sarah Raughley

1. How is *Brown Girl in the Ring* a different kind of Bildungsroman (a novel dealing with one person's formative years or spiritual education) than those books more typical of the genre, like *Anne of Green Gables* or *the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?
2. What do you think of the role of the health care industry in the novel? Do you see parallels to how the health care industry operates in countries like Canada or the United States?
3. Are the supernatural elements in the book something for Ti-Jeanne to fear? Why or why not?
4. The collapse of Toronto in *Brown Girl in the Ring* began with Ontario's fight with the Temagami First Nations over land ownership (a real issue that happened). Why would Nalo Hopkinson use a real-life event relating to the Indigenous Peoples as the background to her dystopian setting?
5. Although Rudy Sheldon started his life in Canada as a powerless immigrant, after his rise to power as a gang lord, he tries to enslave and destroy his wife, his daughter and his grand-daughter throughout the novel. Indeed, his way of achieving power and money seems to rest upon harming his own female relatives. What is this book trying to say about intersections of race, class and gendered power?
6. What is Afrofuturism? What kind of futuristic setting does Afro-futurist literature try to create and how does *Brown Girl in the Ring* fit into this larger genre?

Discussion questions from Amnesty International Book Club

1. What did you think of *Brown Girl in the Ring*? What aspects did you enjoy, and what did you find challenging? Why?
2. What significance does the title, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, have on the text and characters?
3. What inferences can we draw about the characters from the opening and final chapters?
4. Ti-Jeanne's personal growth throughout the novel is evident. How did her attitude toward her elders, culture, and outlook on life develop throughout the book?
5. The story closes with hope, Ti-Jeanne's victory is monumental, and the stolen heart possesses the power to permanently change the city of Toronto for the better. What did you think of the ending?
6. What parallels can we draw between Ti-Jeanne's experience and marginalized and racialized women in Toronto in the present day? What about marginalized and racialized women in the United States?

BACKGROUND



A young woman at an International Women's Day event in Kampala, Uganda, 8 March 1998.

Women's human rights

International Women's Day (IWD) is celebrated worldwide on March 8 every year. It is a time to celebrate achievements in the movement for gender equality and re-commit to the work ahead to ensure that people of every gender identity and expression have the same rights, powers, privileges, and opportunities, and can live in security without fear of violence, harassment, or discrimination.

Amnesty International's goal is a world where people of all genders have their rights equally respected and protected. We aim to root out the unequal power relationships that lead to gender-based discrimination and violence, ensure that women and girls have access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, and make sure women human rights defenders can safely and freely carry out their work.



© Marcus Perkins for Amnesty International

Fawzia Nawabi, investigator at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Mazar-e-Sharief, shares stories at a shelter for women at risk.

The resisters: women human rights defenders

Women human rights defender (WHRD) refers to women, transgender, and gender non-binary individuals who peacefully defend human rights, and people of all genders who defend women's rights and gender issues. WHRDs are subject to gender-specific risks and threats due to their human rights work and/or as a direct consequence of their gender identity, expression, or sexual orientation.

In every region of the world, WHRDs face forms of gender-based violence in addition to the attacks other human rights defenders (HRDs) might face. WHRDs are frequently targeted not only because of their activism but also because of their gender and their activities are repeatedly delegitimized and denigrated. Many of them operate in an environment of blatant hostility against the interests they promote. Those who challenge gender stereotypes and who work on issues like sexual and reproductive health and rights, or defend more widely the human rights of women and girls, are often especially vulnerable to gender-based attacks and threats. WHRDs are subject to systematic violence and discrimination due to their identities and unyielding struggles for rights, equality and justice.

Risks and threats targeting WHRDs

WHRDs are exposed to the same types of risks that all other people who defend human rights, communities, and the environment face. However, they are also exposed to gender-based violence and gender-specific risks because they challenge existing gender norms within their communities and societies.

By defending rights, WHRDs are at risk of:

- Physical assault and death
- Sexual violence
- Intimidation, harassment, threats, and defamation campaigns linked to their status as women, transgender, and non-binary individuals, including in online spaces
- Judicial harassment and criminalization
- Burnout

TAKE ACTION NOW

Demand justice for women human rights defender

Azza Soliman

Azza Soliman is a lawyer, a long-standing women human rights defender, and the co-founder of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), an NGO which works to prevent violence against women, and Lawyers for Justice and Peace to give much-needed legal aid, support, and literacy lessons for women in poverty and survivors of abuse. Azza bravely speaks out for victims of torture, arbitrary detention, domestic abuse, and rape.

Often, the work of WHRDs is seen as challenging traditional notions of family and gender roles in the society, which can lead to hostility by the general population and authorities. Due to this, WHRDs are subjected to stigmatization and ostracism by community leaders, faith-based groups, families and communities who consider them to be threatening religion, honour or culture through their work. In Egypt, public activism is often seen as men's work, and women human rights defenders are often persecuted because their work transgresses gender norms. Every day, Azza Soliman risks her own safety and freedom to defend survivors of abuse in Egypt. She has been arrested several times and harassed by the Egyptian authorities but also by the media for defending women's rights.

In the past year, investigative judges have ramped up pressure on human rights groups, using arbitrary travel bans and assets freezes to muzzle freedom of expression, association and assembly in orchestrated efforts to dismantle the country's human rights



movement and crush the slightest signs of dissent. Because of their courageous advocacy, Azza and other human rights defenders in Egypt have been labelled as spies and national security threats. They have been targeted with smear campaigns and government surveillance - and security forces and pro-government media constantly harass them. Many of them face up to life in prison, as a result of the politically motivated court case known as 'Case 173'.

Azza Soliman was also among 17 witnesses who were arrested after coming forward to give evidence about the killing of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh, an activist who was shot dead during the dispersal of a peaceful march in January 2015. She was charged with protesting without notifying the authorities and disturbing public order but was finally acquitted in May 2015 and upon appeal in October 2015.

Recently, Azza was arrested and interrogated. She now faces charges such as slandering Egypt's image by claiming that women in the country face rape. She has been banned from travel, her assets have been frozen - and she could face time in prison.

Join Amnesty and call on Egypt to drop all charges against Azza immediately and unconditionally, to rescind the travel ban, and unfreeze her assets.

Sign the petition at: <http://bit.ly/azza-soliman>

More about the issues

Learn more about our work on women's human rights: <http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/womens-human-rights>

Read Amnesty International's Human Rights Report Card and 2018 Agenda for Canada

<https://www.amnesty.ca/news/amnesty-international%E2%80%99s-human-rights-report-card-and-2018-agenda-canada>

Share the Amnesty International Book Club online

- Check us out on Facebook at **Amnesty International Book Club**, Twitter at **@AmnestyReads**, Instagram at **@AmnestyBookClub** and join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**

COMING UP IN MAY 2018

Seven Fallen Feathers by Tanya Talaga

Recommended by guest reader **Monia Mazigh**

Journalist Tanya Talaga's award-winning book, *Seven Fallen Feathers*, examines the deaths of seven First Nations high school students in Thunder Bay, Ontario, between 2000 and 2011. Through their stories, Talaga exposes how Canadian society – government, police, and the justice system – has failed these young people, their families and their communities. The sub title is *Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City*. The hard truths found in this book invite us all to join a crucial conversation about human rights in Canada.

The discussion guide will be sent out May 2018.

In the meanwhile, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca



© Steve Russell/Toronto Star

