

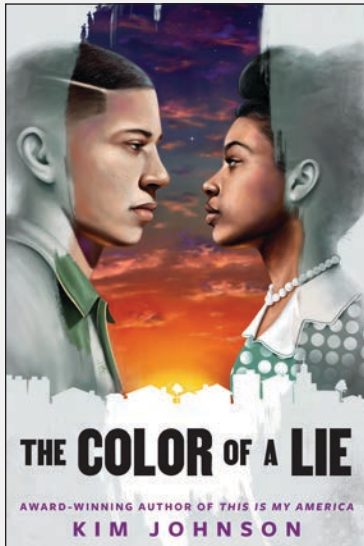
# KIM JOHNSON

## AUTHOR GUIDE



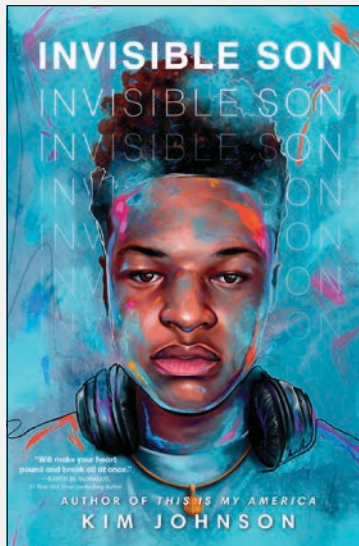


# ABOUT THE BOOKS



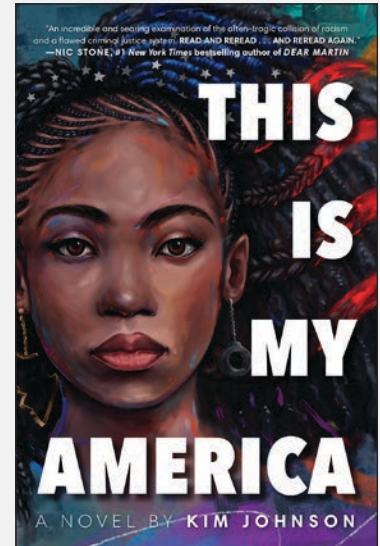
## The Color of a Lie

Expertly weaving together real historical events with important reflections on being Black in America, acclaimed author Kim Johnson powerfully connects readers to the experience of being forced to live a life-threatening lie or embrace an equally deadly truth.



## Invisible Son

Critically acclaimed author Kim Johnson delivers a social justice thriller about a wrongly accused teen desperate to reclaim both his innocence and his first love. Perfect for fans of *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *Dear Justyce* by Nic Stone.



## This Is My America

An unflinching yet uplifting debut novel that explores the racist injustices in the American justice system in a raw, unflinching, and accessible teen voice.

### Themes:

African American Interest, Contemporary Issues/Social Problems, Racism & Prejudice, Family & Relationships, Cultural Diversity

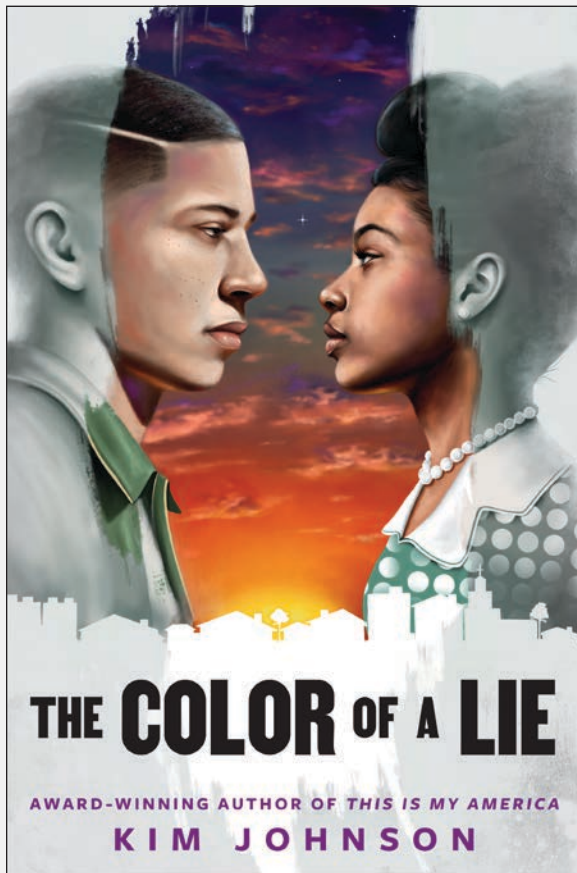
# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo credit: JBOY Photography

**Kim Johnson** held leadership positions in social justice organizations as a teen and in college, and is now an author and educator. Kim's bestselling novel, *This Is My America*, won numerous accolades, including the Pacific Northwest Book Award and Malka Penn Human Rights Award for Children's Literature. Her second novel, *Invisible Son*, is another thriller ripped from the headlines. Both novels were selected as NPR Best Books. *The Color of a Lie* is her first historical thriller.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *THE COLOR OF A LIE*



1. As Calvin's family settles into Levittown, we see that Calvin and his parents each have different perspectives on passing—what they stand to gain and lose. Discuss each character's viewpoint. Can each of their perspectives be valid at once? How do they each cope with the difficulties, dangers, and losses? Do you think you would try living such a life, given the choices they had?
2. On pages 35–36, Calvin's class is shown a film on conforming to societal rules and standards. Do you believe US society has moved away from this type of pressure, or does this message seem to still be prevalent? If you still see it in action, how so?
3. Calvin moves through the world differently when he is passing as white. He notices when he and his white friends "took up space on the sidewalk and people scattered out of our way." (p. 77) His interactions with white girls and women are strained by his awareness of what could happen if they found out he is not white. The story of Emmett Till symbolizes the ultimate danger to Black boys and men with regard to white girls and women. Meanwhile, the white teens behave as if Lily is public property. Discuss how racism intensifies when it intersects with issues of gender. Do you see traces of those ideas today?
4. After Lily is harassed and assaulted at school, her mother doesn't want her to go back. Considering the dangers and threats to which youth integrating schools and families integrating neighborhoods were subject, how do you think you would have approached decisions about integration if you lived at this time in history?
5. When Alex tells Calvin the story of the Sampsons, Calvin asks if the whole town was angry about a Black family moving in. Alex responds, "Not the whole town . . . but enough. The angriest were the loudest." (p. 151) How does this foreshadow how things will play out in this story? Consider the supportive but quiet characters, like Alex and Miss Brower. Do you find that those who are angriest tend to be the loudest in opposition to current social justice issues? How do people of conscience weigh the instinct for self-preservation with the need to contribute to progress and make the world a better place? Is it easier to rally people around selfish goals than around principles of equality? Why or why not?



6. Throughout the book, there are rumors that the woods are haunted, but some characters, like Lily and eventually Calvin, take comfort in the woods. By the end of the book, after the scenes in the barn, the church, and the forest, what do you think of the setting? How does the setting contribute to the story and amplify its themes?
7. Discuss Calvin's decision to hide what happens to Darren. Are you convinced that his reasoning is sound? Would you have agreed to keep it a secret? Do you think all the characters can be trusted to keep it hidden?
8. Toward the end of the book, the characters learn about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. beginning his civil rights work and looking for young people to join a movement. Does it surprise you that so many young people were active before Dr. King made their cause famous? After reading about characters like Lily and the CORE organizers in this book, do you think the history of the Civil Rights Movement should be taught differently?
9. Before Calvin's family leaves Levittown, Ben says goodbye and apologizes to Calvin. Calvin responds, "Make it right, then, Ben. When everything changes here, make it right." (p. 313) What can Ben do to "make it right"? When can he start?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *INVISIBLE SON*



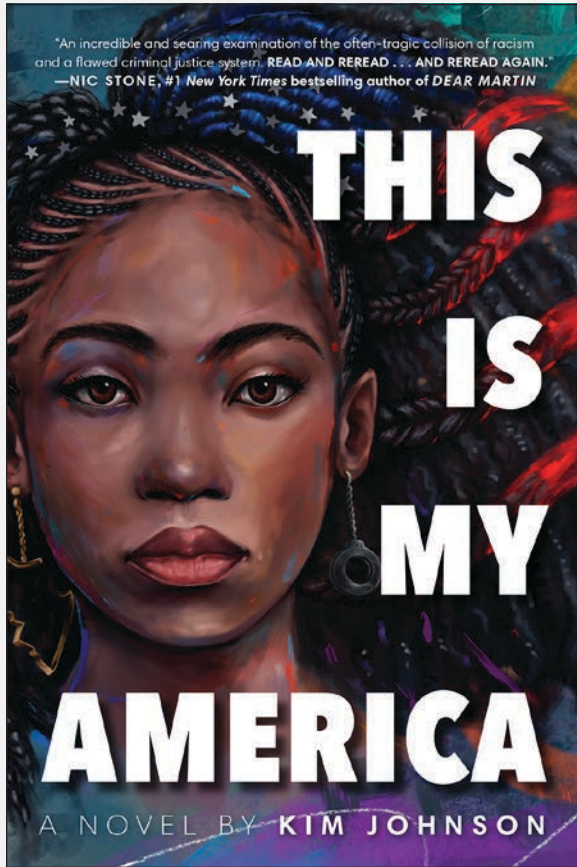
1. What reasons does Andre give for not telling the police what he knew about Eric and Gavin? What do you think about his choice? When is it okay to "snitch" on people you care about?
2. Andre's grandfather wants Andre to hang around the right crowd and get good grades. Andre thinks his respectability politics are wishful thinking. "He believes if we're perfect, then we're untouchable. . . . But code-switching and dressing a certain way don't really keep you safe." (p. 41) Why does Andre think this? Do you agree? If your behavior and speech won't guarantee your safety, do they matter at all?
3. Andre and Boogie notice how gentrification has changed their city. "Northeast used to have a bad rep. Then they come in to clean it up, and a decade later actual brick-and-mortar weed shops are on every block and that's fine?" (p. 47) When he is stopped by police, Andre thinks, "I pray my story of *place* in this neighborhood means something to them. That some name recognition saves

my life." (p. 248) Discuss Andre's relationship with his city. How does gentrification work for and against different populations? What are some ways in which residents can resist being pushed out of their homes and neighborhoods?

4. Andre struggles to remain the same person he was before he was sent to juvenile detention. Who and what work against him and who and what work with him in his struggle? What does Andre do to feel like himself again? How can people stay true to themselves when the people around them doubt and question who they really are?
5. When Andre finds bruises on Sierra's arm, he immediately wants to know who is hurting her, but she won't tell. What are some strategies for approaching someone who is being abused? What would you do to support someone who's not ready to speak about the abuse they are experiencing?
6. Compare the different experiences with COVID-19—those of Andre's family, Boogie's family, and the Whitakers. What do their stories highlight about the different realities people lived through during the pandemic? How did race and class affect those experiences?
7. When Sierra and her siblings become active in the Black Lives Matter protests, Andre doesn't join them, even though he believes in what it stands for. "It's about being able to exist. To thrive. . . . Having the same chance." (p. 265) Why does he hesitate to be hopeful about Black Lives Matter? Why does he decide to stay at the protest with Sierra?
8. Andre is uncomfortable with the way Katie treats him, and eventually we learn about their history. Discuss what happened between them at the party as an issue of consent. Do you feel that this storyline was resolved in a satisfactory way? Why or why not?
9. Discuss the role of music in Andre's life, and in his relationships with Sierra and Boogie. How does listening to old songs bring them closer together? What activities or hobbies do you enjoy better with friends, in person or virtually? How does having company change the experience?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *THIS IS MY AMERICA*



1. Take a close look at the art on the cover of the book. What symbols do you see, and what do they mean to you? How do they connect to the book's themes? Does the image resonate with you? Why or why not?
2. In the opening letter from Tracy to Innocence X, we learn that her father has been on death row for seven years, through multiple appeals. Consider the ages Tracy and her siblings were when he was first imprisoned. How do you think Tracy managed to hold on to hope that she could prove his innocence? Describe her relationship with her father and his case.
3. What was your impression of Tracy's decision to bring up her father's case on the television show? Do you think she was justified? How would you feel if you were Jamal?
4. When Tracy shows up at school after Angela's death, she is treated as if she has no right to be there. At one point, she notes that she doesn't have time to grieve because of her need to defend her brother. When polarizing events happen, people who are put on the defensive often don't get to process their complicated feelings of grief and loss. Where else do you see this dynamic at play in our world?
5. After Jamal's disappearance, Tracy needs Quincy's help, and they become closer as they work together to clear his name. Meanwhile, Tracy's relationship with Dean becomes fraught after he admits that he hadn't immediately known her brother was innocent. Discuss how Tracy frames the evolution of these two relationships in the context of the traumas faced by her family and Quincy's.
6. Beverly's position as a police officer is seen differently by different characters. Discuss Beverly's relationship with the Black community, including her family, since her decision to join the police force. What do you think of her choice? How does her presence on the police force affect the Black community? Is she able to help ensure justice is served?
7. When Mrs. Evans says she doesn't want to choose sides, Tracy responds, "There's one side. The side of justice." (p. 261) When you learn about Mrs. Evans's past, does it affect how you view her as a character? Why or why not?
8. Discuss Jamal's reasons for running away, and for not turning himself in even when he is urged to by people who care for him. Do you think that was the best choice, given his situation? What would you have done?
9. Tracy's mother has kept Tracy's father's car in working order so that when he is released, one thing will be the same. Discuss how it might feel to return to your family and community after seven years in prison. What would you need to begin rebuilding your life? Does our society provide the support needed for people who have been incarcerated?

# EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

## Displacement, Housing Discrimination, and Gentrification

In each of Johnson's novels, setting plays a major role in the characters' lives and communities. From redlining and housing discrimination to avoid integration in the 1950s and '60s to gentrification in the current day, social and economic policies have repeatedly prevented Black families from gaining wealth through property. Do some research on your town or city. Starting from the indigenous nation that was displaced during colonial times and westward expansion, find out what ethnic and cultural groups have inhabited your area. What policies and developmental programs influenced who could live in what parts of your area over time? How is that changing now, and who is benefitting? Write a brief narrative telling the story of your town, city, or region.

## Challenging "Color Blindness" in the Criminal Justice System

*This Is My America* and *Invisible Son* highlight the disproportionate effects of the criminal justice system on Black people. In *This Is My America* and *The Color of a Lie*, the relationship between the Ku Klux Klan and the police complicates the Black communities' access to justice before the law.

**Discuss:** Looking at the history of these systems, what has been their function in regard to the Black population in the United States?

**Research:** Learn about a model of resistance through which people have worked against injustice. Some examples of movements led by young people are the Children's Birmingham Crusade or Dream Defenders. You can also learn more about the Equal Justice Initiative.

**Act:** Take a step toward creating a more just society. What can you do right now? Write an op-ed, write to a congressperson/stakeholder, participate in or organize a protest, disseminate information to your community? Take one active step.

## Interracial Friendships and Relationships

In each of the three novels, there are times when Black characters see that a white friend does not or cannot understand the experience of being Black. When there is an imbalance of power between groups, relationships can be strained by the privilege society confers on some individuals because of their membership in a particular group (racial, gender, immigration status, etc). Brainstorm ways in which members of privileged groups can learn more about the experiences of members of marginalized groups. Then choose one method and use it to learn more about a group with less privilege than you. For example, if you listed reading books centering characters from marginalized groups and you are an able-bodied person, you could find a book centering a differently abled character to read.

## Race as a Social Construct

Race is experienced socially, with specific human-made, socially enforced rules that apply at different times and in different contexts. Johnson's three novels explore the social experience of race from the perspective of Black Americans in different times and locations. This activity asks you to identify the human-made rules pertaining to race in the USA. Create a chart with columns for Rules, Evidence, and Echoes. Under Rules, brainstorm and list some of the racial rules that appeared in any of the three stories. Under Evidence, note where in the text(s) you found indications of this rule. For Echoes, think about whether you believe that rule applies in your time and location and whether it affects how you live. Try to cite examples—firsthand stories or articles—to show how the rule shapes your context.

**Autumn Allen**, EdM, MA, MFA, is an educator, an editor, an author, and a children's literature specialist. Visit her online at [www.autumnallenbooks.com](http://www.autumnallenbooks.com).



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