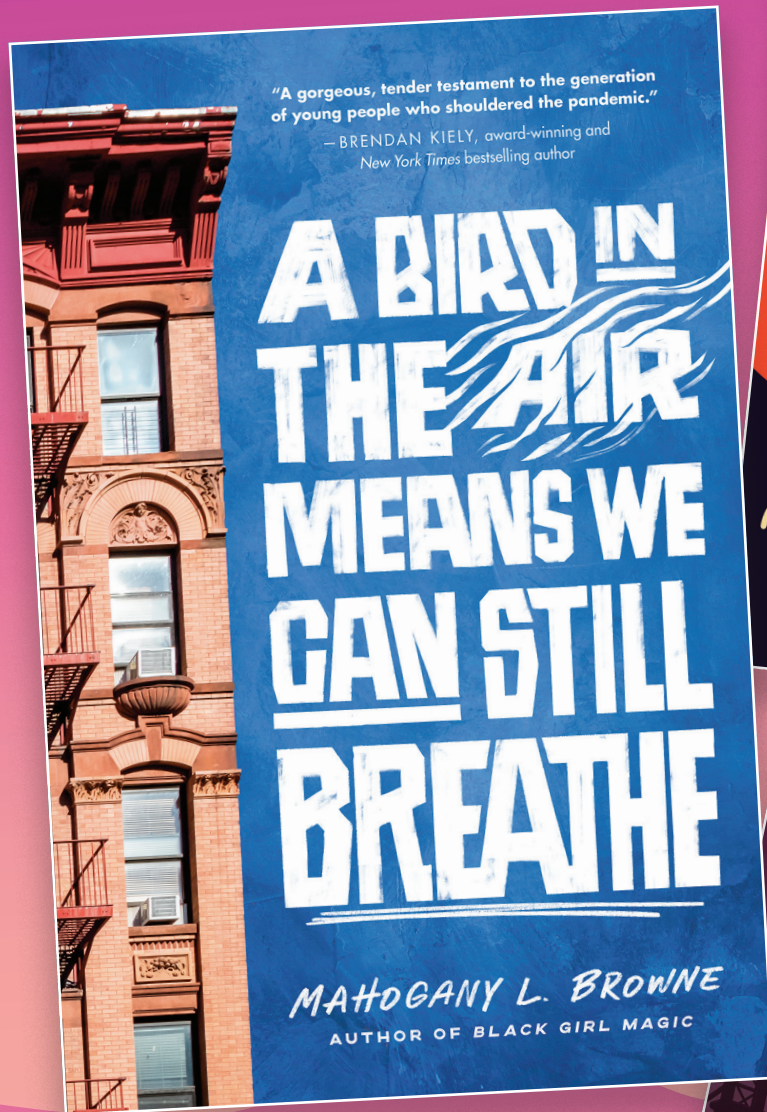


MAHOGANY L. BROWNE

AUTHOR STUDY GUIDE



ABOUT THE BOOKS



A novel-in-verse about a young girl coming of age and stepping out of the shadow of her former best friend.

SHE LOOKS ME HARD IN MY EYES

& my knees lock into tree trunks

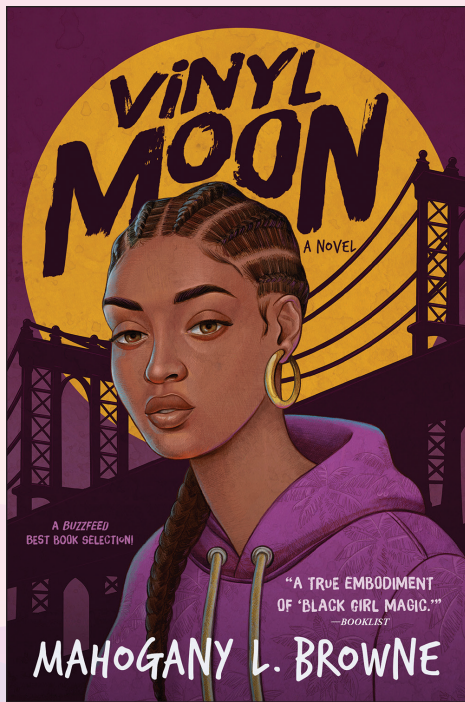
My eyes don't dance like my heartbeat racing

They stare straight back hot daggers.

I remember things will never be the same.

I remember things.

With gritty, heartbreaking honesty, Mahogany L. Browne delivers a novel-in-verse about broken promises, fast rumors, and when growing up means growing apart from your best friend.

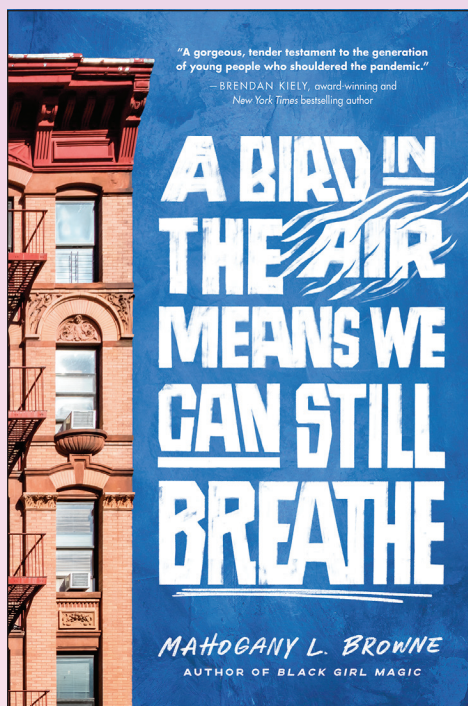


When Darius told Angel he loved her, she believed him.

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.

ABOUT THE BOOKS (CONTINUED)



A striking collection of interconnected prose and poetry

In New York City, teens, their families, and their communities feel the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid the fear and loss, these teens and the adults around them persevere with love and hope while living in difficult circumstances.

- Malachi writes an Armageddon short story inspired by his pandemic reality.
- Tariq helps their ailing grandmother survive during quarantine.
- Zamira struggles with depression and loneliness after losing her parents.
- Mohamed tries to help keep his community spirit alive.
- A social worker reflects on the ways the foster system fails children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo credit: Savannah Lauren

Mahogany L. Browne is a Kennedy Center Next 50 fellow, writer, playwright, organizer, and educator. Browne has received fellowships from ALL ARTS, Arts for Justice, AIR Serenbe, Baldwin for the Arts, Cave Canem, Poets House, Mellon Research, Rauschenberg, and Wesleyan University. Browne's books include *A Bird in the Air Means We Can Still Breathe*, *Vinyl Moon*, *Chlorine Sky* (optioned for Steppenwolf Theatre), *Black Girl Magic*, and banned books *Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice* and *Woke Baby*. Browne's

Chrome Valley tour was highlighted in *Publishers Weekly* and *The New York Times*. Founder of the diverse lit initiative Woke Baby Book Fair, Browne is a Paterson Poetry Prize winner. She is the inaugural poet in residence at the Lincoln Center and lives in Brooklyn, New York. Visit her online at mobrowne.com or on social at [@mobrowne](https://twitter.com/mobrowne).

CHLORINE SKY

DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

1. Writers use repetition to emphasize important ideas. In the first poem, “ME & LAY LI AIN’T TALKING,” Sky explains that she and Lay Li are having friendship trouble “cause she think she cute / cause she think I ain’t.” (p. 1) In the second poem, “& THIS IS WHY I THINK,” Sky says, “She must think she cute! / Must think I ain’t!” (p. 2) and in the third poem, “& LAY LI STILL GRINNING,” she says, “She must think she cute / But she ain’t just cute / Lay Li pretty.” (p. 4) What do you learn about Sky over these three poems? What were her most dominant feelings at the beginning of *Chlorine Sky*? What and who is important to her?
2. We meet Curtis, who is cruel to Sky. How does Sky respond to Curtis in her poems? Do you believe that Lay Li has a responsibility to defend Sky? Colorism is the unjust and damaging practice of favoring lighter brown skin (and lighter brown-skinned people) and denigrating browner skin (and browner-skinned people). It has its roots in white supremacy. Lateral violence is a type of violence that is misdirected at one’s peers instead of one’s adversaries, and it arises from deeply rooted forms of oppression. Research both concepts. Explain what roles colorism and lateral violence play in *Chlorine Sky*’s opening poems.
3. In “HAVE YOU EVER STARTED A RUMOR?,” (p. 74) Sky describes what it feels like to be on either side of a rumor: what it feels like to talk about someone and what it feels like to be talked about by other people. What images does Sky use to describe how both of these experiences feel? What sensory (sight, smell, touch, taste, sound) details could you add from your own experiences of rumors?
4. In “THE ASPHALT IS HOT ON MY SNEAKERS,” (p. 82) Sky says, “with all my tough talk, I still don’t talk about nobody’s mama / Cause Tyrone’s mama reminds me of my uncle / Sick on that stuff / & I don’t talk about his daddy neither / Cause his daddy gone just like mines. / Instead / I say ‘Your handles is trash!’ / & really, that’s only a fact.” (p. 83) What value does Sky demonstrate here? Why do you believe this is important to her? What are Sky’s other values? At what moments in the book do you see her values challenged by other characters?
5. Reflect on and respond to the following quotes. You may choose to analyze the quote (What is its context? What is its purpose? What do you notice about this quote—what does it make you think or feel? What other specific quotes in the book does this quote connect to, and why?) or use it as a creative writing prompt (either as a line in a story or a poem you write or as a theme or topic to explore in your own poem or story).
 - “& the argument has grown teeth / Buried its fangs into our friendship / & won’t let go.” (p. 30)
 - “I bop across the grass & / As soon as my ten toes touch asphalt / all the boys groan” (p. 79)
 - “Don’t write about it Don’t write about it? / Nah, don’t leave evidence of the sads. / & never ever let it take you somewhere you can’t come back from.” (p. 94)
 - “Shoot, stories can change your whole world.” (p. 101)
 - “Because here I am with a chance to do different / & instead of being loyal to myself / I rather be loyal to Lay Li.” (p. 109)
 - “Everybody wants to be a hero, but most of us / are just misunderstood villains.” (p. 144)
 - “She can’t be crying for me . . .” (p. 161)
 - “Once you figure out what you gaming for / Then you can play honest & with integrity / If you show up & show the world your real self / You don’t have to wait for others to claim you / You don’t have to wait for others to pick you / You pick yourself, I mean / Really choose yourself every day” (p. 172)

6. In “THE RULES ARE EASY,” (p. 47) Sky lists all the rules in her home. Indented and in parentheses, we are told the questions Sky’s mother asks when she does not follow the rules. Write a poem about the rules of your home, using the same structure as this poem: rules of your home up against the margin, and then an adult’s voice in parentheses asking questions of you when those rules aren’t followed. What does Sky communicate about her home life that is similar to or different from yours? What does Sky think about the rules? Are they easy for her to follow? Why or why not? Are your rules easy for you to follow? Why or why not?
7. “Now I realize being a girl is heavy business,” Sky says. (p. 152) What is heavy about the business of being a girl, according to Sky? How does Sky’s statement reflect a new understanding of her relationship with Lay Li? How does Sky’s new understanding of being a girl relate to her experiences with Clifton, Tyrone, and Curtis? In *Chlorine Sky*, how is being a girl “heavy business”? Do you think being a girl is “heavy business”? Why or why not?
8. Every poem in *Chlorine Sky* tells a story. Every poem is connected to the one that came before and the one that comes after. The titles of the poems are also the first lines. Why do you think the author made the decision to write her book this way? What value does the interconnection between poems add to the book for you? Write three poems about three connected events in your life. Follow the same format as *Chlorine Sky*: the title of each poem is also its first line, and the last line connects to the next poem.
9. Sky has important relationships with Essa, Lay Li, Inga, and Kiyana. How does she feel about each of these characters throughout the book? Does it change? What lessons does each person teach her? What do you imagine she might teach each of them? How does Sky grow in each of these relationships?
10. Inga instructs Sky in “INGA SAYS”: “Being a Black girl & a Black girl baller is a whole set of rules / you never see coming / Know the rules / So you know which ones you need to break.” (p. 172) Contrast this with Coach Willie’s earlier instruction to Sky: “He say I ain’t supposed to say them things. / Not with my girl mouth / & I was almost surprised / Cause I ain’t said nothing that they haven’t already said to me.” (p. 83) By the end of *Chlorine Sky*, what rules has Sky decided to break? What advice from others, including Inga and Coach Willie, does she accept? What advice does she reject?
11. We learn Sky’s name in the last two lines of the book. Reflect on Sky’s feelings about herself over the course of the novel. What parts of herself has Sky learned to accept by the end that she did not in the beginning?

[Click here for even more questions about Chlorine Sky.](#)

Praise for *Chlorine Sky*

- ★ “Celebrated poet Browne brings serious poetry chops to her writing but keeps it pared down and immediate for teen readers; 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

“Readers will find the changing friendships relatable. A contemporary look at changing teenage friendships and finding ways to accept yourself.” —*School Library Journal*

VINYL MOON

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 classroom: 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?

7. Brooklyn is a gorgeous tapestry of sights, landmarks, history, food, music, and people. Pick 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. Which relationships in the book speak most to you, and why? Which relationships in this book reflect your own? 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) 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 would you decide on, and why?

[Click here for even more questions about *Vinyl Moon*.](#)

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*

A BIRD ~~IN~~ THE AIR MEANS WE CAN STILL BREATHE

DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

1. When and with whom do you feel most heard? Why do you imagine that Hyacinth and Electra, our chorus, are so adamant about being heard, as teens, in their own languages, about what they see during the pandemic?
2. Compare and contrast the pandemic-apocalypse story that Malachi tells in “Malachi: Quinies, Part 1–4” with the letter Malachi sends his mother from boarding school after Ms. Buchanon writes home. What are important moments where the two different tellings (the letter and the story) merge? What can a story do for us when we are living through a complex and difficult time? (You can reflect on what positive effects telling his story may have for Malachi.)
3. Tariq wrote out seven stages of the pandemic. What do we learn about Tariq’s perspective and about what’s important to him based on how he describes his stages? Based on your own experience or the experiences of those you are close to who lived in the pandemic, what are your stages, and how would you describe each stage?
4. Reflect on the differences between the characters—their families, their personalities, the experiences that have shaped them as individuals. Which character did you relate to most, and why? Which character did you learn the most from, and what did you learn?
5. Maseo Craig Sr. says, “One nation, one table. Let no one leave hungry!” Many characters are creatively making do with what they have and do not have enough resources available to comfortably meet all their needs. Different teens in the book make different choices that have hard consequences: Tamara, for example, works all day to cover their expenses and has to leave Zamira at home, which strains their relationship and doesn’t give Tamara enough time to rest. Yusef’s foster parents stole his income, and when he took needed basics, he was thrown in jail and later tortured by solitary confinement in the SHU. These are just two examples—how else do you see resources, or the lack of resources, impacting characters in the book? Abolishing poverty is possible. What does that world look like? How does your vision compare to Maseo Craig Sr.’s vision in “Hope is an Act of Liberation”?
6. Characters embody a beautiful range of identities. They also have many different family structures. Pick a character you have learned something from and explore how their identity shapes their outlook and experiences, citing evidence from the book. Reflect on your own identities—what are they? Why are they important to you, and how can you imagine or describe how one or more has shaped your current perspective on life?
7. Electra says, “I mean, love is not a vaccine. But when we take care of one another, man . . . love is the cure.” What is love the cure to? How do you imagine that characters are cured with love? How has love cured you and/or people around you in your own life?
8. Many characters suffer losses in the pandemic, either through disappearance or death. Pick one character who experienced a loss and explore how they received care and from whom as they were losing the person or after they lost the person they cared about. What are the different ways we can care for each other when dealing with loss?

9. Systems and programs that are designed to support the public that touch characters' lives in this book include school, extracurricular programs (like writing programs or afterschool programs), jail, and child services. How do these systems and programs protect characters, and how do they make characters vulnerable or even harm them? A social worker's job is to care for people who have needs within each of these spaces and to help people find resources that can help them. What do the social workers say in their haikus that gives insight into their feelings and experiences of offering help?

10. Audre Lorde's poem, "A Litany for Survival," ends with these three lines:

*So, it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.*

Hyacinth and Electra, our chorus, offer "We, a Litany on Surviving After Audre Lorde" at the end of the book, which speaks out loud all the beautiful and affirmative ways they and the young people in their community thrive and exist despite terrible pressures (from the pandemic and from society). What does *your* litany on surviving sound like? And who is part of your chorus, your "we"?

11. Why do you think the author used so many different formats like chorus, letter, journal, free verse, and list in the book? How do you think each format helps tell the story or reveal the characters' feelings? Now think about a life-changing event you've experienced—what format would you choose to write in, and why?

4 Starred Reviews for *A Bird in the Air Means We Can Still Breathe*

★ "Important, powerful
and evergreen."

—*Kirkus Reviews*,
starred review

★ "An emotionally
impactful read."

—*Publishers Weekly*,
starred review

★ "An unsparing examination
of the plague and its impact
on young lives."

—*Booklist*, starred review

★ "An essential purchase."

—*School Library Journal*,
starred review

*Questions written by Christina Olivares,
a New York City-based writer and educator.*



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