

## Book Club Discussion Guide



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# The Break

## By Katherena Vermette

### About the author:

katherena vermette (she/her/hers) is a Red River Métis (Michif) writer from Treaty 1 territory, the heart of the Métis Nation. She has worked in poetry, novels, children's literature, and film.

Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, her father's roots run deep in St. Boniface, St. Norbert and beyond. Her mother's side is Mennonite from the Altona and Rosenfeld area (Treaty 1).

vermette received the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry for her first book, *North End Love Songs (The Muses' Company)*. *The Break (House of Anansi)* won several awards including the Amazon.ca First Novel Award, and was a bestseller in Canada. Her National Film Board documentary, *this river* won the Canadian Screen Award for Best Short. She holds a Master of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia.

Her second novel, *The Strangers (Hammish Hamilton)* won the Atwood Gibson Writers Trust Fiction Prize and was named Chapters Indigo's Book of the Year 2021. It was also longlisted for the Giller Prize.

katherena lives with her family in a cranky old house within skipping distance of the temperamental Red River.

*Source: Author's website: (<https://katherenavermette.com/>)*

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### About this book:

When Stella, a young Métis mother, looks out her window one evening and spots someone in trouble on the Break — a barren field on an isolated strip of land outside her house — she calls the police to alert them to a possible crime.

In a series of shifting narratives, people who are connected, both directly and indirectly, with the victim — police, family, and friends — tell their personal stories leading up to that fateful night. Lou, a social worker, grapples with the departure of her live-in boyfriend. Cheryl, an artist, mourns the premature death of her sister Rain. Paulina, a single mother, struggles to trust her new partner. Phoenix, a homeless teenager, is released from a youth detention centre. Officer Scott, a Métis policeman, feels caught between two worlds as he patrols the city. Through their various perspectives a larger, more comprehensive story about lives of the residents in Winnipeg's North End is exposed.

A powerful intergenerational family saga, *The Break* showcases Vermette's abundant writing talent and positions her as an exciting new voice in Canadian literature.

Source: <https://katherenavermette.com/>

### Discussion Questions:

1. The book begins with a shocking act of violence and its investigation by the police. In what way does *The Break* follow the pattern of a more conventional crime or mystery novel, and in what ways does it depart from the forms of these genres?

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2. The book is organized into four parts, and at the start of each is a short reflection by an unnamed character. How does this point of view provide insight into the events unfolding in the novel?
3. At the book's opening Stella is isolated in her home alone with her young children and partly estranged from her family. Why is she distant from her relatives? How do the events of the novel force her to reconsider this distance?
4. When we are introduced to Cheryl, she is trying to revive a series of paintings in which she represents her family members as wolf women (47) and at the end of the novel, Cheryl imagines herself and her sisters together, "just wolves with shed skin" (344). What is the intent of these paintings and what does this image reflect for Cheryl? Why does she initially have trouble finding the spark of inspiration for these works?
5. The image of the Manitoba Hydro towers recurs throughout the novel. When snow falls on the lines, they buzz constantly, "like a whisper you know is a voice but you can't hear the words" (5). What disparate places do these towers connect? What might they symbolize?
6. The book's epigraph comes from Alice Walker: "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." How would you relate this quote to the relative social power — or powerlessness — of the characters in *The Break*? Do they think that they have power? Why or why not?
7. What was the initial impetus behind Tommy's decision to become a police officer? Does his sense of the work change over time? How does it affect his relationship with his wife, Hannah?
8. The frigid Manitoba winter is so active and powerful a force in the lives of the characters that it is almost a character itself. At what moments in the story does the winter heighten or demonstrate different characters' vulnerability?

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9. The novel is told from ten different perspectives; the views converge around the violent act at the centre of the story, but also dip into the past. How does this constantly shifting point of view affect the tension in the plot? Which voices are left out and why?

10. Flora, known in the novel as Kookum, is a powerful matriarch and provides members of her family with a strong sense of connectedness. What do you think is the source of her power? In what specific ways does she care for her family despite being in need of care herself? Near the close of the book, Kookum reflects, “In the end, all that matters is what has been given” (328). Is this an expression of appreciation or resignation? How does it relate to the journey she faced after the death of her daughter Rain?

11. For many characters, the lands of their traditional territories represent sustenance and healing. What is important for these characters about life in the “bush” and how do those connections relate to their lives in the city? What tensions do specific characters face in the pull of these two worlds?

12. Latent and overt racism in the criminal justice system is embodied in the character of Officer Christie, who characterizes the attack in the Break as “nates beating on nates” (72) and calls Officer Scott “May-tee.” What are the origins of Officer Christie’s beliefs? Over the course of the novel, does he demonstrate any capacity to change?

13. Jake and Sunny seem vulnerable to the draws of gang life. Over the long run, do you think that they will enter that life or avoid it? What clues do we have? How might the violence that Ziggy and Emily faced shape the boys’ paths?

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14. In 2016, the federal government launched an independent inquiry into the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Its mandate is to explore the “systemic causes behind the violence that Indigenous women and girls and their greater vulnerability to that violence by looking for patterns and underlying factors that explain why higher levels of violence occur.” In what ways does *The Break* comment on these patterns or underlying factors of violence against Indigenous women, if at all?

15. Phoenix willfully ignores the idea that her unborn child will have to go into care. Instead, she dreams about pushing a stroller down the sidewalk, the way she did with her baby sister Sparrow. What does this mental image of Phoenix’s reveal about her sense of herself, her history, and her state of mind at the end of the novel?

Source: *Brampton Library* ([www.bramptonlibrary.ca](http://www.bramptonlibrary.ca))