



## THE TRUE DEFINITION OF NEVA BEANE DISCUSSION GUIDE

by Christine Kendall

### Book Summary

Being twelve isn't easy, especially if you're Neva Beane. She knows she's beautiful and smart but there are so many confusing signals in everyday life about, well, everything including the changes taking place in her pre-adolescent body; her relationship with her best friend, Jamila; and, her admiration for the activist on the block, Michelle. It's especially hard for Neva to figure all of this out while her musician parents are on tour in Europe and Neva and her brother, Clay, are left at home with their very traditional grandparents. The household descends into inter-generational turmoil and Neva is left with what comforts her most—words and their meanings. While the pages of her beloved dictionary reveal truths about what's happening around her, Neva discovers the best way to define herself. (Ages 8 - 12)

## Questions to discuss

### *Key Ideas and Themes*

1. Neva's daily routine is disrupted when Clay sees her admiring herself in front of the biggest mirror in the house. Neva is humiliated and never wants to see her brother again. What do you think of Neva's response to the situation?
2. Who is your favorite character in the novel? Who are you most similar to?
3. Neva knows she's beautiful and smart but she still experiences a loss of self confidence as she approaches adolescence. Why do you think that is? Can you think of a time when you were stronger than you thought you were? What did you learn from that experience?
4. Neva initially thinks she is weakened by not having her parents, especially her mom, around for the summer. What do you think about her parents' decision to pursue the opportunity presented to them?
5. Granddad and Nana are deeply conflicted about Clay's political activism. What are their responsibilities as guardians while Clay and Neva's parents are away? What do you think of Clay's handling of the situation?
6. Neva is obsessed with definitions and her dictionary serves as her comfort object. Why do you think that is?
7. Granddad is a force to be reckoned with. What do you think of his behavior? What does the cuddling scene reveal about him?
8. A generational divide is present throughout the book. Discuss examples of generational differences in your life.
9. The traditional roles of men and women come into play in the novel. Discuss how these issues impact Neva, her family, and her community.
10. There are clues pointing to Nana's physical decline throughout the book and Neva is upset when she learns why her grandmother will not attend the march. What do you think about the book's ending?

### **Craft and Structure**

10. Neva tries to avoid her brother after the mirror scene in the first chapter. Do you think the problem introduced by this incident would have been enough to carry the entire book? Why or why not?
11. Fictional characters are more interesting when they are neither all good or all bad. Consider Neva and her family. How would you describe each of them?

12. What role do the chapter headings play in the book?

### **Additional Activities**

13. Neva experiences a profound sense of positive energy when she attends the community political meeting. Have you ever experienced a similar jolt of "electricity" through art, music, athletics, nature, or anything else? Write a paragraph about your experience.

14. Michelle and Neva exhibit totally different leadership styles at the end of the book. What sorts of leadership skills are important to you?

15. Ghanaian highlife music is mentioned in the book. Research the music and write a summary of your findings.

### **Author Information**

Christine Kendall grew up in a family of artists filled with abundant creative energy. Before being bitten by the writing bug she enjoyed a long corporate career. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals and her debut novel, *Riding Chance*, was nominated for a NAACP Image Award in the category of Outstanding Literary work for Youth/Teens. *The True Definition of Neva Beane* is her second novel. Christine lives in Philadelphia, PA where she co-curates and hosts the award winning reading series, Creative at the Cannery.

