

Discussion Guide for Swift River by Essie Chambers

1. SWIFT RIVER begins with, “The summer after I turn sixteen, I am so fat I can’t ride my bike anymore.” How does this opening line set the tone for the rest of the story? What were your initial thoughts when you read it?
2. How does Diamond’s weight and self-perception shape her interactions with others throughout the novel? How did your perception of Diamond change as you read?
3. Before reading "Swift River," what did you know about sundown towns? Did anything you learned from the book surprise you or challenge your previous knowledge?
4. Mother-Daughter Relationship: Explore the dynamic between Diamond and her mother, Annabelle. How does their relationship evolve over the course of the novel? How do you feel about Annabelle’s decisions and their impact on Diamond?
5. What role do the letters from Lena and Clara play in the narrative? How do they help Diamond connect with her heritage and understand her family’s past?
6. Did "Swift River" make you reconsider the history of your own hometown? Are there aspects of your town’s past that you think might be overlooked or untold? Where would you start if you wanted to learn more about your hometown's hidden history?
7. Characters like Diamond, Ma, Shelley, Pop, and Clara each have unique ways of dealing with hardships. Discuss these coping strategies. Which ones did you find most relatable or effective?
8. Discuss the concept of sundown towns and their impact on the story. How does learning about Pop’s experience in such a town deepen your understanding of the characters’ struggles?
9. Swift River, the town, is described as a character in itself. How does the setting influence the events of the story? What role does the river play in the symbolism of the novel?
10. In what ways does Diamond’s inheritance—stories and letters—shape her identity and future? How do these non-material inheritances compare to traditional notions of inheritance?

11. Diamond feels isolated as the only Black person in Swift River. How does this isolation affect her sense of self and her relationships with others in the town?
12. What are your theories about what happened to Diamond's father? How do you think this mystery impacts the story and Diamond's life?
13. How does the novel address issues of race and class? How do these issues intersect and impact the characters, particularly Diamond and her family?
14. As the only Black person in Swift River, Diamond often feels like an outsider. How does her sense of "otherness" make her both highly visible and invisible in different situations?
15. How does the mystery surrounding Pop's disappearance drive the plot? What were your theories about what happened to him as you read, and how did you feel when the truth was revealed?
16. Examine Diamond's relationships with her peers, especially Shelly. How do these relationships influence her journey of self-discovery and empowerment?
17. How does the novel challenge societal perceptions of weight and body image? How does Diamond's journey reflect broader themes of acceptance and self-worth?
18. How does the 1980s setting influence the story? What aspects of the time period are most evident, and how do they affect the characters' experiences?
19. How important is your family or community history to your sense of identity? Have you ever discovered something about your family that changed how you see yourself and your heritage?
20. What is the significance of Diamond learning to drive in secret? How does this act of rebellion symbolize her desire for independence and change?
21. How do the secrets revealed through Lena's letters affect Diamond's understanding of her family and herself? How does uncovering these secrets help her grow?
22. Out of the three main voices in "Swift River" – Diamond's, Lena's, and Clara's – which did you connect with the most? What aspects of their stories or personalities resonated with you?

23. Compare and contrast the experiences of Diamond, Lena, and Clara. How do their stories reflect different aspects of the African American experience across generations?
24. Lena shares Clara's letters to Sweetie with Diamond, but Sweetie's responses are missing. Did you imagine what Sweetie might have written back? How did Clara's letters shape your understanding of Sweetie?
25. Discuss the various meanings of the river in the novel. How does it symbolize transition, danger, power, and rebirth?
26. Essie Chambers' background in film and television is evident in her writing. How do her visual storytelling techniques enhance your reading experience?
27. How did having the perspectives of Diamond, Lena, and Clara enhance your understanding of their family and the history of Swift River? Did you notice any similarities or differences in their voices, personalities, or perspectives?
28. Despite the challenges she faces, Diamond shows remarkable resilience. What moments in the book highlight her strength and determination? How did these moments resonate with you?
29. The novel hints at the evolving relationship between Diamond and Ma in the years following the story. How do you imagine their relationship develops into Diamond's adulthood? What might bring them closer together or drive them apart?
30. The novel concludes with an open ending, leaving some storylines unresolved. How did you feel about this ending? What do you imagine happens next for Diamond and her family?