

## Bloomsbury Books Reading Group Guide

### **There is No Me Without You** **By Melissa Fay Greene**

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about Melissa Fay Greene's *There Is No Me Without You*, the inspiring portrait of one Ethiopian woman nurturing a young generation orphaned by the AIDS pandemic.

#### **About this book**

Haregewoin Teferra always wanted a large family, but she and her husband, Worku, were satisfied to raise their two daughters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. When Worku died suddenly, and their eldest daughter, Attetegeb, died soon after, Haregewoin retreated into solitary mourning. But a local priest begged Haregewoin to take in a vulnerable young girl, an orphan living on the streets. Six weeks later, another orphan arrived on her doorstep. Before she knew it, Haregewoin was running a full-fledged orphanage: the Attetegeb Worku Memorial Orphans Support Association.

When Melissa Fay Greene traveled to Ethiopia to adopt a child, she was stunned by the AIDS pandemic in Africa: the lack of crucial drugs for treatment, the pervasive stigma, the bureaucratic denial, the international neglect, and most of all, the staggering number of deaths, and the orphans thus left without care. Haregewoin, hastily taking in AIDS orphan, who simply had no place else to go, watched her reputation rise and fall with each step she took in the children's interest. Faced with malicious gossip and legal repercussions, Haregewoin once again focused on her primary purpose: connecting vulnerable children with nurturing caregivers.

*There Is No Me Without You* is the story of “the common experience of this [Ethiopian] generation” (276) and an impassioned reminder of what is at stake in the AIDS pandemic: the solace of family.

#### **For discussion**

1. Haregewoin typed a line from a pop song, “There Is No Me Without You” (134), and framed it with a picture of her daughters. How does this line relate to Haregewoin's family, and to her work? Why is this an appropriate title for this book?
2. Review the rescue of Mintesinot, the brave two-year-old boy whose name means “What could he *not* do?” (15). In what ways is Minty's story typical of his generation? What about Minty's story (which continues on pages 398 to 405) is extraordinary?
3. Greene points out the dispirited state of Ethiopian children: “If powerlessness made vulnerable the girls of Ethiopia, hopelessness made vulnerable the boys” (105). How does the AIDS crisis affect each gender differently? What are some possible solutions to counteract the powerlessness and hopelessness exposed in this book?

4. Haregewoin put two especially beloved children up for adoption: Menah (page 259) and Nardos (page 354). Why did Haregewoin break her promise to “*Never get attached like this again*” (260), when two-month-old Nardos landed in her arms? Why did Haregewoin allow these children to be adopted? Review both of these girls’ departures from Haregewoin’s compound. Which goodbye was more difficult for Haregewoin, and why?

5. Two noisy American gifts made their way into Addis Ababa orphanages: Greene’s whoopee cushion (265) and the Hollingers’ Hokey Pokey Hamster (379). What effect did these gifts have upon the Ethiopian orphans? How did the children’s reaction to these toys surprise the gift-giver, and the reader? What function do these anecdotes serve in the narrative?

6. Chapter 42 describes an elaborate birthday party that a rich Ethiopian girl threw at Haregewoin’s house. What does this chapter reveal about the structure of Ethiopian society? How do you think Haregewoin’s orphans felt during and after the party? And Haregewoin herself?

7. How did young Wasihun’s accusation of sexual abuse signal a turning point in Haregewoin’s work? Later, in court, Wasihun said, ““Nothing really happened. Someone told me to say it”” (407). How relevant do you think the veracity of Washun’s accusation is to the case?

8. The agency that Greene pseudonymously calls “Forward Ethiopia” (335) objected to Haregewoin’s role in placing Ethiopian orphans with foreign families. What are the positive and negative effects of a policy like Forward Ethiopia’s, which emphasizes keeping children in their native cultures? How did this policy affect Hana and baby Sintayehu, whom we meet in chapter 47? Why did Hana’s story escalate into accusations of child trafficking against Haregewoin?

9. Within two pages, the reader hears two perspectives on Ethiopians’ resentment toward Haregewoin. Miniya, a former worker in the compound, seems to think of Haregewoin, ““you put yourself above the children. What was once beautiful was your ability to love each child. Now you don’t know who they are”” (342). Greene counters, “Haregewoin was the only person who had *ever* opened her gates to them.... But they were still poor, still sick, still hungry. So it must be Haregewoin’s fault.... They stand here and wail against Haregewoin because she hears them” (344). According to these arguments, why is Haregewoin resented? How do these two perspectives – Miniya’s and Greene’s – differ? How are they similar?

10. Greene presents the stories of several Ethiopian children settling in with their new families in America: Meskerem, Mekdes and Yabsira, Ababu, and Mintesinot. Which of these passages affected you the most? What emotions did your favorite adoption story evoke?

11. Early in the book, Greene mentions the Ethiopian tradition of layered speech: “*sam enna warq* (wax and gold): the *sam* is the surface meaning and the *warq* is the deep or hidden meaning” (7). What could be considered the *sam*, or surface meaning, of *There Is No Me Without You*? What could be the *warq*, or deeper meaning?

12. At the end of the book, the Hollinger family attended an impromptu memorial service for their adopted children’s birth parents. Ryan Hollinger said to the mourners, ““We are all one family now”” (427). What do you think he meant? How does this ending capture the themes of the book?

13. Were your perceptions of the AIDS pandemic and its victims changed by this book? If so, how?

14. In a review of Greene’s first book, *Praying for Sheetrock*, the *Boston Globe* praised Greene’s writing style, “a combination of oral history and interpretive narrative” (*Boston Sunday Globe*, 9/29/91). How does Greene combine the various narrative threads of *There Is No Me Without You* – Haregewoin’s story, Greene’s own experiences, information about AIDS, and accounts from other adoptive families? If you have read *Praying for Sheetrock*, how does Greene’s writing style in *There Is No Me Without You* compare the earlier book?

15. At the 16<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference in Toronto, Dr. Seth Berkley of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative said, “An AIDS vaccine is the only tool that can end the pandemic” (Reuters, 8/15/06). Until the vaccine is developed, what might be ways to stop the spread of AIDS? What are some realistic solutions to helping AIDS victims and orphans in Ethiopia and the rest of the world?

### **Suggested reading**

Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*; Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World*; Philip Gourevich, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*; William Powers, *Blue Clay People: Seasons on Africa’s Fragile Edge* and *Whispering in the Giant’s Ear: A Frontline Chronicle from Bolivia’s War on Globalization*; Greg Behrman, *The Invisible People: How the U.S. Has Slept Through the Global AIDS Pandemic, the Greatest Humanitarian Catastrophe of Our Time*; Alexander Irwin, Joyce Millen and Dorothy Fallows, *Global AIDS: Myths and Facts, Tools for Fighting the AIDS Pandemic*; Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide*; Sara Erdman, *Nine Hills to Nambonkaha: Two Years in the Heart of an African Village*.

**Melissa Fay Greene** is a journalist and the award-winning author of *Praying for Sheetrock*, *The Temple Bombing*, and *Last Man Out*. She has written for the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Newsweek*, *Salon.com*, and many others. She lives in Atlanta with her husband, Don Samuel, and their seven children, two of whom were adopted from Ethiopia.