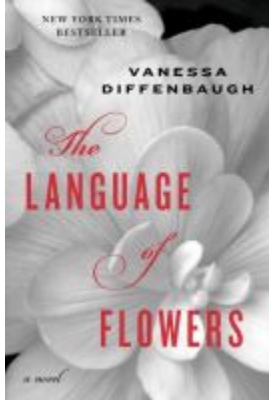


**Oliver Wolcott Library**  
**The Language of Flowers by Vanessa Diffenbaugh**  
**Book Discussion Guide**  
**Prepared by Patricia Moore**



**About the Book:**

The Victorian language of flowers was used to convey romantic expressions: honeysuckle for devotion, aster for patience, and red roses for love. But for Victoria Jones, it's been more useful in communicating grief, mistrust, and solitude. After a childhood spent in the foster-care system, she is unable to get close to anybody, and her only connection to the world is through flowers and their meanings.

Now eighteen and emancipated from the system, Victoria has nowhere to go and sleeps in a public park, where she plants a small garden of her own. Soon a local florist discovers her talents, and Victoria realizes that she has a gift for helping others through the flowers she chooses for them. But a mysterious vendor at the flower market inspires her to question what's been missing in her life. And when she's forced to confront a painful secret from her past, she must decide whether it's worth risking everything for a second chance at happiness.

*RandomHouse.com (USA)*

**About the Author:**

Vanessa Diffenbaugh was born in San Francisco and raised in Chico, California. After studying creative writing and education at Stanford, she went on to teach art and writing to youth in low-income communities. She and her husband, PK, have three children: Tre'von, eighteen; Chela, four; and Miles, three. Tre'von, a former foster child, is attending New York University on a Gates Millennium Scholarship. Diffenbaugh and her family currently live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where her husband is studying urban school reform at Harvard.

Vanessa Diffenbaugh is also the founder of the Camellia Network. The mission of the Camellia Network is to create a nationwide movement to support youth transitioning from foster care. In *The Language of Flowers*, Camellia [kuh-meel-yuh] means "My Destiny is in Your Hands." The network's name emphasizes the belief in the interconnectedness of humanity: each gift a young person receives will be accompanied by a camellia, a reminder that the destiny of our nation lies in the hands of our youngest citizens. For more information visit [www.camellianetwork.org](http://www.camellianetwork.org)

*RandomHouse.com (USA)*

### **Book Reviews:**

"Fascinating ... Diffenbaugh, herself a foster mother, clearly knows both the human heart and her plants, and she keeps us rooting for the damaged Victoria, who comes, finally, to understand that 'the unattached, the unwanted, the unloved [can] grow to give love as lushly as anyone else.'" —*O, The Oprah Magazine*

"Immensely engaging ... Diffenbaugh's most compelling love stories are those between women—mothers and daughters, sisters, friends. As Victoria's two stories hurtle toward their conclusions, Diffenbaugh ably paces both the plot developments and an emotional arc of almost unbearable poignance." —*Boston Globe*

"Catnip for book clubs ... The language of flowers, as illuminated through Victoria's words and a special appendix, turns out to be an addictive preoccupation: once you know that peonies represent anger; basil, hate; and red carnations, heartbreak; every bouquet takes on a new significance." —*NPR*

"Diffenbaugh's affecting debut chronicles the first harrowing steps into adulthood taken by a deeply wounded soul who finds her only solace in an all-but-forgotten language...Struggling against all and ultimately reborn, Victoria Jones is hard to love, but very easy to root for." —*Publishers Weekly*

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What potential do Elizabeth, Renata, and Grant see in Victoria that she has a hard time seeing in herself?
2. While Victoria has been hungry and malnourished often in her life, food ends up meaning more than just nourishment to her. Why?
3. Victoria and Elizabeth both struggle with the idea of being part of a family. What does it mean to you to be part of a family? What defines family?
4. Why do you think Elizabeth waits so long before trying to patch things up with her long-lost sister Catherine? What is the impetus for her to do so?
5. The first week after her daughter's birth goes surprisingly well for Victoria. What is it that makes Victoria feel unable to care for her child after the week ends? And what is it that allows her to ultimately rejoin her family?
6. One of the major themes in *The Language of Flowers* is forgiveness and second chances --- do you think Victoria deserves one after the things she did (both as a child and as an adult)? What about Catherine? And Elizabeth?
7. What did you think of the structure of the book --- the alternating chapters of past and present? In what ways did the two storylines parallel each other, and how did they diverge?
8. The novel touches on many different themes (love, family, forgiveness, second chances). Which do you think is the most important? And what did you think was ultimately the lesson?
9. At the end of the novel, Victoria learns that moss grows without roots. What does this mean, and why is it such a revelation for her?

10. Based on your reading of the novel, what are your impressions of the foster care system in America? What could be improved?

11. Knowing what you now know about the language of the flowers, to whom would you send a bouquet and what would you want it to say?

*ReadingGroupGuides.com*

### **Further Reading:**

#### The Glass Castle: A Memoir by Jeannette Walls

Jeannette Walls grew up with parents whose ideals and stubborn nonconformity were both their curse and their salvation. Rex and Rose Mary Walls had four children. In the beginning, they lived like nomads, moving among Southwest desert towns, camping in the mountains...Later, when the money ran out, or the romance of the wandering life faded, the Walls retreated to the dismal West Virginia mining town -- and the family -- Rex Walls had done everything he could to escape...As the dysfunction of the family escalated, Jeannette and her brother and sisters had to fend for themselves, supporting one another as they weathered their parents' betrayals and, finally, found the resources and will to leave home.

#### A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius by Dave Eggers

The literary sensation of the year, a book that redefines both family and narrative for the twenty-first century. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is the moving memoir of a college senior who, in the space of five weeks, loses both of his parents to cancer and inherits his eight-year-old brother. Here is an exhilarating debut that manages to be simultaneously hilarious and wildly inventive as well as a deeply heartfelt story of the love that holds a family together.

#### The Hours: A Novel by Michael Cunningham

In *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham, widely praised as one of the most gifted writers of his generation, draws inventively on the life and work of Virginia Woolf to tell the story of a group of contemporary characters struggling with the conflicting claims of love and inheritance, hope and despair. The narrative of Woolf's last days before her suicide early in World War II counterpoints the fictional stories of Samuel, a famous poet whose life has been shadowed by his talented and troubled mother, and his lifelong friend Clarissa, who strives to forge a balanced and rewarding life in spite of the demands of friends, lovers, and family.

#### The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

*The Namesake* takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoke adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Named for a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of a catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name.

#### Possession by A.S. Byatt

Winner of England's Booker Prize and the literary sensation of the year, *Possession* is an exhilarating novel of wit and romance, at once an intellectual mystery and triumphant love story. It is the tale of a

pair of young scholars researching the lives of two Victorian poets. As they uncover their letters, journals, and poems, and track their movements from London to Yorkshire—from spiritualist séances to the fairy-haunted far west of Brittany—what emerges is an extraordinary counterpoint of passions and ideas.

White Oleander by Janet Fitch

Everywhere hailed as a novel of rare beauty and power, *White Oleander* tells the unforgettable story of Ingrid, a brilliant poet imprisoned for murder, and her daughter, Astrid, whose odyssey through a series of Los Angeles foster homes—each its own universe, with its own laws, its own dangers, its own hard lessons to be learned—becomes a redeeming and surprising journey of self-discovery.

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*~This book discussion guide including the further reading recommendation list was prepared by the Oliver Wolcott Library.*