



# The language of flowers

By Vanessa Diffenbaugh

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Genre & subjects

Florists fiction

## Synopsis

The Victorian language of flowers was used to convey romantic expressions: honeysuckle for devotion, asters 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 she has a gift for helping others through the flowers she chooses for them. But a mysterious vendor at the flower market has her questioning 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.

## Author biography

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.

## Discussion starters

- What potential do Elizabeth, Renata, and Grant see in Victoria that she has a hard time seeing in herself?
- While Victoria has been hungry and malnourished often in her life, food ends up meaning more than just nourishment to her. Why?
- 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?
- 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?

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

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