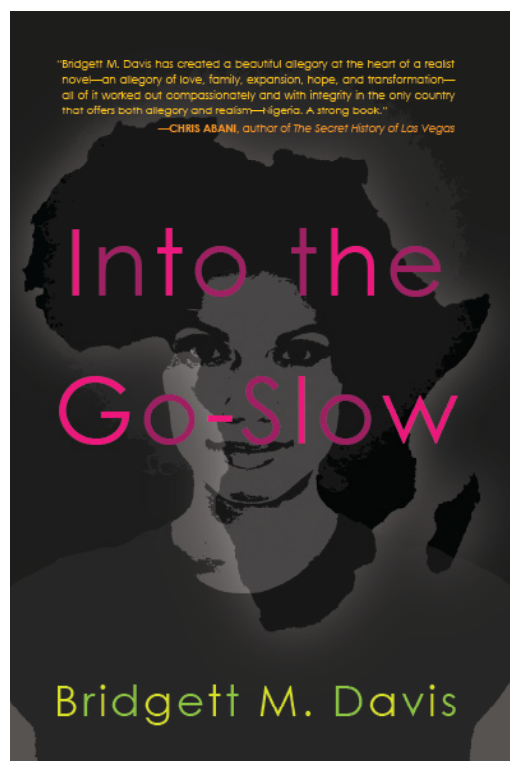


High School Reading
Teacher's Guide

Into the Go-Slow

A NOVEL BY
Bridgett M. Davis



9781558618640 • 360 pgs • \$16.95

CONTENTS

About Bridgett M. Davis	2
A Letter from the Author	3

Study Guide

Plot Summary	4
Characters	4
Glossary	6
For Further Study	11
Nigeria by Decade	12
Short Answer Questions	15
Essay Questions	16
The Feminist Press	17

“Bridgett M. Davis has created a beautiful allegory at the heart of a realist novel—an allegory of love, family, expansion, hope, and transformation—all of it worked out compassionately and with integrity...”

—CHRIS ABANI, author of *The Secret History of Las Vegas*

“Davis’s novel asks the big questions reverberating through the African American community in the wake of the 1980s: Who are we now? What is Africa to us: homeland or fantasy? *Into the Go-Slow* is a page-turner; its daring protagonist is a young woman on the cusp of adulthood, searching for the legacy of the sister she has lost to an era of change.”

—AYANA MATHIS, author of *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*

“At its core, *Into the Go-Slow* is a love story—romantic love, love of family, love of culture, love of self. Angie is an unforgettable heroine who will steal your heart and break it, too.”

—TAYARI JONES, author of *Silver Sparrow*



BRIDGETT M. DAVIS is a novelist, essayist, teacher, filmmaker, and curator.

A Thomas J. Watson Fellowship allowed Davis to travel to Nigeria in the 80s, where she lived in Lagos for nearly a year and studied the work of Nigerian media women. That experience was the inspiration behind *Into The Go-Slow*.

A native of Detroit, Michigan, Davis grew up on the city's northwest side, and continues to use the Motor City as a locale in her work. "Detroit for me is like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County," she says. "Only my city is both apocryphal and real. I think of Detroit as ever rising from her ashes, ever becoming, ever intriguing."

Davis's debut novel *Shifting Through Neutral*, published by Amistad/Harper Collins in 2004, was a finalist for the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Legacy Award. She was selected as 2005 New Author of the Year by Go on Girl! Book Club—the largest national reading group for African-American women.

A major advocate for promoting and nurturing literary talent by people of color, Davis is the Books Editor for the black culture site *Bold As Love Magazine* (boldaslove.us); founder and curator for the popular Brooklyn reading series, *Sundays @*; and a founding member of ringShout, a group dedicated to celebrating and promoting ambitious literary work by African American writers.

Davis is a professor at Baruch College, CUNY, where she teaches Creative Writing and Journalism, and is Director of the Sidney Harman Writer-in-Residence Program. She is also Co-Academic Director of the University's Faculty Fellowship Publication Program, (FFPP) where she facilitates writing workshops for female and minority faculty seeking to complete and publish their creative works.

She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, son, and daughter. Visit her website at bridgettdavis.com.

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

When I was a senior in college, my oldest sister died suddenly from an embolism. Months later, I left home on a fellowship that allowed me to travel for a year. I spent much of that time in Nigeria, a place that was so fascinating and demanding that it consumed my time and thoughts. In a way, it allowed me to run from my own grief. Of course, I was simply suppressing it. When I began writing my novel, I used that personal experience as the catalyst for the story. I needed to finally look at what it meant to be a young woman on the precipice of an exciting new life, when my sister's own life had been cut short. I needed to explore my contrasting feelings of survivor's guilt and wanderlust.

Luckily, I'd saved all my journals and letters and photos from my time in Nigeria. I used those documents to help me recall who I was as a twenty-two-year-old recent college grad filled with hope and (secret) sorrow. Several of the people I encountered during my time there became the basis for characters in the book. And the main character is a stand-in for me, just as Ella, the sister, is inspired by my own sister. Also, I created a character based on my uncle, a horse trainer, because I wanted to showcase his extraordinary life. Even still, the book is fiction, so the characters are their own creations.

Angie is a young woman searching for a way to be in the world. She desperately wants to identify with *something*. But she's lost. For her entire life, she identified as Ella's baby sister. Once Ella dies, she has to face the fundamental question that drives the story: Who are you when the person you've defined yourself against is gone? It's further complicated because Angie is at the very point in her life when most people are trying to figure out who they want to be—she's a new college graduate. Her quest is complicated by her loss, and by survivor's guilt. Angie's challenge is to step out of her sister's shadow and figure out who she is; she must discover what her own interests, hopes, and desires are, separate and apart from her sibling's.

I see the themes in my novel as part of a universal quest to self-identify, to push away from powerful influences—be they parents, siblings, or role models—and figure out how to live our own lives. I wrote this story as a way of saying that when we are young adults, we must each go on an individual journey—figuratively or literally—to discover who we are, and to find our own truth.



STUDY GUIDE

This guide was created completely by students attending: Colby College, the College of New Jersey, Fordham University, Haverford College, Rutgers University—The Honors College, Vassar College, and Wheaton College (MA).

PLOT SUMMARY

Into the Go-Slow is a coming-of-age novel set in the 1980s: twenty-one-year-old Angie Mackenzie, a recent college graduate, passes time working in a mall and watching sitcoms with her mom. She is haunted by her sister's death, which occurred four years earlier in Nigeria. Unable to escape the shadow of her sister Ella's memory, or the vestiges of the Black Power movement that Ella so fiercely championed, Angie decides to retrace her sister's footsteps and visit Nigeria for herself. After leaving her Detroit hometown, she begins to unravel Ella's identity as well as her own. For anyone who has longed to be in a different era, *Into the Go-Slow* captures the pain of living vicariously and the exhilaration of finding yourself.

CHARACTERS

Angie: A recent college graduate with no concrete career plans, Angie Mackenzie travels to Nigeria to retrace the steps of her intrepid sister, Ella, who died in a traffic accident in the city of Lagos four years earlier. On the way, Angie learns about the secrets of Ella's past and discovers the country her sister loved. Angie is cautious and uncertain about her future, younger and less ambitious than both of her sisters, but her perceptive nature, open mind, and adaptability serve her well on her journey. Against her mother's wishes, Angie uses her trip to connect with the sister she adored, and to explore what it means to be black in the United States, Africa, and the world.

Ella: Ella Mackenzie was impulsive, insatiable, and strong-willed. She grew up training horses with her father, Samson, and dreamed of being the first black female jockey. While attending the University of Michigan, she became involved with the Black Power movement, traveling to Nigeria and participating in local politics. Ella's appetite for excitement was matched by her enthusiasm for food, sex, and other forms of pleasure, a hedonistic streak that led to a heroin addiction in her twenties. After getting clean, she and her longtime boyfriend Nigel returned to Nigeria, where she worked as the editor of the women's page of the *Lagos Voice*, an independent newspaper, before her sudden death in a traffic accident.

Denise: A sales representative for a pharmaceutical company in Atlanta, Denise has always been the most straitlaced of the Mackenzie sisters. She has a taste for designer clothing and the salary to sustain it. She encourages her mother, Nanette, to move from their family home in Detroit to live in Atlanta.

Nanette: The mother of Angie, Ella, and Denise, and the widow of Samson, Nanette Mackenzie has lived a life of hard work punctuated by tragedy. After giving birth to Ella at a young age, she and Samson migrated from the South to Detroit, leaving their daughter with family and sending for her a few years later. After Angie's graduation from Wayne State University, Nanette contemplates moving to Atlanta and making a fresh start.

Samson: A talented racehorse trainer by trade, Samson battled racism and sacrificed his time with family to focus on his career. He enlisted Ella's help around the stables and taught her to ride horses at a young age, cultivating a close relationship with his oldest daughter. He moved to Detroit with Nanette when they were young, and spent most of the year traveling for work, until he had a fatal heart attack during Ella's teenage years.

Nigel: A contemplative and well-intentioned, albeit selfish man, Nigel met Ella at the University of Michigan and fell passionately in love. Alongside Ella, he joined the Black Power movement, struggled with drug addiction, and worked at the *Lagos Voice*. After her death, he continues working as a foreign correspondent and eventually becomes a professor of communications at the University of Lagos.

Chris: Chris Olapade grew up in Nigeria, but studied and lived in the US for a decade. He returned to Nigeria after the election of its first civilian president. Buoyed by a sense of optimism and possibility, Chris and his wife Brenda helped found the *Lagos Voice*, a radical paper. Because Ella had lived with the couple, Angie stays with them during her visit; however, Chris's veneer of hospitality proves deceptive.

Brenda: A black American woman who went to Spelman College, Brenda is married to Chris. While she used to have many black American girlfriends in Nigeria, she is now one of the only ones left. She is hospitable and welcoming to Angie, and has an excellent sense of fashion, specifically a love for footwear.

Funke: Angie stays with Funke Akinlolu, a Nigerian businesswoman, when she is in Surulere. Ella met her while writing a story on Lagos businesswomen. Funke is an executive secretary for the assistant commissioner of the ministry of transportation, an entrepreneur who started her own kiosk for beauty and hygiene products, and a host for foreign travelers.

GLOSSARY

African Liberation Day (pg. 8): initially celebrated on April 15 in many countries across Africa. It commemorates the 1958 convention of the First Conference of Independent States held in Ghana. The holiday was moved to May 25 in 1963.

Andrew Young (75): the former congressman of Georgia's 5th congressional district and mayor of Atlanta. Young was a friend and supporter of Martin Luther King, Jr. He served as president of the National Council of Churches USA and was a member of the civil rights organization the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the Civil Rights Movement.

Angela Davis (35): a radical black activist who was tried and acquitted for three counts of murder, kidnapping, and criminal conspiracy after a revolt of black prisoners at the Marin County courthouse. Today she is a prominent educator and prison abolition activist.

Assata Shakur (270): an activist who was a member of the Black Panther Party, a left-wing organization that advocated African American self-defense. She was charged with the murder of a police officer after a shootout in New Jersey, in which police officers shot her twice. She escaped from prison and is living in exile in Cuba. She is on the FBI's most wanted list.

Black Action Movement (BAM) (65): a series of protests between 1970 and 1987 by African American students against the policies and actions of the University of Michigan. BAM was one of relatively few successful student protest movements of the era. Demands included racial integration, implementation of a Black Studies program, and administrative action against racist speech by members of the student body.

Bobby Seale (270): an activist who cofounded the Black Panther Party with Huey P. Newton. He was tried as a member of the "Chicago Eight," a group of protestors charged with conspiracy to start riots in Chicago.

Coleman Young (63): the first African American mayor of Detroit, serving from 1974 to 1994. Although he emerged from the political far left, Young's politics moved to the right when he took office. The mayor has been criticized for being partially responsible for the middle class leaving the city for the suburbs. Young was awarded the NAACP's Spingarn Medal in 1981.

The Congressional Black Caucus (343): an organization made up by black members of Congress. It was founded in 1971 to serve as a voice for people of color and vulnerable communities.

Dashiki (124): a brightly colored top that is most prevalent in West Africa. It achieved popularity in the US as a symbol of pride in Africanism.

Detroit Uprising 1967 (107): one of the deadliest and most destructive riots in US history. The riot started after growing tensions over racial inequality in Detroit came to a head and the notoriously violent, mostly-white police force raided an unlicensed bar. The riots lasted for five days and resulted in 43 deaths.

Devil's Night (108): traditionally the night before Halloween, on which participants partake in small acts of vandalism such as egging or toilet papering trees and houses. It came to be associated with acts of major vandalism and arson in Detroit from the 1970s through the 1980s.

Divestment movement (65): a political movement protesting South Africa's system of apartheid. While the campaign had roots as early as the 1960s, it was not actually executed on a widespread scale until the 1980s. The movement helped pressure the South African government into dismantling the apartheid system.

Durbar (75): an annual festival, celebrated primarily in northern Nigerian cities, that honors chiefs, leaders, and warriors. This spectacular festival involves prayers, a horse parade, and music.

Eldridge Cleaver (61): a Black Panther Party leader and militant anti-racist activist. He wrote the influential memoir and essay collection *Soul on Ice* (1968).

Emmett Till (113): a fourteen-year-old African American boy who was brutally tortured and murdered in 1955 after being accused of flirting with a white woman.

Fela Kuti (11): a Nigerian musician and political activist who founded the modern genre of Afrobeat, a blend of funk, jazz, and traditional African percussion. Inspired by the Black Power movement and Pan-Africanism, Fela and his band often used politically charged lyrics as a method of activism. While his strong anti-oppression sentiments inspired a cult of popularity in West African working classes, it also evoked strong opposition from the Nigerian government.

FESTAC 1977 (36): the second Festival of African Culture held in Lagos, Nigeria. It was a meeting of thousands of artists, writers, and musicians from Africa and abroad.

Frantz Fanon (61): a Martinique-born psychiatrist, physician, and revolutionary. His best-known books are *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), two texts that contributed greatly to Marxist and anti-colonialist thought.

Hajj (107): the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, a holy city in Saudi Arabia. The Hajj is one of the central practices of Islam, which are known as the five pillars of Islam. Every able-bodied Muslim with the material means to do so is required to make the journey at least once in their lifetime.

Huey P. Newton (63): the co-founder of the Black Panther Party. He recruited for his cause in popular youth spaces, like pool halls and college campuses, to inspire social consciousness. Newton's activism often brought him into conflict with law enforcement. In 1967, Newton was pulled over by police officer John Frey, who was shot and killed during the altercation. Newton spent 22 months in prison for voluntary manslaughter and was released when his conviction was overturned. Black Guerilla Family member Tyrone Robinson assassinated Newton at the age of 47.

Ibrahim Babangida (178): Nigeria's head of state and military ruler from 1985-93, after overthrowing General Muhammadu Buhari in a military coup. He was accused of egregious human rights violations during his time in power.

Jim Jones (88): a religious and cult leader who founded the People's Temple, an interracial and radical Christian organization. He is infamous for spearheading the Jamestown mass suicide in 1978, in which over 900 members of the People poisoned themselves.

Kufi Hat (84): a brimless, rounded cap worn by men throughout the African diaspora. It is part of the national costume for most of the countries in West Africa.

Malcolm X (61): a political organizer and public speaker in the early 1960s. His politics were marked by his identity as a Black Nationalist and a member of the Nation of Islam. Often portrayed in contrast to Martin Luther King, Jr. and his notions of non-violence, Malcolm X urged his followers to defend their rights "by any means necessary". He was assassinated in 1965.

Miriam Makeba (75): a Grammy Award-winning South African singer and civil rights activist nicknamed Mama Africa. Makeba's South African citizenship was revoked because she campaigned against the system of apartheid in 1960. She could not return until after the apartheid system fell in 1990.

National Coalition for Black Reparations in America (8): a coalition founded in 1987 that works to obtain reparations for slavery for African descendants in the United States.

The New Year's Eve Coup (238): the 1983 overthrow by General Muhammadu Buhari of Shehu Shagari's presidential government

Nigerian Independence Day (281): celebrated on October 1. It commemorates Nigeria gaining its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960.

Pan-Africanism (14): a movement made up of many ideologies and political views, but based on the principals of unity among Africans (in Africa and abroad), and independence for African countries. In the early 1900s, conferences served as spaces for political and social alliance. Famous pan-Africanists include W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, and Kwame Nkrumah.

Reaganomics (74): the economic policies of US President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, still partially practiced today. Reaganomics argues that economic growth is best stimulated by making it easier for people to produce goods, so that economic benefit "trickles down" from suppliers to employees. His plan involved reducing the growth of government spending, lowering the federal income tax and capital gains tax, reducing government regulation, and reducing inflation by limiting the growth of the money supply.

Shehu Shagari (144): the President of Nigeria's Second Republic from 1979-1983, after the military government permitted a return to civilian rule. Accusations of corruption marred his presidency, and he was overthrown by General Muhammadu Buhari on New Year's Eve in 1983.

The Shrine (13): a nightclub opened by Fela Kuti that also served as a venue for Afrobeat music.

Soweto (35): an urban center in Johannesburg, South Africa, famous for a student uprising on June 16, 1976. Students involved with black consciousness and anti-apartheid groups protested the use of Afrikaans as a compulsory language in the classroom. What started as a peaceful protest was heavily policed and became a violent revolt resulting in many students' deaths.

Spike Lee (72): an African American director known for his political films and his artistic exploration of race relations, media's influence on contemporary life, and working-class urban life. Lee has won an Emmy Award and two Academy Award nominations.

Steve Biko (86): the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. Biko was known for his slogan “black is beautiful,” and his death in police custody led many to call him a martyr of the anti-apartheid movement.

Stevie Wonder (75): the American Motown performer who has received twenty-two Grammy Awards and sold over 100 million albums and singles. Wonder is also an activist who campaigned to make Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday a US holiday.

Stokely Carmichael (AKA Kwame Ture) (61): a civil rights activist who coined the term “black power,” and spoke widely about black empowerment and organizing. He later became a prominent speaker against US imperialism. After disagreements with the Black Panthers about solidarity with white leaders, he moved to the Republic of Guinea in 1969 where he changed his name to Kwame Ture.

UNESCO (145): or The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is an organization founded in 1945 that aims to promote peace through international collaborations.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

WATCH

School Daze (1988), Spike Lee

The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975 (2011), Göran Olsson

Finding Fela! (2014), Alex Gibney

Half of a Yellow Sun (2013), Biyi Bandele

LISTEN

Innervisions (1973), Steve Wonder

The Best of the Black President (2011 reissue), Fela Kuti

In the Morning Light (1984), Onyeka Onwenu

An Evening with Belafonte/Makeba (1965), Miriam Makeba

READ

Americanah (2013), Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie

Things Fall Apart (1958), Chinua Achebe

The Wretched of the Earth (1961), Frantz Fanon

Women, Race and Class (1981), Angela Davis

NIGERIA BY DECADE

A CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS

1960s

Nigeria gains independence in 1960 from Britain, and Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa establishes a coalition government. The goal of a coalition government is to keep any specific party from achieving a majority. Balewa is later killed in a coup in 1966, and Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi becomes head of a military administration. Ironsi is killed in a counter-coup later that year, and is replaced by Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon. The following year, three eastern states secede and create the Republic of Biafra. This marks the beginning of a bloody civil war.

One of Biafra's first stamps, issued in February of 1968. (Photo courtesy of commonwealthstampsopinion.blogspot.com)



1970s

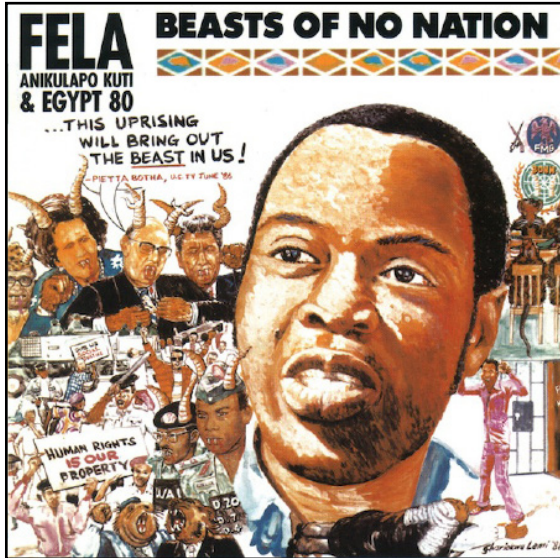
The former Biafran regions are reintegrated into the country following the surrender of Biafran leaders in 1970. Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon is overthrown and replaced by Brigadier Murtala Ramat Mohammed, who begins the process of moving the federal capital to Abuja. In 1976, he is assassinated in a failed coup. His deputy, Lieutenant-General Olusegun Obasanjo, comes to power and introduces an American-style presidential constitution. In 1979, Alhaji Shehu Shagari is elected.



A crowd poses at FESTAC, the Festival of African culture that drew thousands of artists, writers and musicians from Africa and abroad. (Photo by Marilyn Nance. [1978]. Courtesy of blackartinamerica.com.)

1980s

Despite allegations of corruption, Shagari is re-elected in 1983. Later that year, Major-General Muhammad Buhari gains power in a bloodless coup. Two years later, General Ibrahim Babangida seizes power in another bloodless coup. Fela Kuti releases the anti-apartheid album *Beasts of No Nation* in 1989.



Beasts of No Nation album cover depicting South African president P.W. Botha, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan as horned vampires. (Cover art by Ghariokwo Lemi. [1988]. Courtesy of Fela.net.)

1990s

In 1993, the military annuls elections and transfers power to the Interim National Government. Later that year, General Sani Abacha seizes power and suppresses his opposition. When he dies in 1998, Major-General Abdulsalami Abubakar comes to power as his successor. In 1999, parliamentary and presidential elections take place and General Olusegun Obasanjo is sworn in as president.

General Olusegun Obasanjo.
(Photo by Helene C. Stikkel.
Courtesy of Wikipedia.org.)



2000s

The 2000s are marked by growing violent clashes and tensions between Christians and Muslims. Nigeria's economy thrives due to oil exports. It becomes the first African country to clear its debt with the Paris Club of lending nations. While oil is a great export, the industry is plagued by strikes and corruption. Olusegun Obasanjo holds the presidency until April 2007, when Umaru Yar'Adua of the ruling People's Democratic Party wins elections. During this period, border disputes with Cameroon increase violence until August of 2008, when Nigeria hands over the Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon, ending a long-standing dispute. The current President of Nigeria is Goodluck Jonathan. The militant Islamic group Boko Haram opposes western education, and recently kidnapped 500 girls enrolled in secondary school.



Nigerians protest rising oil prices. (Photo by AP. "People protest following the removal of fuel subsidy by the Government in Lagos, Nigeria." London: The Telegraph, 2012. Courtesy of telegraph.co.uk.)

SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

- 1) *Into the Go-Slow* shows how a family responds to loss, grief, and trauma. Choose two characters and compare the way that they cope with these circumstances.
- 2) When Angie tells her mother Nanette she wants to go to Nigeria, Nanette responds, “Going there, it made sense for [Ella]. But you’re different” (69). Why do you think Ella went to Nigeria? Why does Angie want to go after Ella’s death? In what ways were the sisters’ trips motivated by the same things, and in what ways were they different?
- 3) By the end of the book, do you think Angie has separated herself from her sister’s identity and come into her own? Why or why not?
- 4) Ella wants to participate in the Black Power movement by becoming a journalist and activist in Nigeria. Does her activism truly make a difference?
- 5) What is Nigeria to Ella and to Angie? How is it portrayed in the text? Is it an escapist utopia? A harsh and disorganized place to live? Both?
- 6) While Ella is one of the book’s main characters, the reader only experiences Ella’s powerful personality via Angie’s memories. How does this affect the reader’s relationship to Ella? What is gained or lost from this style of narrative?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Pick a topic of your choice and write an essay of at least three pages double-spaced.

- 1) Angie has the “Free Angela Davis” pin, the tape of Fela songs, old letters from Ella, and her graduation tassel to help her make sense of her personal history. If you were to choose a collection of items to represent your individual history, what would they be and why? How are these items relevant to your identity and how do they reflect the influences of your environment and community?
- 2) A central conflict in the text is the question of “how to be black in the world” (72). Why would it be a challenge for Angie to figure out how to be black? At the end of the book, what is Angie’s sense of her own identity as a black woman?
- 3) “Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity.” – Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (see glossary). In 1987, Angie is not sure what the current state of black activism is or what her place can be within it. How does she compare her generation to her sister’s generation? What do you think is your generation’s “mission”?
- 4) While *Into the Go-Slow* is a story of the US and Nigeria in the late twentieth-century that is rich with historic references, it is told as a story about an individual’s personal growth. Why read a novel rather than a history book? What can you learn through fiction that you cannot through nonfiction?
- 5) Refer to the timeline and do independent research about Nigeria’s history during the past decade. How is Nigeria portrayed and represented in the media today?

THE FEMINIST PRESS

The Feminist Press is an education nonprofit organization founded to advance women's rights and amplify feminist perspectives. We publish classic and new writing from around the world, create cutting-edge programs, and elevate silenced and marginalized voices in order to support personal transformation and social justice for all people.

As an independent publisher, the Feminist Press is able to provide a personalized experience for universities that adopt our books through close attention in dealing with all aspects of a university's common read program, from book sales, even programming, and more.

Feminist Press authors are available for lectures, Q&A sessions, or workshops, either in person, via videoconference, or through use of social media and message boards. Our authors are committed to working with your students to enrich and broaden their understanding of the common read text, and of the issues and themes highlighted by the book.

