



***The Vanishing Half*, by Brit Bennett**  
**Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy**

Brit Bennett begins her acclaimed novel *The Vanishing Half* in Mallard, a fictitious Louisiana town. The residents of Mallard are fair-complexioned African Americans, each generation lighter than the one preceding it. *The Vanishing Half's* narrative weaves through time, from the segregated south in the 1950s to an exclusive Los Angeles enclave in the 1990s.

Identical twin sisters, Desiree and Stella Vignes, are the book's main characters. When the twins turned sixteen in 1954, they ran away to New Orleans for better opportunities, leaving Mallard and their widowed mother behind. The sisters have "creamy skin, hazel eyes, wavy hair." They were "striking in both their sameness and differences; Desiree, always restless, Stella, so calm. As they grew, they no longer seemed like one body split in two, but two bodies poured into one, each pulling it her own way."

Struggling to make ends meet in New Orleans, Desiree and Stella took menial jobs at a laundry. The Mallard townspeople had assumed that the girls would "run out of money and come sniffing back. Instead, after a year, the twins scattered, their lives splitting as evenly as their shared egg."

Stella, wanting to increase her earnings, applied for a secretarial position, fully expecting to be rejected because of her race. The hiring manager, however, mistook her for white, and Stella got the job. Stella's plan was to pass for white for a while, but the deception became second nature. One evening, Desiree discovered an empty apartment, all her sister's possessions gone, and a note from Stella: *Sorry, honey, but I've got to go my own way.*

Soon after Stella disappeared, Desiree moved to Washington DC and married Sam Winston, a black attorney. At first, their marriage was a harmonious one. Desiree was pleased that their baby daughter Jude was dark like Sam: "The last thing she

wanted was to love someone else who looked just like herself.” However, when Sam later became abusive, Desiree moved back to Mallard with her little girl Jude.

Meanwhile, Stella and her wealthy white husband Blake Sanders are living the good life in Brentwood, the upscale Los Angeles suburb. They too have a daughter, Kennedy, who is blond and blue-eyed like her father Blake. As she grows up, Kennedy senses that Stella, her distant and remote mother, is keeping her own past a secret.

As the story continues into the 1980s, Desiree’s daughter Jude, securing a track scholarship to UCLA, moves to Los Angeles. At the same time, Stella’s daughter Kennedy is pursuing an acting career in Hollywood. A chance encounter between the two young women leads to a life-changing discovery, which will impact their mothers as well.

*The Vanishing Half* merits high marks for original storytelling and skillful plotting. For readers seeking a compelling and well written novel, *The Vanishing Half* would be an excellent choice.