



Book Club Set

Girl, Women, Other

By Bernadine Evaristo

About the Author



British writer Bernardine Evaristo is the author of ten books and numerous writings that span the genres of fiction, verse fiction, short fiction, non-fiction, poetry, essays, literary criticism, journalism, and radio and theater drama. Bernardine's novel *Girl, Woman, Other* won the Booker Prize 2019. She was the first black woman and black British person to win it in its fifty year history. The novel also won many other prizes including the British Book Awards Fiction Book of the Year & Author of the Year, and the Indie Book Award for Fiction. It was a #1 *Sunday Times* bestseller for five weeks, the first woman of colour to achieve this position in the paperback fiction chart, spending 44 weeks in the Top 10. There are now over 60 translations of Bernardine's books in over 40 languages.

She has received over 76 awards, nominations, fellowships and honours, and her books have been a Book of the Year sixty times. She was voted one of 100 Great Black Britons in 2020 and made the Black Powerlist 100 in 2021, 2022 and 2023. In 2021, she was the 151st honoree on *The Bookseller's* Powerlist 150, making her the de facto Person of the Year of the most important publishing industry magazine in Britain. In 2022 she made the Sky Arts' list of 'Britain's 50 Most Influential Artists of the Past 50 years'. She received an MBE in 2009 and an OBE in 2020, both in the Queen's Birthday Honours List.

Bernardine is the 2023-2024 Literature Mentor for the Rolex Mentor & Protege Arts Initiative (est. 2002), one of five international mentors representing five art forms who are mentoring a solo artist each. Her mentee is the Ghanaian novelist, Ayesha Harruna Attah.

Bernardine has been widely featured in the UK and international media. She has been the subject of two major arts' documentary series: *The Southbank Show*, with Melvyn Bragg (Sky Arts TV, 2020) and *Imagine*, with Alan Yentob (BBC TV, 2021), and she has given hundreds of interviews including for *HARDtalk*, with Stephen Shakur (BBC World, 2020) and *This Cultural Life*, with John Wilson (BBC4, November 2021). She was also the subject of *Profile* (BBC R4, 2019) and *Desert Island Discs* (BBC R4, 2020) interviewed by Lauren Laverne. In 2015 she wrote and presented a two-part BBC Radio 4 documentary called *Fiery Inspiration: Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement*. Her many podcast appearances include being interviewed by the following people on their podcasts: Adwoa Aboah, Samira Ahmed, Elizabeth Day, Grace Dent, Annie MacManus (Annie Mac), Graham Norton, James O'Brien, Natalie Portman, Jay Rayner, Simon Savidge and Jeremy Vine.

She has edited several publications and is currently curating Black Britain: Writing Back, a new book series with Penguin UK re-publishing books that have been out of circulation. The first six books, all novels, were published on February 4th 2021. The oldest book on the list is *Minty Alley* (1936) by C.L.R. James. The second series of books, non-fiction, was published in February 2022. She is a contributor for BBC Radio 4's essay series, *A Point of View*, writing and presenting her opinion on topical subjects. She has written for many newspapers and magazines including the *Guardian*, *New Statesman* and *British Vogue*; has chaired and judged many literary awards including chairing the Women's Prize for Fiction (2021), and she is on the editorial board of the African Poetry Book Fund (USA) for all its publications and prizes.

Bernardine's verse novel *The Emperor's Babe* was adapted into a BBC Radio 4 play in 2013 and her novella *Hello Mum* was adapted as a BBC Radio 4 play in 2012. In 2015 she wrote and presented a two-part BBC Radio 4 documentary called *Fiery Inspiration: Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement*.

Bernardine Evaristo was born the fourth of eight children, in Woolwich, south east London, to an English mother (of English, Irish and German heritage) and a Nigerian father (of Nigerian and Brazilian heritage). Her father was a welder and local Labour councillor; her mother was a schoolteacher. She was educated at Eltham Hill Girls' Grammar School, the Rose Bruford College of Speech & Drama, and Goldsmiths, University of London, where she earned her PhD (Creative Writing). She spent her teenage years at Greenwich Young People's Theatre, which was where she first became involved in the arts. She lives in London with her husband.

About the Book

Girl, Woman, Other follows the lives of twelve very different people in Britain, predominantly female and black. Aged 19 to 93, they span a variety of cultural backgrounds, sexualities, classes and occupations as they tell the stories of themselves, their families, friends and lovers, across the country and through the years.



Retrieved from: <https://bevaristo.com/girl-woman-other/>

Discussion Questions



1. Of the various characters in *Girl, Woman, Other*, which did you relate to the most and why? Consider why the author chose to start the novel with Amma, Yazz, and Dominique's stories. Who is being othered in the novel? Provide examples from the text to support your answers. Share what the title means to you. What experiences have you had that made you feel a sense of otherness?
2. It is believed that the last Amazon of Dahomey, a woman named Nawi, died in 1979 at the age of 100. What is the significance of the play and what does it reveal about Amma? Of the twelve women, who do you think represents Nawi in the novel? Talk about the lives and occupations of the female characters. How do they evolve over the course of the story? What events trigger their growth?
3. Discuss how marriage, identity and sexuality are depicted in the novel.
4. The definition of "winsome" is "aracve or appealing in appearance and character." Why do you think the author chose this name for one of the women? Discuss whether the naming is an indication of character. What are your thoughts about Winsome's betrayal and her lack of remorse?
5. Take it a step further and examine the differences and similarities between Shirley and her mother, Winsome. Not many people seem to find Shirley interesting or like her. She's a closeted homophobe who considers Amma one of her best friends. Explain the cognitive dissonance of the character.
6. Talk about Evaristo's unusual structuring of the novel. There are no periods or capitalization, and the stories weave through me and jump to different points of view. How did this affect your understanding of the characters and the novel as a whole? Did this help you to develop an intimacy with the women? Explain your answers.
7. Evaristo's depiction of the lesbian experience is nuanced, varied, and complex. How does the novel undo the frequently used lesbian trope of everything ending badly? What other lesbian tropes does the novel dismantle?

8. Different eras in British history are used to convey a sense of place in the novel. What is unique about the various songs, and how did it enhance or take away from the stories?
9. How does Evaristo incorporate historical occurrences such as Brexit and aspects of the African diaspora into her stories? What other themes did she emphasize in the novel, and what do you think she was trying to get across to the reader about colorism and racism?
10. Evaristo illuminates the traumatic effects of rape and how one life-changing moment can "other" the victims. This theme is explored in detail in the "Carole" story. How does her ordeal as a teen change her life and relationships going forward? Share how reading about her secret made you feel.
11. What are the major conflicts in the story, especially between mothers and daughters? Why does Grace refuse to connect with her daughter Harriet? Consider what the author is saying about the complicated relationship between a mother and child.
12. Discuss the group dynamic of the Unfuckwithables. Compare and contrast the new guard of activism of Yazz's group and Morgan to that of the old guard of Amma and Dominique.
13. Take a closer look at how Evaristo uses Amma's play, *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, to explore the creative process. Roland and Dominique both think that Amma could be doing more with her talents, with Dom going so far as to plead with her to move to the States to explore new opportunities. Had the novel continued, what do you think would have been Amma's decision? If you were in Amma's situation, what would your choice have been?
14. On page 447, Dominique says to Amma, "Feminism needs tectonic plates to shift; not a trendy make-over." What are your feelings about what she says? Do you consider yourself a feminist and if so, what does feminism mean to you? What does Dom and Amma's conversation about modern feminism and transgender rights say about them as individuals?
15. As the story unfolds, we learn that Penelope is adopted. What else do we learn about her? When did you start to suspect her identity? Did the author leave clues

along the way? Did you envision a different ending for the characters? Explain your answers.

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Author Interview



The choral aspect of your book reminded me of Ntozake Shange’s “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf,” as well as Gloria Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place* and Jacqueline Woodson’s *Another Brooklyn*. But the scope is much bigger, more ambitious.

It’s interesting you should mention Ntozake Shange’s book because I saw the West End production when it first came to London, around 1979. I was a drama student and absolutely loved it. It’s interesting that people are drawing comparisons 40 years later with my book because it was an influence on my work, for sure.

So why 12 characters and how did you envision bringing them together in one book?

I wanted to create as many black British female protagonists as I could get away with. I decided that each woman would have her own section, but they are all kind of interdependent. The first character I wrote was Carol, the banker; and then her mother, Bummi, appeared in Carol’s section and I thought, Okay, Bummi’s going to be the next character. And Carol has a schoolteacher named Shirley, so Shirley became a character. At that stage, I was starting to think in a more organized way, and thought, I’m going to have Shirley’s mother because she’ll be of an earlier Caribbean immigrant generation. And that’s how the book was built: with one character leading to another in a quite organic way. I wanted to have a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and qualities, all of it!

When did you decide the novel would sort of hinge on Amma’s story?

Yes, well [*laughs*], I tend to contradict myself because I can’t quite remember! But, Amma was really interesting to me because she was *absolutely* the kind of character that hasn’t really appeared in fiction at all. I thought, (a) she is a queer woman, which is really kind of in-your-face for the reader. And she’s lived a long life in an alternative profession, in theater, so I thought she’d be a really good character. Also, I really liked her daughter, Yazz, and her friend Dominique’s experiences. So I thought together they would make a good opening.

The novel is set in contemporary England—there’re very current discussions of Brexit, intersectionality, the Twittersphere, and more. But the legacy of the 1980s era of black feminism and activist theater looms large. Tell me about your own connection to that time.

I was very much a part of a 1980s black feminist counter cultural community in London. I left drama school in 1982 and, like Amma, formed a theater company, essentially because there was no work available for us. I really wanted to explore that history and bring it to light. Because unless we—the people who lived through it—talk about it, I don't think anyone is ever going to write about it. But with the different characters, I wanted to have this range of identities and so on. At some stage I decided there would also be a rural family who are living in the north of England. Our experience in this country as black people has been very urban because we were not welcome in the countryside. So locating this family there felt like a radical thing to do. It was positioning ourselves outside a slightly stereotypical notion of who we are and what we do.

Yes, I wanted to ask you about stereotypes and how your writing—as your author's bio states—challenges “myths of various Afro-diasporic histories and identities.”

Underpinning all my work is the assertion, “We are here and this is who we are. And who we are is a myriad of things and not necessarily what you expect.” So one of my early books, *The Emperor's Babe*, is about a black girl growing up in Roman London 1,800 years ago. And that really was disrupting a deep myth about the whiteness of British history. The black presence in Britain actually goes back in a very recorded way to the 1500s and 1600s, but it hasn't been a continuous presence so there's a lot of national amnesia about it. And my last novel, *Mr. Loverman*, featured a 74-year-old Caribbean grandfather who is secretly gay.

And with this book you were also interested in exploring different ideas of sexuality?

Yes, that's part of it. There are several women on the queer spectrum and that, in itself, is subversive, simply because when we *are* presented in literature we are presented in a very heteronormative way. Actually, it's quite subversive to have women who identify as lesbians, women who have homosexual experiences but don't necessarily name it, and then to also have a nonbinary character who considers herself pansexual.

To go back to the '80s, you've said that you were inspired by African American women writers of that period, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde, whose names pop up in the book. How did their work influence you and how was it different from what was happening in England?

Black British writers come from a very different history. In the U.K., the mass migration really happened after the Second World War. They were considered the first generation;

and then there's the second generation, of which I'm a part, and subsequent generations. So we didn't really get into a groove as writers—and we're still not there, I would suggest, in great numbers—until my generation started publishing. When I came of age, there was almost not a single book that you could find in this country that was about black British female experiences. We really were invisible in the culture in that sense, so we had to turn to the African American women writers because they were the ones who were being published. Those names you mentioned were hugely influential to my generation. But after a point, you realized they were writing from a very different cultural viewpoint and experience. So for somebody like myself, there was also a slight invalidation eventually in the fact that their work was being celebrated in this country but publishers weren't interested in the work of their own homegrown writers.

And have things changed much in the years since then?

We're getting there. You can look at my success at the moment, and think, Oh, yeah, this is going to be a breakthrough; this is going to change everything! But I don't think individual success necessarily signals that the industry is opening up to everybody else. I think the way in which the publishing industry changes is through lobbying and activism, something that I've been involved in for many years. I think that books that become an economic success open doors for other writers because publishers are businesses and need to make money.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* was an important book in that sense, wasn't it?

It was, absolutely, for her and for black British writing. So was Andrea Levy's *A Small Island*. And there were some books published in both their wakes. But it's not about who is getting published and becoming hugely successful. There should be many of us—that's where my heart lies. That's part of the reason I had 12 characters in the book: I wanted to see how many I could bring to life!

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Other Links and Resources



Activism and Advocacy: <https://bevaristo.com/activism/>

Author statement: <https://bevaristo.com/statement/>

Bernardine Evaristo on Black British identity and her Booker-winning novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/writersandcompany/bernardine-evaristo-on-black-british-identity-and-her-booker-winning-novel-girl-woman-other-1.5430954>

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As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: