

Women's Prize for Fiction 2020

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Fremantle



2020 SHORTLIST

GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER BY BERNARDINE EVARISTO

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Bernardine Evaristo is the Anglo-Nigerian award-winning author of several books of fiction and verse fiction that explore aspects of the African diaspora: past, present, real, imagined. Her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* won the Booker Prize in 2019. Her writing also spans short fiction, reviews, essays, drama and writing for BBC radio. She is Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University, London, and Vice Chair of the Royal Society of Literature. She was made an MBE in 2009. As a literary activist for inclusion Bernardine has founded a number of successful initiatives, including Spread the Word writer development agency (1995–ongoing); the Complete Works mentoring scheme for poets of colour (2007–2017) and the Brunel International African Poetry Prize (2012–ongoing).

PLOT SUMMARY

Girl, Woman, Other tells the varied, intergenerational stories of twelve Black British women, which are sometimes connected. Lesbian theatre director Amma prepares for the opening of her acclaimed new play at the National Theatre and reflects on the years of struggle she endured as a young, black actress. Amma's best friend, Dominique, becomes embroiled with an emotionally controlling woman, Nzinga. Amma's opinionated daughter, Yazz, begins university and meets a group of friends who defy her expectations of the way the world works.

Meanwhile, Carole is living with her Nigerian-born mother, Bummi, in a high rise flat in south London. With the help of her schoolteacher Shirley King, Carole excels in school and becomes a successful banker. While Carole enters early adulthood, Bummi begins her own cleaning business. She begins a lesbian relationship with her employee Omofe but ends it when she can no longer face the shame of her same-sex romance. While Shirley begins her teaching career bright-eyed and hopeful, she later becomes disillusioned. Lacking support for her queer identity from her liberal parents, Megan turns to drugs and then to the internet for answers. Online, Megan meets a trans woman, Bibi, who introduces her to the possibilities of gender non-binary life. Penelope, the adopted (and racist) daughter of

white parents, finds that her true parentage and ethnicity might not be quite what she thought it was. A contemporary, personal, political novel about what it means to be a black woman in Britain today, *Girl Woman Other* brings generations of women together with the people they have loved to reflect complexities of race, gender, friendship, politics and love.

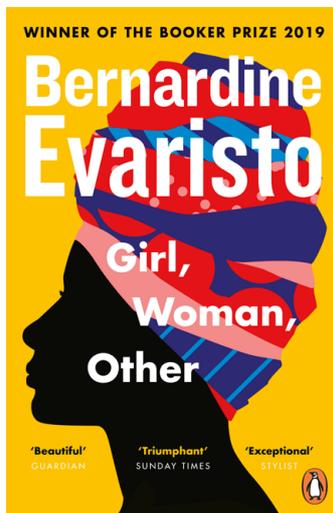
WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Girl, Woman, Other represents a polyphonic multiplicity of experience for the reader with twelve different women's stories. In presenting the reader with so many characters – as well as those characters' friends, lovers, enemies, families – Evaristo shows all readers that they can recognise themselves and their friends and family within the universe of the book. In so doing, she makes a tremendously inclusive book with mainstream appeal while also creating a book representing the multiplicity of black British women's experience in particular.

Style and form is an important element of the experience of reading *Girl, Woman, Other*. Evaristo's flowing, slightly versified and non-punctuated prose has moments of rhyme, repetition, humour and playfulness, sometimes laid out in short bursts like a poem, and at other times in long narrative set pieces. This gives both a sense of artificiality and naturalness to the text:

at first, an unfamiliarity with Evaristo's style, but then a realisation that perhaps it's the usual conventions of novels that are artificial, and that there is a pleasure to be had in the naturalistic flow of her prose which could be said to be more like natural speech.

Narrative characters still manage to retain their distinctive voices within this overall style by use of specific accent, dialogue, register and word choice as well as their specific stories, time periods, and in some cases settings, such as Bummi's youth in Lagos, Carole's experience at her south London comprehensive, Yazz at university in London, Dominique on the Spirit Moon ranch. The changing perspectives of the many characters mean that the reader is swept along in a reasonably long book with plenty of variation, hearing the episodes important to those women rather than each woman's entire life story. Last, there is a satisfying amount of inter-relating narrative so that, as readers, we have plenty of *aha* moments when one story links up with another.



DISCUSSION POINTS

It could very easily be said that *Girl, Woman, Other* represents a very comprehensive overview of Britain today because of its multiple point of view characters that span a variety of contemporary lived experiences. How much do you agree with this idea? Is it possible to represent a whole nation in a novel? What does *Girl, Woman, Other* tell us about Britain today, and what does it say about being a black woman in Britain in the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s to now? What does it say about being a woman in general?

Who are your favourite characters in the novel and why? Who do you really identify with and feel for? Are there any characters you didn't care about? If so, why do you think that was?

How does Evaristo represent romantic and sexual relationships in her novel? Is the range of sexual relationships that her characters experience – including heterosexual, non-binary and lesbian characters – representative of modern British society? And what does *Girl, Woman, Other* say about women and sex overall? Is it refreshing to see sex as an important part of so many women's lives, or is there too much sex in the book? How do the characters experience sex? Consider how, for some, it's a negative experience, and for some, positive.



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FOR FICTION SHORTLIST

QUESTIONS

Did you find Dominique and Nzinga's story surprising? If so, why?

What effect does the poetic language in the novel have on how you read the novel?

How did Yazz and her friends represent intersecting levels of privilege?

How was Bummi's relationship with Omofe different to Amma's experience of being a lesbian? Would Bummi consider herself a lesbian?

What does Evaristo say about motherhood in the book? How does Penelope's experience compare to Yazz's?

NEXT STEPS

Inspired by the narrative style of *Girl, Woman, Other*, create a written piece of perhaps a page or two which conveys a character's stream of consciousness without using punctuation other than line breaks. How does this affect your ability to describe a character or get a sense of them on the page? Is it actually easier to dispense with linguistic conventions such as speech marks, commas, other punctuation? Or is it difficult to get your meaning across?

Girl, Woman, Other excels at representing different women's perspectives. How hard is it to write authentically from a different point of view other than your own? With a friend, try and write as if you are each other. Write about a day in each other's life, in as close as

possible to 'their' voice as possible. How will you get their voice right? Do they have favourite phrases, ways of speaking, volume, pacing? Do they make particular expressions or use emphasis in a particular way? And what about their lived day to day life? What do they do? In sitting down together to do the task you may find that you end up asking each other lots of questions about things you don't know!

“ A FANTASTIC ORIGINAL NOVEL THAT REDEFINES THE BRITISH EXPERIENCE. IT'S UNFORGETTABLE, AND WE LOVED IT ”

VIV GRSKOP
JUDGE 2020

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

BLONDE ROOTS BY BERNARDINE EVARISTO
THE OTHER AMERICANS BY LAILA LALAMI