

BOOK CLUB KIT

AUTHOR LETTER

Dear Reader,

Long before I started writing *Black Cake*, my mother sent me the recipe for her legendary fruitcake. I didn't know it at the time but that recipe, scribbled in pencil on lined notebook paper and mailed from New York to California, would later inspire the title of my first novel.

I hadn't looked at my mother's note for quite a while when a younger member of my family texted me on my smartphone to ask for the recipe. He was about to be married and had my mother still been alive, she surely would have made him a black cake for his wedding reception. It was a tradition in Jamaica, where my mother had grown up.

That episode started me thinking about the cultural markers which people inherit and how we choose to hold some symbols closer to our hearts than others, especially in a multicultural family like mine. Still, it was never my intention to write a book with a cake in it.

Initially, my thoughts about food, diaspora, and identity were just a few paragraphs in a personal journal. Then I found myself circling these ongoing thoughts in a series of fictional scenes which I kept writing and filing away in my laptop. At some point, I realized that the characters in these stories were connected to one another. The novel had begun to take shape. Then the black cake simply popped up one day in the narrative and insisted on having its own story.

By the time I finished the book, the cake had come to symbolize various things: family connections, sisterhood, diaspora, and nostalgia. It also represented the ways in which our identities can be shaped as much by untold stories as by the stories we choose to share. Like the hidden reasons behind the cake in Eleanor Bennett's freezer.

—Charmaine Wilkerson

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Spoiler warning! Key plot points are discussed in the questions below, so if you have not finished reading *Black Cake* yet, please skip this part and come back later.

1. In *Black Cake*, Eleanor Bennett leaves behind a voice recording for her children, disclosing the story of her life. What was the most surprising part of her past for you? The saddest? The most interesting?
2. Secrets are a huge part of the novel. Why do you think Eleanor kept her story from her children for so long and only shared it posthumously? What do you think is more complicated: the secrets you keep or the secrets you share?
3. Eleanor wanted Mr. Mitch, Benny, and Byron to listen to the voice message she left behind when all together. Why do you think she specifically made this request? What would have been different if Benny and Byron had listened to everything separately?
4. What was your favorite part of the story? Favorite location and time period? The character who interested you the most?
5. Black cake was a Bennett family recipe, made for weddings, anniversaries, Christmas, and other special occasions. Do you have a traditional family recipe? What does it mean to you?
6. Benny recalls her first memory of Byron:

“They are sitting on the couch, she is settled under her brother’s arm, and Byron is reciting adventure stories to her from a book. His feet can already touch the floor.”

Discuss Benny and Byron’s relationship. Why was it complicated? How had they grown apart after being so close? If you have siblings, did you understand the push and pull of this relationship?

7. Bert and Eleanor told Benny they “made sacrifices so that [she] could have the ‘best’”—the best being a prestigious education and a secure profession and love life. In short, Benny felt “the best” was what they envisioned for her rather than what she wanted for herself. Why do you think Bert and Eleanor disagreed with Benny’s life choices? Do you think they were wrong to be so hard on her? Why or why not?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, CTD.

Spoiler warning! Key plot points are discussed in the questions below, so if you have not finished reading *Black Cake* yet, please skip this part and come back later.

8. Eleanor didn't tell Bert about her firstborn daughter out of fear of what he might think, just as Benny was afraid to disclose details of her sexuality. Do you find this fear to be reasonable given all the love Benny and Eleanor receive from their family? Why or why not? How do you think Bert would have responded if Eleanor had told him the truth?
9. "The thing about identity. There's your family history, there's how you see yourself, then there's what others see in you." Do you find this statement to be true for the characters in the novel? Discuss.
10. Having come from China as a young boy, Johnny "Lin" Lyncook was still seen as a foreigner to many from the Islands, "even after he'd gone to school in the same town, run a business here, taken a wife here, and raised a child here." Why do you think that is? Did Lin not fit in because of his debts or would he always be an outsider, no matter how integrated into the community he became?
11. When Bert was too stubborn to apologize to Benny, Eleanor stayed by his side out of loyalty. Do you think she made the right decision? Why or why not?
12. After Bert's death, Eleanor has another chance at love. After the sweeping love story that brought Bert and Eleanor back together again, do you find it surprising that she dated someone else after his death? Why or why not?
13. Eleanor's greatest passion growing up was swimming. But, as life got in the way, she was forced to let it go. If she'd never run away, do you think Eleanor would have had a career similar to that of Etta Pringle? Were there regrets for giving up her passion, or do you find that she received greater ones in return?
14. Do you think Covey knew about Bunny's feelings for her? Were you surprised?
15. Forgiveness is a major theme: Eleanor struggles to forgive herself, Marble to forgive her parents, Benny to forgive her family, Byron to forgive Lin. Do you find any of the characters' actions in the book to be unforgivable? Why or why not?

PLAYLIST

The text in blue shares the author's insights to the characters and why she chose these songs for them.

Take Her to Jamaica – Lord Messam (*Mathilda and Pearl in the kitchen.*)

Cheek to Cheek – Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong (*Mathilda dancing.*)

Many Rivers to Cross – Jimmy Cliff (*Covey alone. Lin alone. Etta Pringle alone.*)

It's My Life – Bon Jovi (*Byron.*)

It's My Life (acoustic version) – Bon Jovi (*Benny.*)

Pump It – Black Eyed Peas (*Byron going surfing in the storm.*)

Dance Me to the End of Love – Leonard Cohen (*Benny and Steve.*)

Isis und Osiris (from *The Magic Flute*) – René Pape (*Benny and Steve.*)

True Colors – Cyndi Lauper (*Benny and Joanie.)*

Can't Stop – Red Hot Chili Peppers (*Byron and Eleanor surfing as adults. Etta in the water.*)

Calypso Queen – Calypso Rose (*Etta Pringle late in her career.*)

The Greatest – Sia (*Benny in distress.*)

I Want to Know What Love Is – Mariah Carey (*Benny thinking of her mother. Byron holding his son.*)

Good as Hell (feat. Arianna Grande) – Lizzo (*Benny.*)

High Hopes – Panic! At the Disco (*Benny.*)

Sweet and Dandy (1968 release) – The Maytals (later Toots and the Maytals) (*Happier times.*)

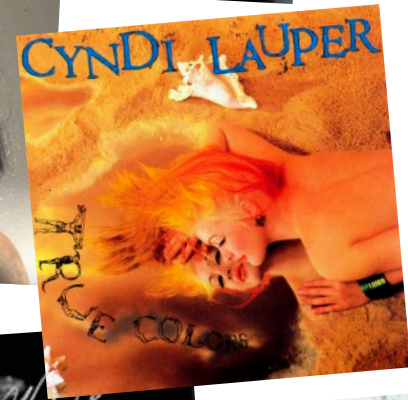
Hold Me Tight – Johnny Nash (*Bunny and Patsy.*)

Family Affair – Mary J. Blige – (*Byron's backyard gathering.*)

Diamonds – Rihanna (*Etta Pringle swimming.*)

Gli Ostacoli del Cuore (“Obstacles of the Heart”) – Elisa (with Ligabue) (*Unrevealed secrets, relationships “ . . . so many things you don't know about me . . . so many things to carry in this journey together . . . ”*)

Listen to this playlist on Spotify [here](#).



ELEANOR'S BLACK CAKE



Quantities are approximate. Eleanor never did write them down.

Ingredients

¾ lb. flour
¼ lb. breadcrumbs
1 lb. dark brown sugar (plus extra for the blacking)
1 tsp. baking powder
½ tsp. baking soda
1 or ½ tsp. salt
1 tsp. mixed spice
2 tsp. vanilla
1 lb. butter, room temperature
1 dozen eggs
5–6 cups fruits, soaked at least 4 months (raisins, prunes, soaked fruits, currants, dates soaked in white rum or dark rum and port). Add dates and maraschino cherries only at mixing time.

Instructions

Mix all dry ingredients. In a separate bowl rub or mix on low: sugar, butter until smooth and fluffy. Add 1 egg, mix 1½ minutes, add ⅓ ounces flour-breadcrumbs mixture. Repeat until all eggs and flour are gone. Mix in the blacking. Make the blacking by cooking brown sugar in a saucepan on low heat until it is caramelized. You will need more than you think! Chop up half the fruits in a blender. Combine and add to the mix. Grease 2 tin pans, cut wax paper to fit containers. Fill to ¾ full with batter.

Bake: Place pans in 350°F oven. Add a separate pan filled with water. Bake for 2 hours or less until a knife inserted in the middle comes out dry. Sometimes much less. Depends on oven and weather.

CARIBBEAN RUM PUNCH RECIPE



A drink that will make you feel like you're relaxing on the beach, listening to the waves . . . Perfect for parties!

Ingredients

1.25 oz. rum
2 oz. pineapple juice
2 oz. orange juice
1 tsp. grenadine
2 drops bitters
ice
Cherry and orange slice to garnish

Instructions

Pour all ingredients into a cocktail shaker and shake well to combine.

Serve over ice in a short cocktail glass.

Garnish with an orange slice and a cherry.

Notes

Chill the pineapple and orange juices ahead of time so your ice doesn't melt as fast.

Bitters are found on the top shelf of the mixers aisle in most grocery store liquor departments.

For a spicier cocktail, use spiced dark rum.

Source: cookingwithcurls.com/2017/12/09/caribbean-rum-punch

JAMAICAN LEMONADE



A refreshing drink on hot days. Lin served this lime drink to Byron and Benny in Florida.

Ingredients

3 limes
1 lemon
3 cups hot water (700 ml)
Sweetener to taste see notes
5 cups cold water (1.18 L)

Instructions

Remove the ends from the lime/lemon then cut off the outer peel, discard the peel and place the fruit in a small bowl. Meanwhile, pour 3 cups of hot water into a blender along with the raw cane sugar (you may want to add more later).

Make sure the lid is secure as you are dealing with HOT water then carefully blitz the lime/sugar/water into a smooth consistency. Grab a large bowl with a fine mesh strain/cheesecloth placed over it and pour the contents from the blender into it.

Discard whatever excess is left in the strainer. Pour 5 cups of cold water into the large bowl and stir. If the lemonade is slightly warm, simply allow to completely cool. Do a taste test in case you want to add more sugar, if so simply dissolve the amount you desire into a very small amount of hot water before adjusting the sweetness/taste.

Notes

The amount of sweetness is subjective and according to your preference. I used about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup which resulted in a subtle sweetness, but I don't like extremely sweet lemonade. You can use another type of sweetener I used organic raw sugar because it still has its nutrients intact, unlike brown. For a low GI index sweetener use unrefined maple syrup, agave, or coconut sugar/nectar. For a more potent lemonade simply add more limes. I like to add some lemon to balance the flavors but you can use sour orange (ulgi fruit for Jamaicans) or even ginger.

Keep the lemonade refrigerated until serving. Drink the lemonade within a few days of making it (we usually drink it immediately, so I don't know the longevity).

Source: thatgirlcookshealthy.com/jamaican-lemonade