



Q & A

A conversation between author Gabriella Burnham and her editor, Nicole Counts.

## NICOLE COUNTS: How did the idea for this book originate?

Gabriella Burnham: *It Is Wood, It Is Stone* started with São Paulo. It took me a long time to write about Brazil. Even though my mother is Brazilian and my entire extended family lives there, I wasn't born in Brazil and didn't grow up there, so I felt like I couldn't write about a country that isn't fully my own. I still feel that way sometimes; I worry that I missed some essential detail that only a "real" Brazilian would know. This is a curse of being a first- or second-generation immigrant: never quite feeling like you can claim a whole identity. But, I did it anyway, against my better judgement, scrawling in a small notebook in private. I wrote a one-page story about an American woman in São Paulo. Once I wrote that story, my temperature rose, and soon I was boiling over to write more about Brazil.

# You lived in São Paulo as a child. What details from that time did you incorporate into It Is Wood. It Is Stone?

I was very young when we lived in São Paulo, about 10-11 years old, but my sister and I were remarkably independent. We didn't speak Portuguese when we arrived, but we somehow managed to navigate our Brazilian school, schedules, classmates, and teachers, all by ourselves. I remember I adored my German teacher because he was the only person at school who spoke English. It was overwhelming at times, and very different from my experiences visiting Brazil now, as an adult, on vacation to see my family. I brought to Linda's character that early feeling of alienation and a desperate desire to connect. I also based Linda and Dennis's apartment in Moema on my Aunt Lili's apartment, whom we lived with in São Paulo.

## What other research did you do to write this novel?

The best research I did was traveling to Brazil multiple times over the course of the book to visit my family. Wherever they wanted to go, I went, and when I got there I listened, I watched, I laughed, I danced, I drank and ate delicious food, I cried, I hugged, and I swam. And then I wrote it all down as soon as possible.

My mother, aunt, and cousin helped me tremendously in writing about Marta's hometown, Atibaia, which is where they are from. They went to the local library and sent me pictures of Atibaia in the 1960s. They shared anecdotes about their lives growing up there and how the town has changed over the years. My mother told me about agricultural practices (Atibaia was primarily an agricultural town in the 1960s and '70s) and explained how a family like Marta's might survive.

Then there was the more conventional research: I read scholarly articles on how capitalism and Brazil's military dictatorship destroyed agricultural communities by funneling money into urbanization. I read essays and articles about slavery in Brazil and post-emancipation assimilation policies and practices. I read articles about colorism and domestic work. This research wasn't for a particular agenda, and I do not consider myself an expert on these topics, but I wanted to have a foundation in real-life history, philosophy, and current events to enrichen the fictional world I created.



I love Marta the most. She makes space for both strength and vulnerability, and she has a sense of humor, style, and frankness that Linda sometimes doesn't. The scenes between Marta and Linda were my favorite to write because of how their rapport develops through the book, from tension, heartbreak, and tenderness to betrayal, and, eventually, genuine affection. Marta's life story was one of my favorites to write, but it was also the most difficult. My family is from Atibaia, Marta's hometown, and so the process of digging deeper, writing closer to truth, meant also writing closer to home. I actually had a physical reaction writing Marta's story—there were days when I was in so much pain, I could barely get out of bed. But I think it opened up a very important part of my voice as a writer that I'll carry with me from now on. I'm forever indebted to her character for that gift.

# "I wasn't looking to turn away from you; I wasn't looking to replace you; I was searching for another version of myself."

In addition to race, tensions about class and gender roles also simmer throughout the novel. What do you think Linda learned about both class and gender roles during her time in Brazil?

Linda grew up in a poor, blue-collar family in the United States. Her father was an addict and her mother left them when Linda was a young teenager. But then something remarkable happened—she married Dennis, who comes from money, and was catapulted into a higher socioeconomic class.

Seven years later, when the novel takes place, Linda is grappling with what it means to be a wife who now lives in a fancy neighborhood in São Paulo, Brazil, who has a maid, and who doesn't need to have a job. This reality is in direct contrast with how she has always viewed herself; she doesn't want to acknowledge her newfound privilege, or how she has benefited from white American institutions her whole life. In this way, Linda lacks intersectionality; she considers those who have privilege and power as separate from those who are oppressed, and not the ways in which one person can inhabit either, both, or all. We see this when Linda first meets Marta, a black woman who is now her employee. Linda says, "I would have liked to believe that once Marta and I sat face-to-face, woman-to-woman, the imprints of housekeeper and kept would dissipate into the coffee. If only I knew how little I knew." Linda wants to relate to Marta as equals because they are both women, without the added complication of race and class disparities.

By the end of the book, Linda isn't so rigid and closed-in by her conflicted sense of self. By sharing her story with women like Celia, Marta, and even Melinda—and, more importantly, by listening to their stories—she begins to tie a thread between their experiences and hers. She thus roots her identity in a collective experience. *It Is Wood, It Is Stone* is about Linda's journey to regaining agency—of her sexuality, her memories, her identity as a woman, her personal story—through relationships with other women. But it's also about Linda moving beyond an individualized view of the world.



When researching texts on racism and colorism for *It Is Wood, It Is Stone*, I noticed a trend among certain scholars to refer to Brazil as a "Racial Democracy," a society that has "transcended" or "escaped" racism. I've heard my own family members make this argument—that the United States is a racist country, but Brazil is not—even though there is significant social stratification between whites and non-whites in Brazil. Most Brazilians who live in the favelas or on the streets, who work as domestic servants or in low-wage jobs, are Black and Brown. Brazil enslaved more Africans than any other country and was the last country to formally abolish slavery. They have the largest African diaspora in the world, and yet the upper class is mostly white.

The false but deeply engrained "Racial Democracy" narrative traces back to post-slavery assimilationist policies. When slavery was abolished in Brazil, the government instituted policies to try and whiten society as a form of ethnocide. This is in contrast to the United States, which responded to abolition with segregationist policies: white people would be segregated away from Black people in order to preserve the white ruling class. In Brazil, the government promoted immigration from white European countries and encouraged interracial marriages and relationships. The thought was that, if they infused society with white people and European culture, Black people and African culture would eventually die out. The irony, of course, is that modern cultural signifiers deemed quintessentially Brazilian—feijoada, carnival, samba, capoeira—all originated in Africa.

If readers are interested in learning more about the history of racism and colorism in Brazil and the United States, I recommend *Race in Another America:*The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil by Edward E. Telles, Black Marxism by Cedric Robinson, and Stamped from the Beginning by Ibram X. Kendi.



# **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- 1. Linda was going to leave Dennis the day he told her about the job in São Paulo. Later, when Celia asks if she doesn't love Dennis anymore, Linda says, "I love him very much. Sometimes I wish it were that easy." Why was she going to leave him if she still loves him? Do you think you can love someone but also want to leave them?
- **2.** When Linda and Dennis arrive in São Paulo, Linda is initially uncomfortable with the idea of a maid. Moving to Brazil seems to have placed them in a different social class than they'd been in in America. How does this seemingly upward shift affect Linda's identity?
- **3.** How does having Marta do the housework put a different pressure on Linda's life, even as it relieves other pressures?
- **4.** Linda puts on Dennis's suit (and a shower cap) before going out in the rain on the day she first meets Ceila. Why do you think she wore Dennis's suit and not clothing of her own?
- **5.** Why does Linda ruin Dennis's suit with the pen as an excuse to wash it? Why doesn't she just wash it? What does this say about Linda's character and mental state at this point in the novel?
- **6.** Linda says, "Even before you and I got married, I struggled to find the competitive femininity that my girlfriends possessed, the kind that got them to the front of a long line or a free drink at the bar." Do you recognize this concept of "competitive femininity" as Linda describes it? Do you agree with her characterization? Why or why not?
- **7.** When Linda is with Celia and her friends, Celia has to act as a translator for Linda. "She would speak rapidly with them, laughing and gesturing wildly, and then she would pause to explain everything to me. This process eventually became exhausting." Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't know the language everyone else was speaking—literally or metaphorically? What kind of toll did this take on you? How does it affect Linda and Celia's power dynamic?
- **8.** Compare and contrast Linda's relationships with the other women in the novel: Celia, Marta, and Melinda. How does each woman help Linda understand herself better? How do her initial impressions of each woman change as their relationships deepen?

- **9.** "I began to feel very exposed around Marta, like she had the ability to identify the worst parts of me, parts of me that I didn't know existed." What is it about Marta that makes Linda feel so exposed?
- **10.** Linda doesn't initially see herself as privileged (especially in contrast to Melinda), but as she spends more time in Brazil and gets to know Marta, she begins to understand her privilege more. How does this help her understand herself? Do you interact with people regularly who are more and less privileged than you are? What have these experiences taught you?
- 11. Some readers may find Linda's recklessness unlikeable. How do you feel about her? Did your feelings change throughout the book? Do you think it's necessary for characters to be likeable?
- **12.** *It Is Wood, It Is Stone* plays with point of view in an interesting way. Most of the novel is written in the second person, with Linda addressing Dennis. But Linda switches to the third person, calling herself "L," when describing her trip with Celia. And when she tells Marta's story, she switches to first person, relating it from Marta's perspective. Why do you think author Gabriella Burnham might have made these choices? How did the shifting perspectives influence your reading experience in those sections?
- **13.** "I didn't know what real rich was until I began to clean houses in São Paulo," Marta says. "I didn't know how precious hands could be, like the underside of a white rose petal, until I met São Paulo professors." How does this illustrate the differences between Linda's life and Marta's? What does this comment say about Dennis, who is a São Paulo professor?
- **14.** How does Marta's skin color affect her identity? Do you think she would feel differently about herself if she didn't have a lighter-skinned beautiful sister to compare herself to? Do you agree with her father's assertion that beauty can be a curse?
- **15.** Looking back on her trip to Paraty with Celia, Linda says, "I don't even think I want to flee anymore. I thought that was what I wanted, but I think more so I wanted to disappear." To you, what is the difference between wanting to escape and wanting to disappear?
- **16.** What brings Dennis and Linda back together in the end? Do you think they will stay together?
- **17.** What did you come to understand about Brazil, and São Paulo specifically, after reading this novel? How is the country similar to or different from where you live?

# DRINK



Source: The Latin Kitchen

## **CAFEZINHO**

Start your morning book club the Brazilian way with a cafezinho, or "little coffee."

Bring water to a boil in a saucepan on a stove with a large quantity of sugar. Lower the flame, stir in finely ground coffee, and remove the saucepan from the stove. Pour the coffee through a cloth strainer (also called a coffee sock or *colador* in Brazil) or if you don't have a cloth filter, use a disposable paper one.

Add hot milk to taste. Because the coffee is so strong, it's traditionally served in a small cup.

# "There is something intoxicating about a secret, like drinking too much dessert wine."

## PINEAPPLE CAIPIRINHA

For something a little stronger, try a pineapple caipirinha cocktail.

## **Ingredients**

- 2 oz cachaça
- Half a lime, cut into wedges
- 2 cubes of pineapple
- 1 tsp sugar
- Small pineapple wedge, for garnish

Source: Thrillist

## Instructions

- Muddle the lime, pineapple and sugar in a shaker tin.
- Add cachaça and ice, and shake to combine and chill.
- Strain over fresh ice in a Lowball glass.
- Garnish with a pineapple wedge.





## EAT

## BRIGADEIROS

The recipe for these sweet treats comes straight from author Gabriella Burnham's mother, a chef.

## **Ingredients** (makes 15)

- 1 14-oz. can condensed milk
- 2/3 cup cocoa powder
- 1 Tbsp. butter
- Chocolate sprinkles (for topping)
- Mini-muffin cups

## Instructions

- 1. Combine condensed milk, cocoa powder, and butter in a cold, non-stick pan.
- 2. Cook on medium-low heat, stirring constantly until the mixture loosens from pan and you can see the bottom of the pan when stirred (about 10 minutes). Be careful not to burn the bottom.
- 3. Let cool completely. Coat hands with a little butter and form 2-inch balls.
- 4. Roll balls in chocolate sprinkles (or another topping of your choice! Topping with cocoa powder makes Brazilian truffles). Serve in mini-muffin cups.

## PÃO DE QUEIJO

## **Ingredients** (makes 15)

- 1 large egg, ideally at room temperature
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2/3 cup milk
- 1 1/2 cups tapioca flour
- 1/2 cup (packed) grated cheese, your preference (We suggest feta cheese or fresh farmer's cheese. If using fresh farmer's cheese, you may want to add another ½ teaspoon of salt.)
- 1 teaspoon of salt (or more to taste)

Source: SimplyRecipes

Photo: Tasty

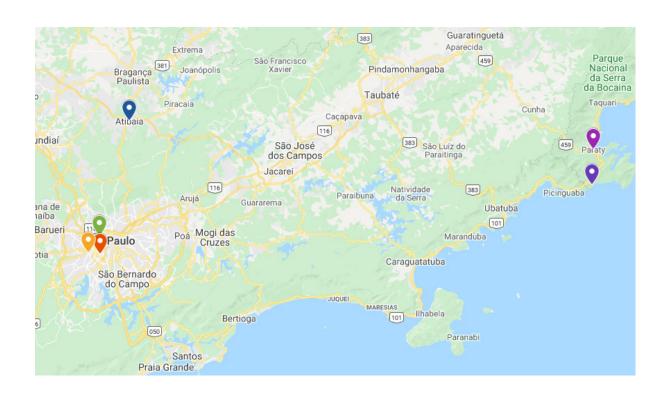
### Instructions

- 1. **Pre-heat oven, prepare mini-muffin tin:** Preheat oven to 400°F. Spread a small amount olive oil around the insides of each well of a mini-muffin tin.
- 2. **Blend ingredients:** Put all of the ingredients into a blender and pulse until smooth. You may need to use a spatula to scrape down the sides of the blender so that everything gets blended well. At this point you can store the batter in the refrigerator for up to a week.
- 3. **Pour into mini-muffin tin:** Pour batter into prepared mini-muffin tin, not quite to the top; leave about 1/8 inch from the top.
- 4. **Bake:** Bake at 400°F in the oven for 15-20 minutes, until all puffy and nicely browned. Remove from oven and let cool on a rack for a few minutes.
- 5. Eat: Eat while warm or save to reheat later. Note that Brazilian cheese bread is very chewy, a lot like Japanese mochi.





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SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL: Setting of It Is Wood, It Is Stone

Moema: The neighborhood where Linda and Dennis live.

Morumbi: The neighborhood where The Provost and Melinda live.

Perdizes: The neighborhood where Celia lives.

**Atibaia:** A small country town an hour away from São Paulo, where Marta grew up and still lives.

**Paraty:** A small coastal village just south of Rio de Janiero, where Linda and Celia go on their trip.

Trindade: Another beach town Linda and Celia visit on the trip.