



# LUCKY GIRL

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**BOOK CLUB KIT**



# A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READER,

When I was growing up in Kenya, my parents told me about my heritage with such pride. We are Kikuyu, the largest and most economically advantaged tribal group in the country. I grew up in a post-colonial Africa where Blacks had wholly reclaimed their countries (except South Africa). I saw Black African presidents, professors, doctors, lawyers, and I knew color was not a barrier to my success. My Blackness had been instilled so deeply that I didn't care, or even dream, that a white person held any more privilege than I did, or could in any way make me feel less than them.

But when I entered the United States to attend college in 1997, at the age of 19, I realized that in America I was "the other." Suddenly, I was being called "a minority." I tried so hard to understand this new kind of Blackness, but I hadn't ever been touched by personal oppression and marginalization. I had only seen American race dynamics on TV, where the insidiousness of racism made it seem like racial violence and profiling only happened to bad people—people who deserved it. I understood racism as a concept, but it felt so different from the experience I had growing up in Kenya. Even when I came to the United States, I wanted to be seen for who I was. I thought, the color of my skin shouldn't define me.

This was America of the 1990s. It was very different from today: race wasn't addressed openly. No one spoke about institutionalized racism or systemic white supremacy. People professed not to "see color." I was a young Black woman living in America participating in those cultural norms. I figured people would get to know and respect me for who I was—they'd see and appreciate my work ethic, accomplishments, intelligence, and kindness. That was how it had always been for me in Kenya. I didn't know that as soon as I set foot in America, my skin color put me at a disadvantage. It would take me years to accept and understand that truth.

That slow dawning of awareness, the early years of my experience in America, is what I wanted to capture in *Lucky Girl*.

*Lucky Girl* is a novel about a Kenyan woman who goes to the United States to study and comes to realize that the world isn't what she thinks it is. The main character, Soila, is forced to confront the ways her upbringing gave her a narrow view of the world. She falls in love with someone who offers her a wide-angle lens—he helps her



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see the world from the inside out, when she had always seen it outside in. As Soila grows up and becomes her own person, she begins to question her own internalized stereotypes, rearranging everything she thought she knew.

But uncovering and reckoning with your own prejudices isn't a linear process, and no one's personal growth is ever done. Soila's experiences are a snippet of racism in the life of an African immigrant in the U.S. at a time when America was trying to be colorblind. Today, with the proliferation of social media, racism is harder to hide. But Soila doesn't step into contemporary America, where racism is called out and bigots are named and shamed, where employees can speak out against bias, and corporations make a show of firing employees who transgress. Soila arrives wanting to believe in the American dream, a land of opportunity and freedom for all. Instead, she steps into an America where racism invisibly underpins every system she encounters. She can't really tell for sure if her experiences, like "shopping while Black," are full proof of racism. She struggles with white friends who may not be racist, but aren't antiracist.

Soila needs experiences that shake her, like the murder of an African student, and a circle of Black American friends in order to understand the deniability of racism in white America. In the end, she learns to identify with this American brand of Blackness: the racism, stereotypes, and bias. She learns, through love, friendship, and difficult self-examination, to rearrange her own beliefs and see the world from the inside out.

Soila is not me, and no novel can convey the full path that someone will take in their lives. The novel captures moments, but Soila will go on after the final page to continue to grow and change, as I have. What I hope readers will take away from this book is an understanding of what it was like to come to America as a hopeful Black African girl and to experience the country at a time when the racism of its systems was still invisible. My hope is that *Lucky Girl* transplants readers three short decades ago to an America where Blacks could only quietly grumble about racism among themselves, whites were unaware of their privilege, kids were told they don't see color, and critical race theory and diversity and inclusion were irrelevant because racism was so veiled it sometimes felt imaginary. I want to show where we came from so we can know what might be ahead.

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the title: *Lucky Girl*. Do you believe Soila is lucky? How did your thoughts shift as you read?
2. How would you describe Soila's relationship with her mother? Did it remind you of any other mother-daughter relationships from books, film, or television?
3. What does Soila get from her aunts and grandmother that she doesn't get from her mother?
4. What surprised you about Soila's first impressions of America? In what ways does America make her question things she previously believed?
5. Soila's upbringing in a wealthy family both shelters her and gives her a great deal of privilege. Discuss the intersections of race and class in the novel. How do you think Soila's worldview is affected by her economic privilege?
6. When Soila is dating Alex, they have a conversation about Black people in America and the legacy of slavery. "It was the first time that I began to realize my ideas were wrong," Soila says. How does she handle this conversation and its aftermath?
7. Akhenaten struggles to understand aspects of African culture—but Soila also struggles to explain them to him. What did you make of this? Do you think the burden for understanding another culture should be on the person who needs to be educated, or the person who needs to illuminate the other's blind spots? Explain.
8. What does *Lucky Girl* have to say about what we owe to our families—and what we owe to ourselves? How does Soila approach this tension?
9. Compare and contrast Soila's relationships with Leticia and Molly. How does each woman influence her? Where do they disagree?
10. *Lucky Girl* follows Soila as she comes to age in Kenya and New York City. How did you watch her character evolve over time? What parts of her remain consistent?
11. What themes emerged for you?
12. Why do you think Soila never told her mother what Father Emmanuel did? Do you think anything would have changed if she had? Why or why not?