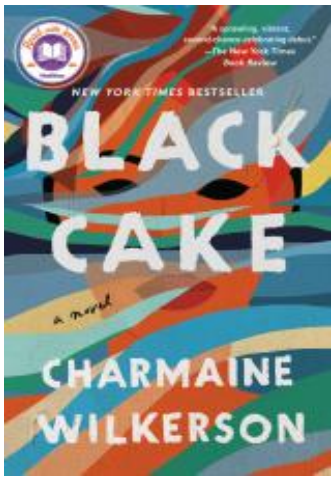
Black Cake

by Charmaine Wilkerson



About the Book

In this moving debut novel, two estranged siblings must set aside their differences to deal with their mother?s death and her hidden past --- a journey of discovery that takes them from the Caribbean to London to California and ends with her famous black cake.

In development as a Hulu original series produced by Marissa Jo Cerar, Oprah Winfrey (Harpo Films) and Kapital Entertainment.

We can?t choose what we inherit. But can we choose who we become?

In present-day California, Eleanor Bennett?s death leaves behind a puzzling inheritance for her two children, Byron and Benny: a traditional Caribbean black cake, made from a family recipe with a long history, and a voice recording. In her message, Eleanor shares a tumultuous story about a headstrong young swimmer who escapes her island home under suspicion of murder. The heartbreaking tale Eleanor unfolds, the secrets she still holds back, and the mystery of a long-lost child challenge everything the siblings thought they knew about their lineage, and themselves.

Can Byron and Benny reclaim their once-close relationship, piece together Eleanor?s true history, and fulfill her final request to ?share the black cake when the time is right?? Will their mother?s revelations bring them back together or leave them feeling more lost than ever?

Charmaine Wilkerson?s debut novel is a story of how the inheritance of betrayals, secrets, memories and even names can shape relationships and history. Deeply evocative and beautifully written, BLACK CAKE is an extraordinary journey through the life of a family changed forever by the choices of its matriarch.

Discussion Guide

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?

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?

Author Bio

Charmaine Wilkerson is the *New York Times* bestselling author of BLACK CAKE, which was named a "Read with Jenna" Book Club pick and adapted as a Hulu streaming series by Oprah Winfrey and Kapital Entertainment. She is an American writer who has lived in Jamaica and Italy. A graduate of Barnard College and Stanford University, she is a former journalist whose award-winning short fiction has appeared in various magazines and anthologies.

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