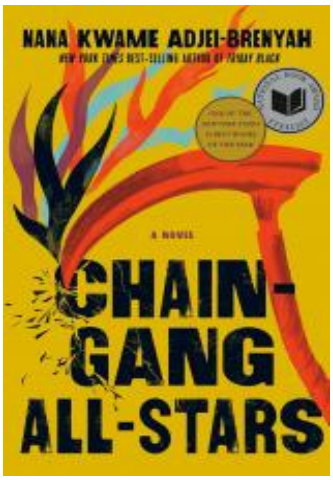
Chain-Gang All-Stars

by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah



About the Book

Two top women gladiators fight for their freedom within a depraved private prison system not so far-removed from America?s own in this explosive debut novel from the *New York Times* bestselling author of FRIDAY BLACK.

She felt their eyes, all those executioners?

Loretta Thurwar and Hamara ?Hurricane Staxxx? Stacker are the stars of Chain-Gang All-Stars, the cornerstone of CAPE --- or Criminal Action Penal Entertainment --- a highly popular, highly controversial, profit-raising program in America?s increasingly dominant private prison industry. It?s the return of the gladiators, and prisoners are competing for the ultimate prize: their freedom.

In CAPE, prisoners travel as Links in Chain-Gangs, competing in death-matches for packed arenas with righteous protestors at the gates. Thurwar and Staxxx, both teammates and lovers, are the fan favorites. And if all goes well, Thurwar will be free in just a few matches, a fact she carries as heavily as her lethal hammer. As she prepares to leave her fellow Links, she considers how she might help preserve their humanity, in defiance of these so-called games, but CAPE?s corporate owners will stop at nothing to protect their status quo, and the obstacles they lay in Thurwar?s path have devastating consequences.

Moving from the Links in the field to the protestors to the CAPE employees and beyond, CHAIN-GANG ALL-STARS is a kaleidoscopic, excoriating look at the American prison system?s unholy alliance of systemic racism, unchecked capitalism and mass incarceration, and a clear-eyed reckoning with what freedom in this country really means from a ?new and necessary American voice? (Tommy Orange, *The New York Times Book Review*).

Discussion Guide

1. CHAIN-GANG ALL-STARS is a work of speculative fiction that immerses readers in the United States of the near future, a technologically advanced society that is still troubled and defined by the laws, institutions and social issues that we see today. Reflect on this setting. Why do you think Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyahh chose to set the story against this backdrop?

2. Who are the Chain-Gang All-Stars and what is the CAPE program? How did the characters end up in this program, and what made them join?

3. When we first meet Loretta Thurwar in the prologue, she is a new Link going up against Melancholia Bishop, a renowned fighter approaching High Freed status. When the novel continues, three years have passed and Thurwar is now in Bishop?s position as a Grand Colossal. What was the significance of her first fight, and how has her character changed since then? What keeps her fighting?

4. Chapter by chapter, CHAIN-GANG ALL-STARS brings readers into the stories of different stakeholders in the CAPE program, from Links and executives to fans and family members. Whose perspective were you most curious about and why? How did the multiple points of view reveal the many facets of the conflicts that are central to the story?

5. The lives of hard-action-sports fans are revealed through the point of view of Wil and Emily, a couple that watch the BattleGrounds and reality series "LinkLyfe" together. A reluctant fan, Emily?s interest in hard-action-sports teeters between horror and fascination. Why do audiences watch the matches, and how do they cope with the realization that they are complicit in these acts of violence? How is the reader also implicated in this?

6. On page 36, Thurwar explains that ?The culture of Chain-Gang was death.? Describe the dynamic between the Links on the Angola-Hammond chain, as well as the other chains in the circuit. How do the culture of death and the constant feelings of distrust and fear impact the chains? What do Thurwar and Staxxx attempt in order to gain trust and build comradery within Angola-Hammond?

7. Who is Tracy Lasser, and what is her connection to the Angola-Hammond chain? How does her act of protest on live TV echo the antiracist movements in media, particularly sports media, that we?ve seen in recent years?

8. In the novel, Hendrix Young is one of the few characters who gets to speak in the first person. Why do you think the author chose to reveal Hendrix?s story from his own perspective, and how did this choice impact your understanding of his character?

9. How do society?s scientific advancements exacerbate the violent conditions experienced by the prisoners, particularly in the novel?s experimental prisons?

10. The story of Simon J. Craft is told through a fragmented narrative style. How is this literary choice used to illuminate the impact of solitary confinement on the mind?

11. On page 192, Hendrix explains, ?Everybody got a name: a story of truths and lies.? Where do the nicknames of the Links come from, and how do they come to define each character? Why do you think that it was notable for Thurwar to

use her own name rather than a moniker?

12. CHAIN-GANG ALL-STARS imagines a world of brand-sponsored, pay-per-view prison entertainment to bring attention to the role of capitalism in the carceral system today. Before reading this novel, were you aware of the prison-industrial complex, prison labor, or the role that corporations play in the carceral system? How does the novel?s dramatization of these stakes allow readers to reflect critically on the real-life implications of this system?

13. Through Mari?s narrative, readers are brought into the lives of families of incarcerated people and the activists working to abolish the carceral system, efforts that echo current calls to defund the police and abolish prisons. What do these chapters reveal about the work of community organizers and activists? Did you learn anything new about these movements? How does Mari?s experience of having an incarcerated father inform her acts of protest over the course of the novel?

14. How would you characterize the novel?s ending and the freedom that Thurwar and Staxxx reach at the end? Triumphant? Mournful? A little bit of both?

15. During the final BlackOut, Staxxx and Thurwar discuss what they will do with their lives when they are free, giving readers the sense that there is more work to be done. What do they decide to do, and what do you imagine happening for the novel?s characters, as well as the CAPE program, after the ending?

16. Adjei-Brenyah?s novel combines fiction with social justice by incorporating footnotes that provide readers with real-life stories and statistics about the experiences of incarcerated people in America. In the acknowledgments, Adjei-Brenyah writes, ?This book is possible because of so many thinkers, activists, writers, and advocates who helped grow my point of view and guide research that deepened my understanding of our carceral world and country.? How did these footnotes add to the realism of the novel? What did you learn, and what stood out to you? Did your perspective on the criminal justice system change after reading this story?

Author Bio

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah is the *New York Times* bestselling author of CHAIN-GANG ALL STARS and FRIDAY BLACK. His work has appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Esquire*, *The Paris Review* and elsewhere. He was a National Book Foundation?s ?5 Under 35? honoree, the winner of the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award and the Saroyan Prize, and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle?s John Leonard Award for Best First Book, along with many other honors. Raised in Spring Valley, New York, he now lives in the Bronx.

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Publication Date: January 23, 2024
Genres: Dystopian, Fiction, Satire
Paperback: 432 pages
Publisher: Vintage
ISBN-10: 0593469313
ISBN-13: 9780593469316