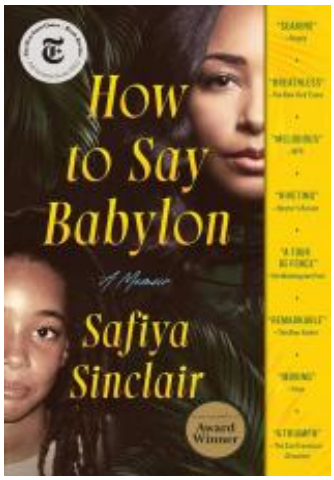
How to Say Babylon: A Memoir

by Safiya Sinclair



About the Book

With echoes of EDUCATED and BORN A CRIME, HOW TO SAY BABYLON is the stunning story of the author?s struggle to break free of her rigid Rastafarian upbringing, ruled by her father?s strict patriarchal views and repressive control of her childhood, to find her own voice as a woman and poet.

Throughout her childhood, Safiya Sinclair?s father, a volatile reggae musician and militant adherent to a strict sect of Rastafari, became obsessed with her purity, in particular, with the threat of what Rastas call Babylon, the immoral and corrupting influences of the Western world outside their home. He worried that womanhood would make Safiya and her sisters morally weak and impure, and believed a woman?s highest virtue was her obedience.

In an effort to keep Babylon outside the gate, he forbade almost everything. In place of pants, the women in her family were made to wear long skirts and dresses to cover their arms and legs, head wraps to cover their hair, no make-up, no jewelry, no opinions, no friends. Safiya?s mother, while loyal to her father, nonetheless gave Safiya and her siblings the gift of books, including poetry, to which Safiya latched on for dear life. And as Safiya watched her mother struggle voicelessly for years under housework and the rigidity of her father?s beliefs, she increasingly used her education as a sharp tool with which to find her voice and break free. Inevitably, with her rebellion comes clashes with her father, whose rage and paranoia explodes in increasing violence. As Safiya?s voice grows, lyrically and poetically, a collision course is set between them.

HOW TO SAY BABYLON is Sinclair?s reckoning with the culture that initially nourished but ultimately sought to silence her; it is her reckoning with patriarchy and tradition, and the legacy of colonialism in Jamaica. Rich in lyricism and language only a poet could evoke, HOW TO SAY BABYLON is both a universal story of a woman finding her own power and a unique glimpse into a rarefied world we may know how to name, Rastafari, but one we know little about.

Discussion Guide

1. How does HOW TO SAY BABYLON explore the themes of religion, family and identity?

2. How does Safiya Sinclair's writing style and voice evolve throughout the memoir?

3. What are some of the challenges and obstacles that Safiya faces as she tries to break free from her father's repressive control?

4. What was your understanding of Rastafarian culture and religion before reading HOW TO SAY BABYLON? After?

5. What are some of the ways in which Safiya?s experiences are shaped by her race, gender and class?

6. How does Safiya?s memoir shed light on the legacy of colonialism and racism in Jamaica and beyond?

7. What role does poetry, writing and reading play in Safiya?s life and her journey to self-discovery?

8. How does Safiya?s memoir explore the complex relationship between fathers and daughters?

9. What are some of the ways in which Safiya?s memoir challenges traditional notions of womanhood and motherhood?

10. How does Safiya?s memoir explore the themes of forgiveness, redemption and healing?

11. What are some of the ways in which Sinclair's memoir resonates with your own experiences and perspectives?

12. What is the significance of the title, HOW TO SAY BABYLON?

Author Bio

Safiya Sinclair was born and raised in Montego Bay, Jamaica. She is the author of the memoir HOW TO SAY BABYLON --- winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, a finalist for the Women?s Prize in Nonfiction, the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, and the Kirkus Prize.

HOW TO SAY BABYLON was one of the *New York Times*?s 100 Notable Books of the year, a *Washington Post* Top 10 Book of 2023, a *TIME* magazine Top 10 Nonfiction Book of 2023, one of *The Atlantic*?s 10 Best Books of 2023, a Read with Jenna/"Today" show book club pick, and one of President Barack Obama?s favorite books of 2023. HOW TO SAY BABYLON was also named a Best Book of the Year by *The New Yorker*, NPR, *The Guardian*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Vulture* and *Harper?s Bazaar*, among others, and was an ALA Notable Book of the Year. The audiobook of HOW TO SAY BABYLON was named a Best Audiobook of the Year by *AudioFile* magazine.

Sinclair is also the author of the poetry collection CANNIBAL, winner of a Whiting Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters? Addison Metcalf Award in Literature, the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Poetry, and the Prairie

Schooner Book Prize in Poetry. Sinclair?s other honours include a Guggenheim fellowship, and fellowships from the Poetry Foundation, the Civitella Rainieri Foundation, the Elizabeth George Foundation, MacDowell, Yaddo, the Bread Loaf Writers? Conference, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. She is currently an associate professor of creative writing at Arizona State University.

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