

Leave Your Mess at Home

by Tolani Akinola



About the Book

The Longe siblings are really botching their parents' American Dream.

Sola Longe --- eldest daughter, estranged from the family --- is secretly back home in Chicago for the first time in a decade. She's a newly single and recently disgraced influencer trying to quietly put her life back together again. The other three Longe siblings aren't doing much better.

Anjola is in love with her best friend, who just got engaged to someone else; Karen, a college junior and the baby of the family, is grappling with her sexuality and self-image; and Ola, the golden child with a baby of his own on the way, is questioning his marriage and how to raise a Black son in America.

Sola's unexpected return sets them on a crash course towards each other, and when the four siblings find themselves together again at their Nigerian immigrant parents' Thanksgiving table, a decade's worth of secrets and a lifetime of resentments explode to the fore.

In the wreckage of their fateful reunion, each Longe is forced to reckon with the past, take stock of what really matters, and find a way back to each other. Big-hearted, hilarious and wise, **LEAVE YOUR MESS AT HOME** is a poignant exploration of forgiveness, unconditional love and becoming who you want to be, asking the question: What do we owe to our families, and what do we owe to ourselves?

Discussion Guide

- 1.** Anjola recalls a deep closeness between she and Sola as children, but Sola remembers Anjola as wanting "to be good at the expense of everything else. Her goodness a boulder between their mutual understanding." How do each sister's memories shape their actions and expectations of each other in the present?
- 2.** In the first argument we see between Ola and Marisol, which continues throughout the novel, Marisol says they should give their son an "American name" because she doesn't want a Yoruba name "to be his struggle." Discuss your thoughts on their argument and their differing points of view.
- 3.** Each of the Longe siblings view their romantic relationships through the lens of the home they grew up in and their individual experiences as children of immigrants. How does their confluence of identities, including nuances of race, class, education, culture and sexuality, influence their decision-making?
- 4.** The incident with the crystal vase and the fight between Sola and Latifat is described by Sola, Ola and Karen. What does each sibling's version tell us about memory and the way they think of one another?
- 5.** Gbenga says he loves Latifat because, "She has always wanted everything and everyone around her to thrive," though their mother's influence is interpreted differently by her children. What shapes the way Latifat's goals are interpreted? Think about the power dynamics in the family, the expectations of the community, and Latifat's and Gbenga's experiences as immigrants.
- 6.** As a child, Ola is often called upon to be the man of the house, but as an adult, he fears he will never measure up to the man his father is. What does Ola think it means to be a man? Where do these ideas come from, and how does it affect his romantic and familial relationships?
- 7.** At the beginning of the novel, Marquise tells Sola that her coming back to Chicago makes sense because it's Sankofa, which means "Retrieving what you've left behind. Going over the past." What does Sola go back and get from the past? How has it changed her by the novel's end?
- 8.** Choosing their father's casket is the only time we see all the siblings alone together. How are they different with one another without anyone around? Who leads, who follows, and what do they learn about themselves as a group and as individuals in this moment?
- 9.** After Thanksgiving, Sola finds herself back in the fold of the family she thought she'd separated from forever. No longer the problem or the prodigal child, what is her role in the family now? Why does she stay?
- 10.** Ola thinks of much of his life as "one big assimilatory project," leaving him feeling out of place with people who are more connected to Nigerian culture like Dare and his friends, and at the Black barbershop. How does this impact his feelings on legacy, fatherhood and raising a son?
- 11.** One thing about the Longes, they're going to put on some music: Latifat's getting-ready gospel hits, Karen and Sola blasting Sade or an Afrobeats playlist together, Anjola learning Neil's music --- from Anita Baker to Bob Marley to Lupe Fiasco --- in high school, and the music Gbenga plays in his cab. The novel is full of song. How do the different Longes use music to express identity, belonging and power, or to give comfort?

12. Though Anjola and Neil share so much history together, their experiences of class and culture through family relationships, food, music and a sense of duty is entirely distinct. How does the novel work to dismantle the idea of a monolithic Black American experience? How do these characters address the issue when approached with these kinds of stereotypes?

13. Once too afraid to study what she wants or admit who she's attracted to, Karen asks at the novel's end, "When do you stop belonging to your family? You don't, right?" How has Karen's perspective of belonging shifted over the course of the novel?

14. Throughout the novel, Anjola struggles to be honest with herself about what she wants in all aspects of her life. When are the moments you see this struggle in Anjola most? How do her relationships with Neil and Sola push her toward her own desires? Is her ending with Neil another instance of withholding from herself, or setting herself free?

Author Bio

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