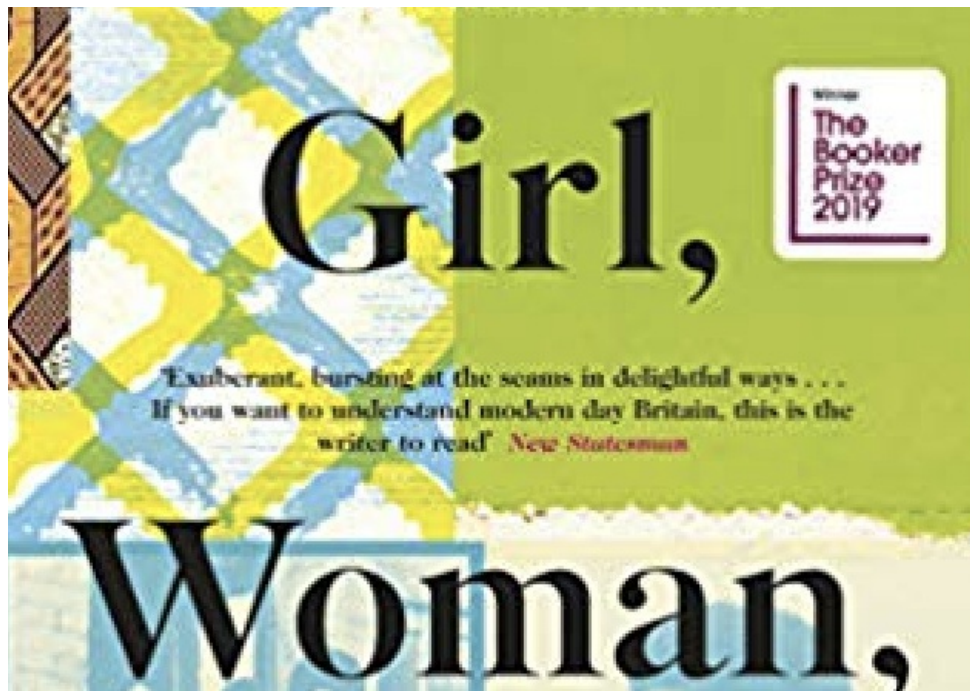
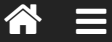


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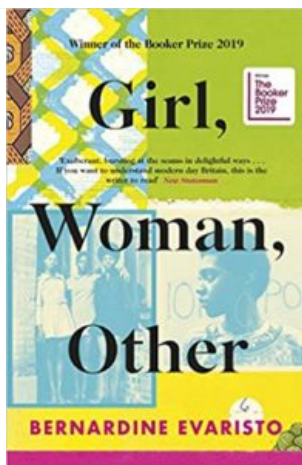
FICTION

'Girl, Woman, Other'

A Symphony of Women's Voices in Last Year's Booker Prize Winner

📅 January 22, 2020 👤 Michael Giltz

Scan all the lists naming the best works of 2019 and you'll repeatedly see the title *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo, an acclaimed British writer new to me. It's a treat, even though a brief description of this Booker Prize winner sounds noble and worthy in an "oh dear" sense. Evaristo offers a multiplicity of voices, all of them women of color living in the UK. Some reviews suggest it's an inspiring choir of female empowerment. Yes, but thankfully her novel is also witty, captivating, cleverly structured and fun.



That structure reveals itself slowly. In Chapter One, we hear from Amma, Yazz and Dominique. Amma is a playwright with a new show opening at the National in London that very night. Yazz is her daughter and Dominique is her friend. Their stories diverge wildly and comment on one another in subtle and direct ways. In Chapter Two, we hear from Carole, Bummi and LaTisha and they are a daughter, a mother and a friend. Slowly we realize everyone has a link to one another and most of them will converge at the after party for Amma's (hopefully) triumphant new play.

I need to read more of Evaristo because her work is so confident and true here. You know immediately you're in good hands. These characters constantly catch you off guard, or, rather, Evaristo does. Carole is a high-powered player in the financial world, reaching higher and farther than her immigrant mother ever imagined. But her mom Bummi's voice is so strong and infectious you can't think of Carole any longer without thinking of her mother's journey too. And when Carole dismisses the chances of a classmate she leaves far behind, you're ashamed to have agreed with her when LaTisha takes center stage and we discover her path.

Again and again, Evaristo does this. A minor character, even a dislikable one, leaps from one section's background to another section's spotlight. As in life, people surprise and confound and startle you until you just accept that you don't really know anyone until you've worked hard to empathize and listen to their story.

All of this is done in free verse, here a style that permits Evaristo's words to flow and fly. She shoots high and skips across decades and then swoops down low to a particular moment. The poetic line breaks put certain scenes into sharp relief, like the heartbreaking story of a rape and its aftermath. Then the verse takes off again at light speed, pulling you along to meet person after person, from a 90-plus-year-old matriarch overseeing the family estate (and a terrible secret), to a schoolteacher who lives to give a leg up to worthy students but never receives her due, to a woman abandoned by a sailor in 1895, a sailor who promises to return but the only thing that arrives is a baby. Sometimes free verse slows you down. But here it's rocket fuel.

I can't recommend reading this as an e-book. While the line breaks appear in their proper places, the visual display of the text will change depending on whether you're on a phone or tablet or E-reader and yet again depending on the font and font size. A physical copy is paramount to know you're reading it the way Evaristo intended. And it is a pleasure to read.

Girl, Woman, Other loses a little steam towards the end. The story of Megan, who became Morgan, is involving. But an extended section covering their online exploration of ideas like gender fluidity, transsexual, transgender and such was accurate but no more thrilling than reading any online chat room. Also, the play's afterparty didn't deliver quite the climax I expected, and while I found a final emotional epilogue intellectually satisfying, it didn't knock me over.

Those are small reservations about this novel. Any section would make a satisfying story in its own right. Taken as a whole, it is indeed an inspiring choir of female empowerment. Yet each voice receives the solo it richly deserves, and Evaristo orchestrates it all to bring clarity instead of cacophony. It's a beguiling melody whether you're a girl, a woman, or other.

(Hamish Hamilton, May 2, 2019)



Bernadine Evaristo, author photo by Jennie Scott.



Michael Giltz

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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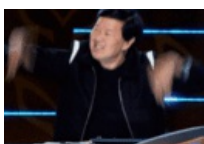
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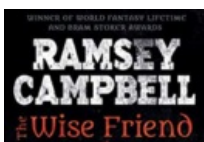
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