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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Black Cake by Charmaine Wilkerson

Summary

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 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 Questions

1. Let's first talk about the famous black cake recipe. How does food and family recipes help connect family? Does your family have a recipe that has been shared throughout the generations?
2. Why did Eleanor decide to leave this recording revealing all her secrets to her children? In your opinion, why did Eleanor wait to tell Byron and Benny the truth until after she passed away?
3. How would you react if your parent left behind a similar recording?
4. How did learning about their mother's past, including her real name and the fact they have a sister, change their perception of what they know?

5. A portion of the novel is set in the 1960s in the Caribbean where young Covey is abandoned by her mother and is raised by her Chinese father, who is a gambling addict and not very present in her life. We meet Covey's best friend, Bunny, and also her boyfriend, Gibbs. What was your impression of Covey's life there and how did it shape who she became?
6. Because of his debts, Covey's father makes a deal with the head of the local gang, Little Man, that he can marry Covey. But at the wedding, Little Man drops dead and Covey frees the island with help from Bunny. Did you think Covey was behind Little Man's murder? What was your reaction that it was Bunny all along?
7. Covey eventually makes her way to London and hopes that she'll find Gibbs there. Let's talk about Covey's journey in London and her friendship with Elly.
8. A train accident takes Elly's life and in a panic, Covey eventually assumes her identity for fear that the island would learn she was still alive. So essentially Covey is erased in many ways. How important is a name to one's identity?
9. As we read about Covey, now Eleanor's journey, we also are following Byron and Benny as adults. Both are very different as Byron is a successful and famous biologist but Benny is struggling a bit trying to find her footing. Why do you think both turned out so different as adults?
10. Benny was estranged from her family after she tried to talk with them about her sexuality. Because of stubbornness on both sides, they never got the chance to forgive each other before both parents passed away. What do you make of her parents' reaction and the fact they never reconciled?
11. We learn that Eleanor was assaulted and had a child she was forced to give up. Let's talk about this revelation.
12. Marble is in fact Eleanor's daughter and her parents who raised her hid the truth of her heritage. But Marble takes a keen interest in the historical context of food. In what ways is Marble similar to Eleanor, despite never knowing her?
13. What happens next for Byron, Benny, Marble and Bunny now that the truth has been revealed?
14. The story explores how one's choices can be passed through generations. What are your thoughts about this?

Summary from GoodReads.com
Discussion Questions from BookClubChat.com