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THE  GIRL

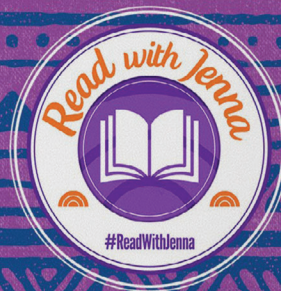
WITH THE

LOUDING

VOICE

ABI DARÉ

A NOVEL



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



BOOK CLUB KIT



A LETTER FROM AUTHOR

ABI DARÉ

WHEN I TURNED TEN, I started to write to my mother. She traveled a lot for work, and in the absence of mobile phones, writing to her was my way of conveying my feelings—hurt or happy, ecstatic or downcast. I wrote on everything I could find—used tissue, little notebooks, exercise books meant for homework.

When I turned thirteen, I was sent to an all-girls boarding school in Lagos, Nigeria. There, I found that my love for writing had evolved from letter-writing and journaling to storytelling.

Characters lived in my head, and I needed an outlet, so I would construct plays, scribble out a script in about a day, and on the same day, direct a short play that would somehow manage to keep the girls entertained on a Saturday afternoon. When I left Nigeria in the early 2000s for university in England, I felt lost. I missed everything about home: the food, the people, the weather, my family—and so I decided to start a blog documenting my experiences as an immigrant, and I was pleasantly surprised when it became hugely popular.

After I stopped blogging to focus on fiction, it took about eight years, and the birth of my daughters, for me to write the story that became my debut. I wrote my first draft in about seven to eight months because I was carrying a burden of an untold story, because the voice of Adunni—my main character—needed to be heard. Adunni is a fourteen-year-old girl who grew up in a Nigerian village. She is spirited, a dreamer. All she wants is an education. But when her mother dies and her father sells her to become the third wife of a much older man, Adunni doesn't give up. A tragedy in her husband's house causes her to flee and she becomes a housemaid for a wealthy family in the city of Lagos. She is trapped, beaten, unpaid, but her spirit remains unbroken. When she discovers that Rebecca, the maid she replaced, disappeared, she realizes she must get out. My debut, *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, is the story of Adunni's escape. It is her fight for an education. It is my way of giving a voice to young girls like her, my way of unburdening the story within.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you think Adunni's comparison of her mother to a rose flower ("a yellow and red and purple rose with shining leaves") symbolizes? She also remembers her mother having a sweet smell like a rosebush. Why do you think she compares her mother to this particular type of flower? And how do you think our five senses play into our memories?
2. Adunni dreads her upcoming marriage to Morufu, but her friend Enitan is genuinely excited for Adunni, believing that her life will be improved after the wedding. Why do you think there is a disconnect between Adunni's and Enitan's points of view? Can you draw any comparisons between cultural attitudes toward marriage in America and Nigeria?
3. Compare and contrast Khadija with the glimpses we get of Adunni's mother. How were their lives similar or different from one another?
4. Why do you think Bamidele doesn't return for Khadija? What do you think he whispers in her ear before leaving her for the last time?
5. Why do you think Adunni is closer with Kayus than Born-boy? What is it that makes their sibling bond so deep?
6. Why do you think bathing is such an important symbol in Nigerian folklore and in the novel? Discuss the similarities and differences between the bath that Kadija believes will save her and her baby's life, and the bath that Ms. Tia's mother-in-law believes will help her get pregnant.
7. Adunni has dreamed of leaving Ikati and seeing "the big, shining city" of Lagos since she was young, though when she actually arrives it's not under the circumstances she envisioned. How do you think her perception of the city changes once she is there? And how does her experience of Lagos relate to Big Madam's or Ms. Tia's? Compare and contrast the ways all three women view the city and experience the opportunities it offers.
8. Though they have dissimilar personalities, are not close in age, and have lived very different lives by the time they meet, Adunni and Ms. Tia have an instant connection that deepens over time. What do you think it is that drew each of them to the other? How do you think their friendship will evolve after the book is over? Will they continue to be friends even though their worlds seem incompatible?
9. What is the significance of the moment when Ms. Tia turns to look at Adunni right after the bath ceremony is over? Why do you think it affects Adunni so strongly?
10. After Ms. Tia's bath, Adunni wants "to ask, to scream, why are the women in Nigeria seem to be suffering for everything more than the men?" What specific moments have brought her to this question? What do the events of the book reveal about cultural attitudes toward women?
11. Adunni remembers her mother saying, "Adunni, you must do good for other peoples, even if you are not well, even if the whole world around you is not well." How do you think this factors into the choices she makes and her dreams for the future?
12. The first time Big Madam hears Adunni singing she slaps her and says, "This is not your village. Here we behave like sane people." Later, when Adunni is comforting Big Madam after she has forced Big Daddy out of her house, Big Madam wants Adunni to sing to her. Discuss the significance of that moment. Why do you think Big Madam's attitude toward Adunni's singing has changed?
13. At first, knowing and reading English is a source of pride for Adunni. But later, she says, "English is only a language, like Yoruba and Igbo and Hausa. Nothing about it is so special, nothing about it makes anybody have sense." What do you think she means by this?
14. How do you feel about the ending? Do you think it is a happy ending for Adunni? Despite the fact that she gets to follow her dream of returning to school, there are bittersweet moments, too—she must contend with the fact that she's left her family behind, her husband might have stopped supporting her family, and the mystery of what happened to Rebecca remains partially unsolved. How do you think these loose ends will affect Adunni as she grows into adulthood?
15. After embarking on this journey with Adunni, what does a "louding voice" mean to you and how does one achieve it? What sort of future do you imagine for Adunni?

Q&A WITH AUTHOR

ABI DARÉ

WHAT FAMILY LESSONS DO YOU PASS ON TO YOUR KIDS?

I would love for my girls to be resilient, kind, and tenderhearted but courageous. To feel empathy and extend love to everyone they meet. My mother is one of the most generous people I have been blessed to know, and I want my children to be the same. I also learned the importance of discipline from my mother. Of applying yourself and working extremely hard to get what you want and refusing to take no for an answer for something that you truly believe in. The importance of not allowing self-pity to overwhelm you in the face of rejection, and just deciding to get up and get things done.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG WRITERS?

I think it is important to dedicate time to the craft of writing and storytelling. Finding the time to write and being consistent at writing is key. Do not give up on your writing dreams. Hold strongly to the belief that what you're writing is worth being read and that you have a story that is worth listening to. Finding a good critique group and partner who can give useful feedback is invaluable for your writing and when seeking publication; refuse to allow the rejection to get to you. Every writer faces rejection. Keep at it!

WHAT ARE THE HOUSEMAIDS' LIVES LIKE IN NIGERIA?

While we had a number of maids who worked for my family, it wasn't until I spent one summer at my neighbor's house that I had the unique opportunity to become close to a young girl named Miriam. She worked for my neighbor and woke up in the morning at about four or five a.m. to start her chores: sweeping, cleaning the house, scrubbing, washing plates, getting food—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—ready for the family. It was an endless cycle of chores, basically 'round the clock. Most of the time she had no break, but she had a bright happy smile, and eyes that sparkled when she laughed. We became friends, and our friendship gave me an insight into her life, the girl behind the housework, behind the life of servitude.

WHAT RESEARCH DID YOU DO FOR THE BOOK?

I had spent close to two decades in Lagos, living with housemaids, and so a lot of my research came from what I had seen and absorbed growing up. I also conducted a fair amount of research on the legality of young girls working for families like mine. I spoke to a few close friends who had housemaids and tried to understand how their maids behaved and lived in comparison to the girls I had encountered growing up. The rest of the book built upon this foundation. Adunni's voice evolved from an infusion of a number of sources: Nigerian slang, words from my then-two-year-old who was just discovering how to speak,

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literal translations from Yoruba into English, and words I made up as I wrote. I drew a fair amount of inspiration from reading excellent books that had been written in nonstandard English.

WHAT DO YOU WANT READERS TO LEARN FROM ADUNNI'S STORY?

I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Nigeria where many families employed maids. These were mostly young girls, many of whom were sadly ill-treated and uneducated. As a child, I had questions I could not voice: Why were some of these girls not allowed to sit at the dining table, or watch TV, or go to school? Why were they cooking and cleaning and serving families at such a young age? My unanswered questions followed me out of Nigeria. They remained buried somewhere within me, as I went about my life and settled in England and had my own family.

When my daughter was eight, I recall asking her politely to help with some house chores. She responded with a series of moans and a barrage of excuses. I must have gotten a little upset, for I recall asking her a question that became a defining moment for this book: "Do you know that there are young girls like you probably working for families like mine in Nigeria?" At my daughter's shock and keen interest as to why a girl of eight would be working as a maid, all the questions I'd had as a child resurfaced. That night I started my research. I discovered that young girls were still being employed as maids, still suffering abuse. I came across a newspaper article: a thirteen-year-old had been scalded with boiling water by the woman who employed her.

It wasn't just the horrific injuries that got to me, it was also the fact that the newspaper hid her face with a block of black ink. They were trying to protect her identity but it felt like a deliberate act to disconnect her from the world. It seemed to say: Here is a nobody. An unknown. Another statistic to report. My conscience burned. I began to wonder, who is the maid in this article? Does she have a family? What does she want out of life? What are her hopes and dreams? *The Girl with the Louding Voice* was born out of my desire for answers. I was desperate to tear away the veil. I was also doing my master's degree in creative writing at the time and I had to submit three thousand words of my dissertation to my lecturer. The day or so before my deadline, Adunni's voice came to me and I wrote the first three thousand words. After I sent it through to my supervisor, I remember walking into his office, expecting him to criticize my work, and him saying, "Abi, this is great. Do you think you can sustain this?" And I said, "I don't think I can." Well I did!

