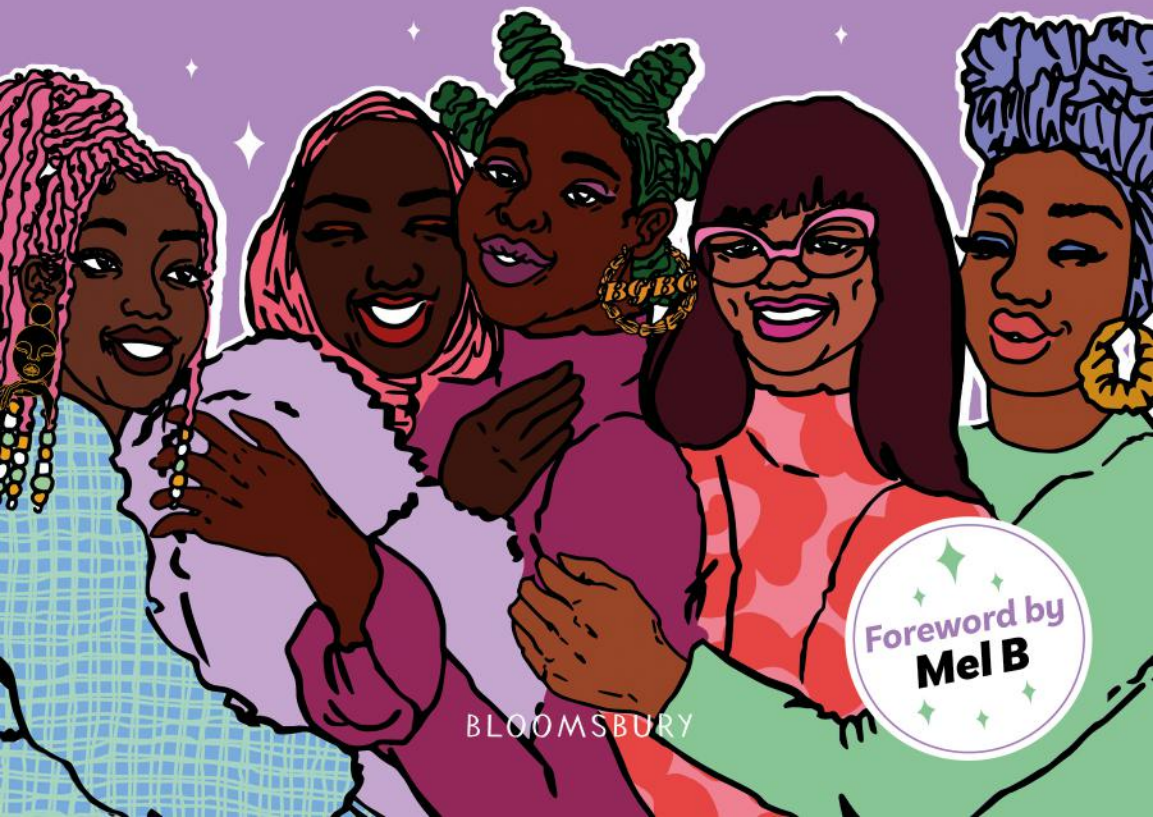


MELISSA CUMMINGS-QUARRY  
& NATALIE A. CARTER

ILLUSTRATED BY DORCAS MAGBADELO

# Grown

The Black Girls'  
Guide to Glowing Up



Foreword by  
**Mel B**

BLOOMSBURY

Best friends **Melissa Cummings-Quarry** and **Natalie A. Carter** met at secondary school in north-east London when they were exactly eleven-and-a-half years old (although Melissa is certain it wasn't until they were twelve). They bonded over their shared love of books, swapping favourites such as Zora Neale Hurston's ***Their Eyes Were Watching God*** and Alice Walker's ***The Color Purple***.

Years later, Melissa, now a business development manager, and Natalie, a real estate lawyer, decided to channel that passion for reading into setting up the **Black Girls' Book Club**, a literary and social events platform that celebrates the work of Black women. Among the authors they've hosted are Candice Carty-Williams, Angie Thomas, Tayari Jones, Diana Evans and Malorie Blackman OBE. Now touted as the premier literary event for Black women and girls in the UK, Black Girls' Book Club has been featured in *Vogue*, *Stylist*, *BBC Radio*, *BuzzFeed*, *Metro*, *gal-dem*, *Pride* and many more. In 2019, Melissa and Natalie were named as two of *The Bookseller's* Rising Stars.

With everything they do intended to ensure Black women have a seat at the table, Melissa and Natalie began to reflect on their own experiences growing up. One thing that became clear was the lack of media created specifically for Black girls. Like the women who attended their events, young Black girls needed something that centred them, something that showed them they were seen. And so, ***Grown: The Black Girls' Guide to Glowing Up*** was born.

**Dorcas Magbadelo** is an illustrator, product designer and independent business owner. In her art, Dorcas endeavours to represent the complexity of Black female identity, and her style is characterised by bold colours, pattern and references to her Nigerian heritage. Her commissions range from editorial to stationary to greetings cards. In 2019, she designed the branding for the **Black Girls' Book Club**. ***Grown*** is her first illustrated book.

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Guide to Glowing Up



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Guide to Glowing Up*



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& NATALIE A. CARTER**

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# Contents

## Foreword by Melanie Brown 8

### Introduction

Natalie 10

Melissa 13

1. **Is that you, yeah?** 16  
Identity and the power of self-definition
  2. **I woke up like this** 44  
Skincare and self-love for beautiful brown-skin girls
  3. **Crowning glory** 60  
A love letter to Black hair
  4. **Squad goals** 84  
How friendship and sisterhood can shape your life
  5. **Reclaiming your time**  
**Part 1: Real talk** Dealing with microaggressions 98  
**Part 2: Defining yourself** Understanding stereotypes 118
  6. **Body language** 136  
Your body, your choice
  7. **Yours faithfully** 168  
Your beliefs, morals and thinking big
  8. **Got skills** 182  
Education, work experience and chasing your dream career
  9. **Secure the Bag** 200  
Paving the way to live your best life
  10. **Money moves**  
**Part 1: Finessing your finances** How to budget 212  
**Part 2: Know your worth** Financial literacy 218
  11. **For us, by us** 236
- Notes 250



# Foreword

By **Melanie Brown** (she/her), one fifth of the Spice Girls

**I'm so proud** to be part of this book. Growing up as a mixed-race girl in Leeds in the 1970s, sometimes I really didn't know who I was or where I belonged.

My mum was white, from Yorkshire, and my dad was black, from Nevis – a tiny island in the Caribbean where I'd never been and couldn't even imagine. All my family holidays were spent at a campsite in Wales with my white aunts, uncles and cousins. It was only my dad, me and my little sister, Danielle, who were brown. Life wasn't easy for my mum and dad. If they were ever out in Leeds on a Saturday when I was a baby, my mum would push me into my dad's arms because she thought there wouldn't be any trouble if he was holding a baby. **But, I never heard my dad complain about it.** When I was chased home from school by kids calling me names, he never went to complain to the teachers. Instead, he'd take me to the park and get me running and jumping as fast and high as I could – so that I'd be the one winning all the medals on sports day.



We were the only kids on our road who didn't go to the Christmas party and Easter Egg hunt at the local working men's club. They wouldn't let my dad be a member because he was Black. When I got to be a Spice Girl, I said I was going to buy that club and let everyone in. I think it's probably the reason why **I stand up for anyone who is different** – whether they are gay, straight, trans or a victim of domestic violence.

When I was little, I wanted to be white. I wanted to fit in. But I never fitted in at school anyway. I was loud, I loved to dance, I wanted more. **I became proud of my differences** – my hair, my skin, the spicy food my boyfriend's mum (who was Jamaican) made me.

When I met the Spice Girls, I found my tribe. We were all different in the way we looked, the way we spoke and our personalities, but we all wanted the same thing – to get up there and be heard. On our first ever video shoot for 'Wannabe', the stylist wanted to straighten my hair. I refused. I wasn't going to hide who I was. I wasn't going to try and fit in. I wanted my afro out there as loud and proud as I felt. The girls all backed me up. **'We celebrate our differences,'** we told them, and we did.

Becoming famous helped me own who I was because other brown and Black girls responded to me. They cheered me on, wore their hair in afros in the playground and – like me – wore (fake) leopard skin as a badge of honour. I represented them and they represented me. Nothing makes me prouder than when a brown or Black girl comes up to me today and says, 'When I saw you on stage, I felt so proud because I saw someone like me'. **Girl Power was for all of us.**

I would have loved Natalie and Melissa's book growing up. It's a book I will give to my daughters because it answers questions about who we are, from the little things that define us – like our hair – to the big things that define us – like who we are and our place in the world. It's a book that makes us conscious and a book that makes us proud. **It's been a long time coming.** Knowledge is power, but **to know who you really are is the real power.** I'm so proud to be part of this movement for girls.



# Natalie

**This is a really important book. This is a big deal. This is *Grown*.**

**F**or the first time, you, a beautiful, unique, special, phenomenal, creative and intelligent Black girl, have something that is written just for you.

A book to show you how to own your choices. To live your truth without fear. To lead the bold, colourful life you truly deserve. To be grown **on your own terms** without limits or apologies.

For a lot of my teenage life, I struggled to feel included in British girlhood. I never saw myself in magazines, on TV shows or on the cover of the books everyone loved. It seemed that, as a young Black girl, **nothing was created with me in mind**. At the time, I just shrugged and moved on. But now I see how sad and excluded it made me feel when I couldn't read a book at school that dealt with my experiences or my culture, or pick up a magazine with a free lipstick that would actually suit my complexion.

Being a teenager and trying to understand who you are and what you want is difficult for everyone. But I don't care what anyone says, life is harder for young Black girls. Period. It can feel like everything you do is studied under a microscope. If it's not our teachers treating us differently, it's strangers being harsher on us, or our families wanting us to grow up and act like women (but not too much) before our time. So many people have opinions on what you need to do, what you can study, when you should start working and how domesticated you are. Yet, at the same time, you are being told by everyone around you to enjoy being young because you don't have 'bills to pay' or any 'real' problems. There isn't time for you to just be a **babygirl** – to be vulnerable and just be a teenager.

There are so many expectations placed on you, but the same energy isn't applied when it comes to encouraging you to embrace what makes you amazing and set your own independent path. I know that when I was younger, I felt like I couldn't just be me. It was this pressure to act like someone I wasn't that led to me holding back, not chasing my dreams with my full energy, and it made me want to shrink myself so I could be accepted. But when I reflect on it, there was never a need for me to have held back who I really was. Every Black girl is unique and special. No one has the same natural talents or perspectives, and this is what sets you apart from everyone else. **This is your life and your story**, and you get to make the choices that are best for you. You don't need to apologise for who you are.

That said, I understand that knowing yourself, loving yourself, and making decisions for yourself decisions for yourself doesn't always come naturally. All that pressure can be too much to process on your own. Sometimes you can talk to your mum, aunty, friends or a big sister, but it isn't always easy to communicate how you feel, and sometimes we worry that those around us just won't understand. Or maybe you're embarrassed or think that others might judge you.

That's where **Grown** comes in. We've taken our stories, our memories, our wins and our Ls and put them together with all the advice we wish we had when we were finding our way as young Black girls growing up. We've also asked some other inspirational Black women who we adore to share their stories and life hacks too. But don't worry, we aren't going to tell you what to do and how to live your life – because there are no right answers. In these pages, we're just going to give you our take on the things that impacted us when we were in your shoes. The questions we wanted answers to, the situations we found ourselves in and the feelings we didn't know how to articulate at the time. My wish is that this book can be the safe space you turn to when you need inspiration or comfort. Something to remind you that whatever you're going through, you're not the only one – there are others trying to work things out in the same way you are, just as we were and still are (even at our big big age).



I want this book to be everything I wish I had when I was younger. Things are always going to be harder for you when who you are isn't seen as the norm, but this book will show you that we can create our own norms. Because as long as you know your true worth and your standards, nothing will get in the way of you achieving your dreams. And that's the very essence of **Black Girl Magic** – it's doing amazing things even when you're told it isn't possible and you don't belong.

Sure, you aren't going to get everything right on the first try (or even the second one). As a young Black girl, it can feel like you won't get a second chance, like you can't just do you without having to explain or justify your actions. Life can feel like one big flop sometimes and it hurts. Sometimes you try so hard but you make so many mistakes, and even when you do everything right you still end up back at square one. It's OK to cry and admit that things haven't worked out. **There is no shame in failure.** You tried. Before you think about everything that went wrong, remember that you actually got up and walked towards doing something to better your life. Grasp that, and plan what you are going to do next time. That's what *Grown* is about – learning from our experiences and using that knowledge to drive us forward.

This book is for all Black girls. We wrote this with you in mind – you were our inspiration from the moment we came up with the idea to the moment we typed the last word. This book is for you and you alone. **We see you and we are here for you.** As a Black girl, you are not an afterthought for us – you are the centre of every chapter in this book, just as you deserve to be.

# Melissa

**To whoever is reading this right now,  
this book is dedicated to you.**

**This book is for Black girls everywhere.**

**It's our ode to Black girlhood and a celebration  
of our Black British Caribbean culture.**



**G**rown is so special to me. It's a culmination of everything I have learned along the way as I transitioned from a babygirl to a big woman.

We rarely discuss it, but you already know that as a young Black girl you are vulnerable. In so many ways, society fails to recognise that we even exist – and that starts when we are erased from conversations about girlhood. As Black girls, we have this weird period where we are told that we shouldn't get involved in 'big people's business'. We're often accused of being 'too fast' or 'nuff', and so we don't get to experience our girlhood in a way that is afforded to our male counterparts. We don't get the 'boys will be boys' equivalent tagline. We have all the expectations of adulthood placed upon us without the reward.

We are treated, characterised and judged as adults before we really get to explore and enjoy what it means to be a young Black girl. At times, it feels like we aren't allowed to even make mistakes. We are expected to be 'grown', to be mature, to be respectable, to wash plate and to carry ourselves properly well before we know who we really are let alone how we feel.



**Grown** is our way of reclaiming a word that has been weaponised against Black girls and used to stereotype us as sometimes being too 'too much', whilst simultaneously making us feel like we aren't enough. We're turning that word on its head and giving it positive vibes. **Grown is a mood.** It's a mindset. It's a mantra. **It's a lifestyle.** It embodies everything that makes us who we are.

I can't lie. I desperately needed **Grown** when I was growing up. I was constantly searching for something that would fill in the gaps and cater directly to my experiences as a young Black girl. Like so many of us, I felt like I was taking L after L, and if it wasn't but for the support and guidance of my friends who let me know that I was never alone, things would have been tough. When I finally got sick of waiting for other people to make a space at the table for me, in the famous last words of incredible Black women everywhere, I said, 'F\*\*\* it. I'll do it myself'.

From our very first thoughts to our final words, this book is all about you, sis. In these pages we share our stories alongside important rites of passage, valuable advice and life lessons. We want to ensure you know how to shoot your shot, and in turn how to Secure the Bag. We want to give you the skills to show up and show out while making sure you're looking on point when doing it. We will be discussing self-care, well-being, beauty and skincare tips, and providing practical advice that teaches you how to make money moves that will help secure financial independence and freedom. From **fashion** to **featurism**, we are going to have honest conversations that lay bare what it means to be a young Black girl trying to get to grown. **This is the seasoning to your sauce.** That extra sprinkling of Black Girl Magic in book form.

**Grown** is more than just a generic toolkit or a guide. **Grown** is a complete manifestation of all the experiences of Black women who came before us. Our mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunties. The girlfriends that listened to me rant about boys. The aunties that lent me books where Black women were the focus. Black women on the street that told me my hair looked good or that I was beautiful. Social media influencers who let me know that whatever I was feeling or thinking was ok and totally normal. The ancestors who through sheer determination and bravery made it possible for me to be here today writing the introduction to my very first book. **Grown** is an amplification of all the beauty in our Blackness.

Just know that **Grown** was created for all Black girls. When we say Black girls, we mean everyone who identifies as such. This is '**for us, by us**' because we exist, and by virtue of us existing we deserve to be represented. We don't need to ever wait to feel seen. We don't need anyone else to make us feel recognised.

From girl to grown, *The Black Girls' Guide to Glowing Up* was written with one thing in mind, sis. You.



# Is that you, yeah?

## Identity and the power of self-definition

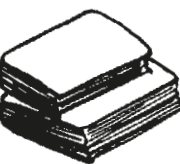
By Melissa

**G**rowing up as a young Black girl on the outskirts of London was hard. Throw in not being able to easily see myself represented in British media, and you have a young, impressionable girl on the verge of adulthood striving to carve out an identity with little resources. There were specific issues and questions that I had, and at times it was difficult to find the right answer. Often it felt that any cultural reference to Blackness or the experiences of girls who looked and behaved like me was an afterthought, or a tick on a diversity checklist. I wanted to be catered to. **I wanted to feel seen.** I wanted to know what it was like to be a teenager. To have boy problems. To go to prom.

**'I am Black, Woman, and Poet ... I can choose only to be or not be, and in various combinations of myself ... all that I am is of who I am, is of what I do.'**

**Audre Lorde <sup>[1]</sup>**

I've always loved reading, so when I wanted to explore the person I was becoming, I turned to books to give me the answers I was looking for. I used to live out my rebel fantasies safely from the comfort of my own room, revelling in whatever the lead character got up to, but knowing that I wouldn't dare do the same in real life.



I was constantly seeking books that would give me that **lightbulb moment**. Something that would allow me to really make sense of the world. Someone I could identify with. Books recommended to me by friends or teachers didn't inspire me as they did them. I just couldn't relate – whether it was the food the characters ate, the things they were doing or the way they spoke to their parents, it was unfamiliar and unknown territory. **It was like being a single gungo pea in a bowl of rice.**

Of course, I could still find joy in reading stories written about people with different experiences, but I also became more conscious of my lived differences. I remember reading *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and falling in love with the character, Elizabeth Bennet. She was smart, gutsy, bold and witty – everything I hoped and dreamt I could be. I saw myself in her and imagined finding my own Mr Darcy, but it always felt bittersweet finishing the book. **Something was missing.** But I hadn't yet learnt the words I needed to vocalise the frustrations I felt.



It wasn't until I turned fourteen and read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston that I finally felt seen. Hurston introduced me to the concepts of feminism before I knew them by name. I was thrilled to read a book written in a dialect reminiscent of the patois spoken in my own home. To witness a Black protagonist explore her womanhood, sexuality and independence was mind-blowing. Hurston showed me the importance of financial freedom, the beauty of love and friendship, the power of setting boundaries and speaking your mind. Although the book was written during

**“How can anybody deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me!” This is exactly right. No one should deny themselves the pleasure of Zora.’**  
**Zadie Smith** <sup>[2]</sup>

the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s, I felt more connected to Janie, the protagonist, than I had to a character in any other book I'd read before. For once I felt centred. **This was representation.**

Hurston didn't feel the need to explain the meaning of the words she used, or the food her characters ate. I distinctly remember characters eating cornmeal dumplings, fried chicken and macaroni. It was in that moment

that I truly understood the meaning of the phrase, **‘What is understood, does not need to be explained’**. Those are soul food delicacies for me – that's ‘yard’ cooking – and they symbolise comfort and love. It's like when your mum or grandmother notices you aren't yourself, so they cook you up some dumplings or take time out to fry some chicken. **It's equal to a big hug.** Without words, those foods just manage to let you know that everything will be OK. To this day, if Natalie and I have had a tough day or we want to celebrate, the first thing we do is ensure we find a bossman so we can get some hot wings.



**‘If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all.’**

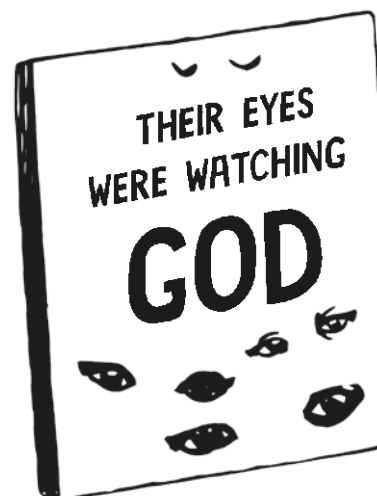
**Zora Neale Hurston** <sup>[3]</sup>

and recognisable. Until then, I didn't understand just how much I needed to see parts of myself represented in literary fiction. To be more than just a plot device (or for those of you who are studying English literature, the ‘magical negro’).

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* quickly became my manifesto. I have read it so many times and at different points in my life, and the older I get, the more things I discover about the text and about myself. When I'm feeling conflicted, I reach for it, finding comfort in reading words written about a Black woman simply existing. **Through finding Hurston, I ended up finding myself.**

**‘Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves.’**

**Zora Neale Hurston** <sup>[4]</sup>





I guess this is one of the reasons I wanted to create a space like Black Girls Book Club that allowed Black women to express themselves unapologetically. Using our love of books as a link of commonality and a way to grow our **sisterhood**. Natalie and I wanted to ensure that there was a platform where Black women were celebrated, centred and catered to. We understood that we needed a space to explore what Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw meant when, in 1989, she defined the term '**intersectionality**'.

Put simply, when you understand what it means to be the person standing in the middle of an intersection of oncoming traffic – knowing that at any moment danger could strike from one direction because of your gender, or the other because of your race – you ultimately understand what it means to be Black and a woman. This is intersectionality.



*'Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another.'*

**Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw** <sup>[5]</sup>

**Black Girls' Book Club sits at that intersection.** But we've reclaimed that space, making it special, sacred and safe – a place where Black women's rich and varied experiences and complex identities are our strengths, not our weaknesses. This space allows us to define ourselves and reject damaging cultural stereotypes such as the 'angry, loud Black girl', 'strong Black woman' or 'sassy girlfriend'. It gives us the opportunity to discuss our unique experiences and unpack what it actually means to be Black, a woman, and all the other elements that together make up our individual identities. If through Hurston I found myself, through Black Girls' Book Club I truly began to understand who I was becoming.

I want you to see this chapter as an opportunity to take stock and think about who you are. A space to allow you to look back at yourself and embrace every element of what makes you *you*. Remember, neither you nor I should be bound to the expectations of others – you are who **YOU** say you are, and not what others purport you to be.

*'My Blackness does not inhibit me from being beautiful and intelligent. In fact, it is the reason I am beautiful and intelligent. And you cannot stop me.'*

**Amandla Stenberg** <sup>[6]</sup>



## What is identity?

Your identity is simply who you are. It's the characteristics that make you unique. From the way that you walk and the way that you talk to the things you like to do. Your identity can be influenced by many factors, from your culture, religion and race, to your hobbies and life goals. I feel like **everything I've done up to this point has shaped me**. Every person I've met. Every book I've read. Every holiday I've been on. Every mistake I've made. All of those interactions have informed the person I am and the person I'm still becoming.

When I think about my identity, I realise that even at my big big age, I still don't have all the answers. I change my mind about things – whether it's about my personal life, my career or my boundaries – as often as I change my hair. That's not to say these things are trivial – I'm just saying that being older doesn't necessarily make you any surer of yourself.

Sometimes, I don't have the right words to articulate the way I'm feeling, or the capacity to deal with the bubbling thoughts and emotions that are coursing through my body. And that **not knowing**

**'I'm a Black woman who is from Central Falls, Rhode Island. I'm dark-skinned. I'm quirky. I'm shy. I'm strong. I'm guarded. I'm weak at times. I'm sensual. I'm not overly sexual. I am so many things in so many ways.'**

**Viola Davis** <sup>171</sup>

**is perfectly OK.** Do not feel obligated to stick to any decisions you make, or to have an immediate, fully formed response to the things that are happening around you. **Finding yourself often means acknowledging that nothing is static – things, thoughts and ideas are forever changing.** Who you are today may not be who you were yesterday, and definitely not the person you will be in ten or twenty years.

## Identity is a work in progress

**Georgina Lawton** (she/her), author, speaker, freelance journalist and founder of the podcast *The Secrets in Us*

The formation of your identity doesn't happen in a vacuum. By that I mean, no one becomes the person they are without a little help from the structures around them. School. Family. College. The Church. The Mosque. Your dance class. The local football club. Who you are is a result of all these influences as well as various personal choices over the years. But, sometimes it may feel like others have a little too much say in who you are becoming. You may feel like you don't fit in, or that being your authentic self results in rejection or condemnation. Identity struggles are isolating and draining, but I *promise* you they are a part of growing up. Personal identity battles are universally experienced, depicted in everything from *Harry Potter* to *The Hunger Games*, from religion to rap, and from philosophy to pop and politics. Humans have concerned themselves with the search for self for thousands of years. For Black girls, our journey is often tougher, taking place against a global landscape that often fails to see our joy and pain, or hear our feelings. You may feel like a perpetual outsider, a person for whom a fully-formed identity feels like a destination that is forever beyond your reach. But know that you have the power. **The boundaries of your personhood can only be drawn by you.** A clear sense of self is a work in progress, a journey you may be on for your entire life. So, read widely. Write down your thoughts and feelings. Seek counsel in those who inspire you. And, little by little, you will learn to trust in your own decisions for yourself, so that one day, the person you see in the mirror is loved, lauded, heard and understood – not just by others – but by you too.



## So, how do you define yourself?

Figuring out who you are or where you are going isn't going to be an easy task. At my big age I still feel like I'm finding things out about myself and learning who I am. I continue to transition and to grow. Constantly learning and unlearning things as I go. Meeting new people and having new experiences have helped me to define myself by my own rules. At this point it doesn't matter what clothes I wear, who I know or even what I look like. There's more to who I am than what I see when I look in the mirror. Now, honey, that doesn't mean that I won't buy the latest Fenty Skin, make-up, shoes, handbag, or whatever Bad Gal RiRi is selling. But I acknowledge that my worth isn't based on how others view me. **I'm enough.** Period.

*'If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.'*

**Audre Lorde** <sup>[1]</sup>

So, I challenge you to create an identity mind map. Set out the things that are important to you, the things that make you tick. Start by writing down three phrases that describe you – these could be anything from your hair type to your religion to your cultural background. Next, add three things that are important to you – they could be your family, friends or a hobby. Now, think about what particular qualities you bring to the table. Are you a reliable friend or a good listener? Do you make people laugh or are you a great dancer? These are your unique strengths – add them to your mind map!

***I don't bring anything to the table – I am the table!***

Writing things down isn't the only way to do this. You could cut out pictures from a magazine or, if you prefer, record this exercise as a voice note to come back to when you need to centre yourself.

A mind map doesn't exactly help you to create your identity, but it allows you to visualise all the different and intersecting parts of who you are. If at any time you start to feel like you're unsure of yourself, I want you to look back at this. Remember, **you are all these things and more.** At times, when I'm not feeling myself, I like to think about the different attributes I have and the things I have achieved. It's a helpful hack I learnt to help instantly calm my nerves whenever I'm feeling anxious, or when I need the courage and motivation to complete a task.





I acknowledge this is all very easy to say, but tough to actually do. Sometimes, you may feel as though your worth is about who you are friends with or the trainers you wear. **I totally get it.** I remember that having a pair of Kickers or a Baby G watch automatically meant you were a bad gyal when I was at school. It seems so insignificant now, but turning up at school after the summer holidays to find your friends are wearing Kickers while you are wearing Clarks really hurts. And your parents just don't get it. It's as if everyone got the memo. Everyone knew exactly what to do to fit in. Except you.

Sometimes, it isn't even about material things. It might be the activities you do or what grades you get at school. This was definitely true for me. I took part in an excessive amount of after-school activities – even at a young age, it was really important for me to show how capable I was. Yes, it looked great on my personal statement and I picked up life skills that I use to this very day. But, looking back, I realise that I was using the things I could do or experiences I'd had in place of letting people see who I was as a person. There was more to me than what I did, who I knew or the clothes I liked to wear. I had to strip away all the extras and think about who I was without the good grades. The Baby G watch. Or my friends. When everything you are is wrapped up in what you can do and what you *like* rather than who you actually are, it can be quite life shattering when you don't meet up to your own expectations.

So, rather than worrying about how great I was doing in school, compared to everyone else, I started to think about whether I praised myself for the hard

work I put in. I started celebrating how many questions I got right, rather than beating myself up for the ones I missed.

**I took time to love myself for who I was rather than what I could do.** But it's hard! To this day I still have to remind myself that I deserve praise not because of what I can contribute, but just for who I am.



See and be seen

Although it's ultimately up to you to define yourself, part of your identity is also about how other people see you – and other people's viewpoints can offer a fresh perspective. Often, we are our own worst critics and we don't realise the positive ways in which we impact people's lives until they tell us.

Ask a friend to write down five phrases that describe you and do the same thing for them. When you're ready, swap your lists. I bet you'll be surprised with some of the things they've written down – they might have highlighted strengths you weren't even aware you had!



- 1. ....
- 2. ....
- 3. ....
- 4. ....
- 5. ....



## Dig a little deeper

I feel that really knowing and embracing who you are is the first step to becoming grown. When I look in the mirror, I see myself as a Black British woman of Caribbean heritage. No matter what I experience or who I meet, that is a fact that will never change. **I'm proud of my culture**, and I love the way it influences and informs the person I am and the decisions I make – whether that's placing a capful of Dettol in my bath, making life-changing decisions based on whether 'my spirit takes to it', or spending a whole year planning my outfit for the single most important date in my calendar. (No, not my birthday – Notting Hill Carnival!) It's there when I hear lovers rock or reggae music being played in the early hours of the morning, and instinctively know that my weekend plans are ruined because my mum wants us to clean the house from top to bottom. It's there when I'm using my mouth to point at things, and when Natalie starts saying, 'Hello, hello, hi!' when someone is doing something wrong and they need to stop IMMEDIATELY.

My particular cultural background means understanding that the act of kissing your teeth can have 100 different meanings. It's deciphering exactly which 'ting' my Dad wants me to get. ('No, it's not dat ting. It's the other ting next to the big ting.') It's eating fried dumplings, baked beans and having a cup of Yorkshire Tea. Or a roast dinner with rice and peas, macaroni pie and some Guinness punch. It's repeating a word or phrase twice for emphasis (describing something as 'good up, good up' definitely holds more weight than simply saying it was 'good'). Understanding where these parts of my character come from only helps to understand the person I am.

Now, you may have read my experiences above and not necessarily seen parts of your own culture captured. It is important to remember that we all access our different cultures in different ways. For many of us who are first, second and third-generation immigrants, the preparation and serving of traditional dishes is a simple way of **celebrating our heritage**. For me, nothing beats a Julie mango, sugar cane or a plate of my mum's curry goat. But for you, it may be about using a familiar language at home, reciting Anansi stories, dressing up in aso ebi for a special occasion, doing a particular dance or taking part in customs such as Nine Night. It could be tied up in the way you practise religion, or you might access it by listening to family members reminisce about their lives back home.

One of my favourite things to do is to listen to my grandma regale me with stories about growing up in Jamaica. These stories help me feel closer to her and allow us to connect with one another despite our generational differences. This not only helps to demystify my culture, it also allows me the space to embrace or reject parts of my upbringing with true knowledge and understanding of where it comes from. She also tells me honestly about the racism she faced when she emigrated to the UK, and the different ways she supported other people in her community to adapt to life here. She talks of the importance of performing libations when someone passes away, and describes the parties she attended and the number of suitors she had. This is a history masterclass, a way of passing stories and knowledge down from grandmother to granddaughter like a griot, and it forms part of our tradition. Having this cultural connection has empowered me to be confident in who I am and where I've come from.

## Generational stories

### Jade Bentil, feminist historian and author

The first time I sat down to interview my grandma about her memories of arriving in Britain from Ghana in the late 1950s, I didn't know quite what to expect. A gifted storyteller, I knew that for the next few hours she would transport me back in time. I expected to relive the journey with her, listening to her recollections of the moment she'd purchased a one-way boat ticket to Liverpool, or the moment she'd finally arrived after twelve days at sea, shocked by just how cold and how dark this place called England was. What I didn't know when I started to record our conversations is just how much they would change my life.

My grandma has lived a life that would be impossible to narrate here in all its splendour. I learnt so much about her: her hopes and her dreams. The way she has loved and has been loved. These conversations lay the groundwork for my forthcoming book, *Rebel Citizen*. Alongside my grandma, I've interviewed nearly thirty women across the country about their memories of arriving in Britain following the Second World War. These women were the original Hot Girls—women who challenged the climate of racism, sexism and classism in Britain to live the full, beautiful lives that they imagined for themselves. I hope that in recording their stories, I can contribute documenting the incredible lives that our foremothers have created and passed down to us.

So, how do you learn about your culture when you are the second or even third generation to be born in this country? Your family might have been here long before Windrush. You may be of mixed heritage, meaning that navigating your cultural background might be more difficult, especially if you're not in regular contact with family members who share your history. You may have a close connection to your relatives, but don't feel comfortable asking them personal questions about their lives.



**No matter the situation, there is always a way to learn more.** You may wish to travel and explore your cultural home. Perhaps written histories and old photographs are your thing – the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, London is a really good place to start. For those of you who want to explore your culture through food, the Latin Village in Seven Sisters, Tottenham is filled with shops and cafés where you can get plátanos maduros, empanadas and arepas. One of my favourite things to do is watch Nollywood films with my BFFs. It's so affirming to see women who look like me on screen, and it also gives me an opportunity to connect with my friends through their own culture. Don't forget your community centre – for many of our parents, coming to the UK meant learning a new set of rules, navigating British bureaucracy and even figuring out the best place to purchase things like plantain and shea butter. Your local

community centre is a really good place to start learning about your culture and identity.

And whilst Notting Hill Carnival is Europe's biggest street festival, Birmingham, Derby, Huddersfield, Leeds and Luton do an incredible job of uplifting and celebrating Caribbean culture through playing mas. Somali Week Festival was founded by Ayan Mahamoud MBE as a response to the lack of provisions for Somali arts and culture in the UK. She created her organisation 'Kayd' – meaning 'preservation' in Somali –



as a way of protecting and promoting Somali arts, culture and heritage.

You can also connect with like-minded people through social media by following Instagram accounts that you can relate to. I really recommend reading books by authors who have a similar background to you – whether that's Nicole Dennis-Benn, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Alexandra Sheppard or Camryn Garrett. Choose whatever option works for you!

## 'Third culture kid'

**Sareeta Domingo** (she/her), editor and author

For a long time growing up, I felt jealous of people whose identity was shaped by where they were from. My parents are from Sierra Leone, and I was born in south-east London. However, my family moved house a lot. We lived in Kent and East Sussex, in areas where there were almost no other Black families. Then, my mum and dad told me and my twin brother that we were moving again for my dad's job – but this time all the way to Bahrain, in the Middle East. My silly, nine-year-old brain definitely pictured us riding to school on a camel, but I was hyped for that!

Growing up in Bahrain until I was sixteen was an amazing experience. We had a wonderful lifestyle, incredible education, and my friends were literally from all over the world. However, there were hardly any other Black kids there either, and when I came back to the UK I still felt a sense of rootlessness when it came to my identity. I'd grown up without friends who had a shared cultural heritage, so it was harder for me to understand who I was. I later heard the phrase 'third culture kid', meaning someone raised in a culture other than their parents' or the culture of their country of nationality, and who also live in a different environment for a big part of their childhood. That's me! I worried that it would be hard for me to find 'my people', or that I'd be judged as strange for not being the 'same' as other young Black British women.

However, there is no *one way* to be Black. Forging connections with people is about so much more than just knowing where you are from. I have a wealth of experiences that have shaped my identity, and, no matter where I go now, I know that I'm a proud Black British woman of Sierra Leonean heritage.



## What being Jamaican means to me and my work

**Sara Collins** (she/her), award-winning author

I left Jamaica when I was four years old, and sometimes it feels as if I've spent every day since then trying to return. I moved to Grand Cayman, and later came to school in England. When you leave your birthplace as a very young child it slips away from you; you can feel as if you are spending your whole life trying to catch it. I think this is why I was drawn to reading. It is also why I write. It's my way of claiming territory for myself, of finally putting down some roots.

What does being Jamaican bring to my work? In a word, everything. I believe that our status as islanders sets us up to be observers of the world: it's in our DNA. We are a diasporic nation, so we are curious, and connected. We travel. We know about transitions, and about yearning. We know about interrogating ideas of home, and belonging. We know about making one people out of many, and something out of nothing, about honouring history while at the same time shaking off its chains. I will probably always write about Jamaica in some way, even if doing so will never quite bring me home.

## Documenting our history

**Karis Beaumont**, photographer and founder and curator of Bumpkin Files, a multimedia platform centred around Black life in Britain

I document the Black British experience because all Black history is important. Throughout the years, our histories have been left out, whitewashed or erased. When we look at Black British culture, we're rarely celebrated, especially from outside of London. As a photographer, I believe it's my duty to ensure that our stories and experiences are included, preserved and told. Black British girlhood is so unique. We all come from different cultures, walks of life and are pretty badass if I'm being honest!

## On being an Efik woman

Lilian Alfred (Effiong) (she/her) law graduate, mentor for a social mobility charity and relationship associate in corporate and investment banking

'Efik? What's that? In Nigeria? Abeg. I just class you all as Igbo. It's easier'. This is a common response to whenever I tell people my ethnic origin. At times I laugh, but there are times when I am completely exasperated. Often the dismissive comments are never ill intentioned, but it's nice when someone just GETS it, or is open to learning about my culture without weird generalisations or stereotypes.

'What's the big deal? Are you not just Nigerian?' people ask. Well, actually the three most populous ethnicities or languages in Nigeria are Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. However, did you know that in Nigeria that there are more than 250 ethnicities and over 500 languages spoken? Maybe not. Efik is one of those languages. Despite Nigeria being the most populous Black country in the world, I am of Efik descent – which is a minority group. Nigeria is a man-made country that has a variety of cultures and ethnicities. Thus, not only am I a minority as a Black British Woman born and raised in London but I am also a minority as a woman of Efik descent from Nigeria.

Nevertheless, if you ever meet an Efik person, you would come to realise that the term 'minority' is not something we would use to describe ourselves. We are very proud people with rich culture and traditions – all of which has made me the person I am today. We have twenty-seven national food dishes and, like many cultures, we are incredibly passionate about music and dance. I have fond memories of rehearsing a dance from primary school to a pop song and my mother telling me, 'Don't dance with just your hands and legs. Soften your back for goodness sake'. I love our traditional attire, such as Oyonyo, as well as what takes place for marriage rites. I love how women are revered in our culture and have a strong sense of self. I believe those values, as well as many others, have set me in good stead to steer my way through life, and are what has helped me my own personal Black British journey as an Efik woman.



## Identity is a work in progress

**Ebinehita Iyere** (she/her), founder of Milk & Honey, a platform that centres Black British girls

I don't know what my experience should or shouldn't have been as a Black British girl because it's never been documented. I was rushed into becoming a Black woman by society.

Black British girlhood is not a linear path, but a navigation of individual and shared, emotional and physical connections and experiences. Whilst our unique aesthetic, culture and style defines our girlhood, it is important to remember that peace within and self-care is just as important as our outward presentations. Claiming a stake in your identity as a Black British girl creates a pathway for you to be free to be creative and credited; fragile without judgment; and to discard the stereotypes that our self-expression is nothing but rage or that you have to be strong whilst being able to bend for the comfort of others.

Many Black women did not get a chance to be Black girls. One could argue that this was a method of survival – a coping mechanism to give a Black girl a fighting chance in a world where we are not seen, let alone heard. That's why, through Milk & Honey, I work to centre our experiences and celebrate our accomplishments. I want to ensure visibility for all Black girls and provide them with safe spaces to discuss their achievements and challenges, and support them to achieve their hopes and dreams.

Never forget that you are the embodiment of all of your experiences, and you are exceptional.

## Finding myself

**Sharmaine Lovegrove** (she/her), publisher at Dialogue Books

I truly believe that being your full self is the best gift you can bring to the world. We all make mistakes, and all have flaws, but learning from the past and not defining yourself by your imperfections is important to create a peaceful, full life where you can fulfil your potential.

I epitomised a care-free Black girl when I was a teenager in South London in the 1990s. I loved grunge music as much as I love curry goat, I wore my hair natural and rocked Dr. Martens boots, Nirvana T-shirts and patchwork skirts. My personal taste was an expression of my youth and liberalism, but was oppositional to the quiet, conservative, Jamaican family I am from. It was important to me to show that I could be a loving, studious grandchild with an interest in Marxism and heavy basslines.

As I walked through Brixton to my home in Battersea, I would be called 'coconut' by random young people on road, but I would retort by quoting the righteousness of Blackness from Dr Martin Luther King, James Baldwin or Malcom X. I stood firm in who I was and walked with pride and was able to rise above the criticism, empowered by the knowledge I was gaining and fun in the experiences I was having.

Self-knowledge is power and it builds resilience and confidence, which are important attributes to have when navigating the modern world. There are many challenges we have to face in the world, but don't let one of those battles be with your true self.



## On race, gender and disability

**Jumoke Abdullahi** (she/her) and **Kym Oliver** (she/them), creators of the Triple Cripples, an activist platform that centres people of colour living with disabilities

We understand what it means to go through life as Black, Disabled women. Simply put, the world was not created, nor structured with us in mind. Society has already decided what we deserve and, unfortunately, the answer is, not much. We get what it feels like to look around and not see yourself reflected anywhere. This can be an incredibly isolating experience. That's why we created the Triple Cripples platform and community – to cater specifically to you. To centre and speak directly to your needs, hopes, fears and desires. So, here is what we would like you to do: Be **BIG**.

Take up space. We will make room for you. Space has already been made for you. So often we are reduced to horrifying statistics, either because of our Blackness or our disabilities and/or chronic illnesses. The often negative social, cultural, financial and medical implications of our lives are discussed in news articles and within the political arena. However, they sorely lack the range to appreciate the nuances that exist at the intersections of race, gender and ability. While there is much that needs to be fixed, unlearned and redesigned about the structure of the world. There is a lot of joy, laughter and love to be found in our lives. We just want you to know that we see you, hear you and love you. We are you.



## Self-image

It's so easy to get into the habit of comparing yourself to others. Especially when it's so easy to go onto social media and within seconds see twenty different people living an enviable lifestyle, getting hundreds of thousands of likes for simply standing there and taking a picture in their room. Whether it's someone with better grades than you, nicer clothes, more friends, someone thinner than you or thicker than you – there's always going to be someone out there that seemingly has the most perfect life and everything you want.

*'When I'm not feeling my best, I ask myself, "What are you gonna do about it?" I use the negativity to fuel the transformation into a better me.'*

**Beyoncé** <sup>[10]</sup>

Attempting to maintain a positive self-image is sometimes a lot easier said than done. It just takes one scroll to change how you feel about yourself. That's the danger of comparison culture – no matter what you do, no matter what lengths you go to or how you try to change there will always be someone who has something you don't.

*'[You] don't have to be like me – you need to be like you, and never ever let somebody stop you or shame you from being yourself.'*

**Lizzo** <sup>[11]</sup>

So, how do you keep a **positive self-image** when there is so much pressure around you to conform? First things first. I would suggest only following and engaging with those that make you feel affirmed and good about yourself.

### Unfollow. Block. Delete

If it makes you feel bad, or forces you to contrast and compare, then babygirl, it's not for you. Surround yourself with images of those who look like you and make you feel on top of the world. The worst thing you can do for your mental health is to continue to expose yourself to things that make you feel less than. Once you start seeing the value in who you are, your confidence and feelings of self-worth will increase.



*'Believe in yourself. Push to your highest limit. Be confident that you can do it. If you take that one push to do it, then God's got the rest. Just leave it up to him.'*

**Marsai Martin** <sup>[12]</sup>

Half the time, confidence is all about faking it until you make it. Yeah, it's pretty cringey to keep telling yourself how great you are, but you have to be your own cheerleader. Confidence comes from

knowing who you are and seeing the power in what you can do. You can be confident in your abilities and still be awkward or anxious.

I want you to try something. Look at yourself in the mirror and say these words:

**'I'm destined for GREAT things. I stay READY. I'm OWNING the person I am becoming. I'm WORKING towards my goals. I will NEVER let you dull my shine. I'm GROWN. PERIOD.'**

Repeat this every day for a whole week. How does it make you feel?

## Understanding self-love

**Kelechi Okafor** (she/her), podcaster, writer and actress

It takes a brave person to experience situations that could make you believe that you are undeserving of love, yet still go outward and inward to embody that love anyway.

The first step to self-care is to remember to breathe. Sounds simple enough, yet it is a transformational practice. Sometimes, life can get overwhelming and we don't even realise that we are holding our breath. Checking in with our breathing allows us to re-centre and to be present in the particular moment.

Role models



Sometimes, thinking about who you are, what you’re going through or what is expected of you can feel overwhelming. In those moments, I think about women who have inspired me. **Black**

**‘I don’t know her.’** **women who empowered me to define who I wanted to be.** Often, I identified with them because they had a similar background to me. Sometimes, they were

**Mariah Carey** <sup>[13]</sup>

women who inspired me purely because they had achieved exactly what I was working towards. Having the privilege of being able to draw inspiration from Black women who came before me has always given me that extra push. They show that not every door is shut. For just a moment, the glass ceiling shatters.



For me, one of those women is Mariah Carey. Now, Ms Carey is not just the patron saint of Black Girls’ Book Club, she is also my big sis (in my head). In fact, Ms Carey calling into BBC Radio and talking about BGBC was probably the most surreal moment of my life! I love everything about her, from her overuse of the word ‘dahhhling’ to her penchant for the highest of heels and the tightest of dresses. I also find Mariah **incredibly inspiring** – and not just because she knows the art of SHADE, honey (she did give us the iconic phrase ‘I don’t know her’) – but because she has dominated the charts since the 1990s, basically invented the remix and was one of the first artists to take the pop/hip-hop genre we have all come to love mainstream. And she did all this by being unapologetically herself. She used her talent to take up space and create a lane for herself in a male-dominated industry, despite the odds being stacked against her. She didn’t come from a wealthy family. She didn’t go to uni. She didn’t take music lessons and, despite her five-octave range, she can’t read sheet music. But she did have talent, faith, self-belief and fearlessness. That, for me, is super inspirational. So, when I feel low, I ask myself, **‘What would Mariah Carey do?’** and it helps inspire me to think outside the box and believe in myself.



So, here’s a task for you. Think of five people who inspire you. They can be friends, family members or famous faces. Write a short sentence explaining what makes them so special and how they make you feel.

- 1. ....
- 2. ....
- 3. ....
- 4. ....
- 5. ....

If you’re stuck, I’ve written a few of my own below. When I’m feeling down and I’m trying to make sense of the world, I search for interviews, articles and videos about my role models to help me out of that rut.



- ★ *Filmmaker Ava DuVernay reminds me that it’s never too late to start.*
- ★ *Rt Hon Diane Abbott MP teaches me the power of community.*
- ★ *Beyoncé showed me that there are endless possibilities when you have a strong work ethic.*
- ★ *STEM entrepreneur Dr Anne-Marie Imafidon MBE is the reason I know that nothing is impossible and that the sky is the limit.*
- ★ *Rapper Lil’ Kim inspired me to trust my voice and be unapologetically myself.*
- ★ *Naomi Campbell has dominated the modelling industry for more than thirty years, demonstrating the importance of self-belief and honing your craft.*



## Take time to reflect

I understand that all this talk on identity might feel like it's all a bit much and something many of you just won't have the capacity to engage with right now. And that's OK. **Life can be complex.** And your identity is always evolving. Remember, you can come back to this chapter at any time. I got you!

For those of you who just want to listen to some music, watch a film or read a book while you figure things out, here are some suggestions that I feel portray the Black girl experience. Perhaps you will have that epiphany moment like I did when I discovered Zora Neale Hurston, or maybe exploring the artists below will inspire you to pick up your own

**'Over 90% of entertainment is produced by white men. I'm a part of a lineage of creators who want to change that narrative. You can tell when a show is made by a sister.'**

**Ava DuVernay** <sup>[12]</sup>

pen and create something. Just remember that you can be all of the things we have discussed, or none of them. You might be great at sport, an academic, a thinker or maybe you're not too sure who you are or what you're good at yet. Don't worry, sis. **No matter what, your uniqueness is your secret weapon.**



### TV AND FILM

Girlhood  
Pose  
The Proud Family  
Girlfriends  
Grown-ish  
On My Block  
Sister, Sister  
Insecure  
Moesha  
Paris Is Burning

Rocks  
Love & Basketball  
Beasts of the Southern Wild  
Jinn  
Little  
Queen of Katwe  
Greenleaf  
I May Destroy You  
Akeelah and the Bee

Disclaimer: Some of the suggestions here may contain adult content. Always check with a parent or guardian before deciding whether to watch, read or listen.

**'She didn't read books so she didn't know that she was the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop.'**

**Zora Neale Hurston** <sup>[13]</sup>



### BOOKS

#### IF YOU LIKE

Pride and Prejudice  
To Kill a Mockingbird  
Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging  
Bridget Jones's Diary  
The Story of Tracy Beaker  
Little Women  
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone  
The Handmaid's Tale  
Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret  
To All the Boys I've Loved Before

#### TRY

Keisha the Sket by Jade LB  
The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas  
Oh My Gods by Alexandra Sheppard  
Queenie by Candice Carter-Williams  
The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo  
Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie  
Children of Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi  
Noughts and Crosses by Malorie Blackman  
Full Disclosure by Camryn Garrett  
The Sun is Also a Star by Nicola Yoon

### MUSIC

Beyoncé - Lemonade  
Kelis - Kaleidoscope  
Solange - A Seat at the Table  
Summer Walker - Over It  
Mariah Carey - The Emancipation of Mimi  
Lauryn Hill - The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill  
Ari Lennox - Shea Butter Baby  
Tiwa Savage - R.E.D.



**'[I'm proud of] the femaleness of the album, of the freaking outspokenness of it, the Blackness of it, the alternativeness of it.'**

**Kelis** <sup>[16]</sup>