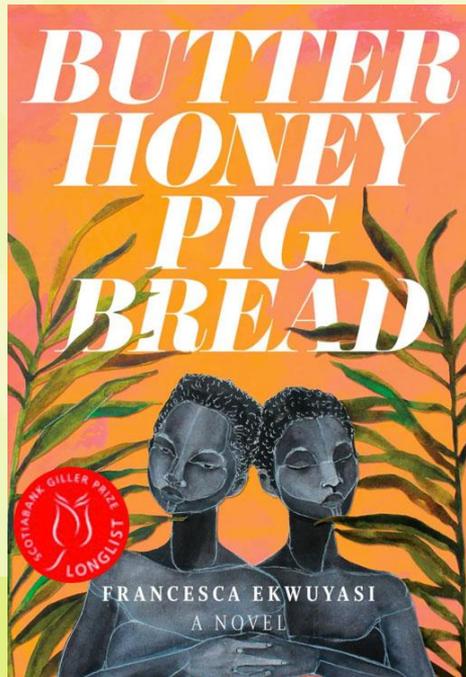


Book backgrounder: **Butter Honey Pig Bread**



Butter Honey Pig Bread is a novel about twin sisters, Kehinde and Taiye, and their mother, Kambirinachi. Kambirinachi believes she was a spirit who was supposed to die as a small child. By staying alive, she is cursing her family — a fear that appears to come true when Kehinde experiences something that tears the family apart, and divides the twins for years. But when the three women connect years later, they must confront their past and find forgiveness.

Note to teachers:

The novel *Butter Honey Pig Bread* contains scenes of sexual violence. Teachers who are considering reading the full novel in class need to take steps to prepare students for sensitive material. The [book excerpt](#) found on *Curio.ca* does not contain any explicit material.

If you intend to read only the book excerpt with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Butter Honey Pig Bread* and watch Francesca Ekwuyasi discuss her book.



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Acknowledgments

About the Book: Adapted from materials prepared by the CBC Books team
Critical Thinking Questions / Inquiry Activities: Written by Jason Himsl
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Book Description

Butter Honey Pig Bread is the debut novel by Halifax writer Francesca Ekwuyasi. It is the story of a Nigerian woman named Kambirinachi and her twin daughters, Taiye and Kehinde. The story is told in a combination of three narrative voices: the omnipresent narrator, the first person narration of the younger twin Kehinde and epistolary narrative (written in letter form) of the older twin Taiye.

Kambirinachi believes that she is an Ogbanje or an Abiku — a non-human spirit that plagues a family with misfortune by allowing themselves to be born and then dying in childhood to cause a human

LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



mother misery — who has chosen to stay alive and love her human family.

Kambirinachi believes that her choice to stay alive in human form has caused the wrath of her Ogbanje/Abiku kin, and triggered a series of misfortunes to befall her loved ones. The story follows Kambirinachi from childhood in Abeokuta, to

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secondary school in Lagos, university in Ife and back to Lagos with her husband Banji. Throughout the story Kambirinachi's perception of reality challenges the reader; either she lives with an undiagnosed mental disorder, or she is the Ogbanje that she believes herself to be.

The three women grow apart as a result of Kehinde's sexual assault by an uncle. This childhood trauma leads her to cut off all meaningful contact from both her sister and mother when she moves away to Montreal for university. There she discovers a passion for art, and she develops an art practice that becomes a career. She also meets her first lover, Wolfie, and Farouq, the man who would

become her future husband. Kehinde carries a lot of rage and resentment towards her mother for failing to protect her as a child, and more complicated feelings towards her sister for similar reasons. A major theme in Kehinde's story arc is that of motherhood. Having been raised by what she considered a less-than-competent mother, she tries to balance her longing for a child of her own with a fear that she won't be a good mother herself.

Taiye, on the other hand, is plagued with guilt for what her sister experienced as a child, and spends her young adulthood attempting to fill the void of that lost relationship through one-dimensional, often careless, casual sexual encounters. She writes

Book background: **Butter Honey Pig Bread**

letters to her sister that she has no intention of sending, and stays in touch with her mother without explicitly sharing her truest identity as a queer woman. Taiye's interest in food and cooking lead her to Montpellier, France and Halifax, Nova Scotia. She eagerly flings herself into learning about and preparing food as a way to process her emotions and to express love and care. A major theme in her story arc is loneliness and longing.

The story moves toward a reunion of mother and the twin daughters when Kehinde (now pregnant) returns to the family home in Lagos with her husband Farouq, joining her sister Taiye, who had returned a year earlier to care for their mother. It is

here that the three women face each other and address the painful events of the past in order to move forward as a family. In the end, they forgive one another, and rediscover the power to be found in their kinship with one another.

Pronunciation of key names / words

Francesca Ekwuyasi (Fran-SES-ka Ek-queue-YAH-si)

Kambirinachi (Kam-bir-in-AH-chee)

Kambi (KAM-bee)

Taiye (TAI-yee)

Kehinde (Ke-HIND-dee)

Ogbanje (o-BAN-jeh)

Igbo (IG-bow)

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Primary Characters

Kambirinachi – Matriarch of the family; known as Kambi for short; wracked by feelings of guilt for defying the spirit of Ogbanje that resulted in the sexual assault of her daughter. Tragedy is a common thread in her life; her husband Banji, the love of her life and the father of her two daughters, is shot dead by a robber.

Kehinde – One of Kambirinachi's twin daughters; as a child she is sexually assaulted by an uncle, which leads her eventually to move away from Nigeria and pursue a life outside of her family. She falls in love with a man named Farouq; she then becomes

pregnant and fears that she will not be a good mother, given her experience with her own mother.

Taiye – Kambirinachi's other twin daughter; she too leaves Nigeria and pursues her life authentically as a queer woman. She is also wracked by guilt over what happened to her sister as a child, and writes letters to her that she never sends.

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Key Themes

 **FAMILY and KINSHIP** – The bonds between mother and daughters that are damaged by trauma, but in the end, never severed. While Kambirinachi and her daughters are estranged from one another, they remain spiritually connected to each other, which they finally revisit.

 **WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS** – The powerful connections between women, familial and otherwise. As a queer woman who has lost her way with her mother and sister, Taiye longs for kinship with other women and sometimes seeks out momentary pleasure as a substitute.

 **DEALING WITH TRAUMA** – The sexual assault suffered by Kehinde has ramifications for her mother and sister too — they both feel guilt for having let it occur, and in Kambirinachi's case, a sense that her daughter is being punished for Kambirinachi's decisions. The pain of the past trauma continues unabated until their long overdue reunion.

 **FOOD/APPETITE** – Food plays an important role in the novel. How food is prepared, described, cooked and consumed are detailed throughout the book. The theme of food — how it evokes feelings, emotions and memory — plays a fundamental role in describing the family dynamics and need for connection and belonging.

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About the Author

Francesca Ekwuyasi is a writer, artist and filmmaker born in Lagos, Nigeria. Her work explores themes of faith, family, queerness, consumption, loneliness and belonging.

Her writing has been published in Winter Tangerine Review, Brittle Paper, Transition Magazine and the Malahat Review, among others. Her story “Orun is Heaven” was longlisted for the 2019 Journey Prize. *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, is her first novel.



Watch Francesca Ekwuyasi discuss her book: www.curio.ca/canadareads



Notable Quotes from Reviews

"It is a rare pleasure when a debut novel appears with such a fully realized, confident voice as Francesca Ekwuyasi's *Butter Honey Pig Bread*."

– Quill and Quire ("Books of the Year")

"Ekwuyasi's magical debut delves into the reverberating effects of a Nigerian mother's choices on her twin daughters' lives. The stories of Kambirinachi and her daughters, Taiye and Kehinde,

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unfold in lyrical, emotionally affecting parallel narratives... Written in sizzling prose, Ekwuyasi's assured, inspired debut will impress fans of Akwaeke Emezi."

– Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"The descriptions throughout the novel, from Taiye's cooking to the feel of Lagos to the urgency of new love, invite readers to fully savor Ekwuyasi's language. Mixing emotional depth with supernatural elements, this is a masterful debut."

– Booklist (starred review)



CBC Links

- Canada Reads Book page: [Butter Honey Pig Bread](#)
- Canada Reads Author page: [Francesca Ekwuyasi](#)
- [How food becomes the 'punctuation between all the talking' in Francesca Ekwuyasi's debut novel](#)
- [Interview with Roger Mooking about Butter Honey Pig Bread](#)



Other Links

- [Francesca Ekwuyasi Is a Book Person](#) (The Tye)

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Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *Butter Honey Pig Bread* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. Food and cooking play a big part in *Butter Honey Pig Bread*. What are the foods that represent you? Your culture?
2. Think about a situation in your life that left you feeling guilty. How did the experience affect you? How did you ultimately move past the feeling?
3. In an interview, Francesca Ekwuyasi said "We have a lot of dichotomies in our head about good and bad or dead and alive. But these aren't just dichotomies; they exist." Read the excerpt of *Butter Honey Pig Bread* at www.curio.ca/canadareads. Where do you see evidence of dichotomies in the text?
4. *Butter Honey Pig Bread* features three different narrators. What are the benefits to a reader of seeing a story from different perspectives? What about drawbacks?
5. How have your opportunities to travel affected you as a person? What experiences have been especially impactful?

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6. Roger Mooking, a chef and TV host, is the Canada Reads champion for *Butter Honey Pig Bread*. Mooking's experiences as a chef give him unique insight into the food and cooking that are frequently described in the book. What are topics that you are familiar with and have some expertise in? How does your experience change when you read about these topics instead of those that are new to you?
7. What are the steps in forgiving someone? Is it more difficult to forgive yourself or someone else?
8. In an interview, Francesca Ekwuyasi said of her novel, "A part of me isn't worried about who

'gets it' — that looks like not italicizing non-English words and not explaining colloquial terms. I'm Nigerian and I write about characters with that experience." How much should authors explain cultural allusions and terms they use to help ensure readers understand their book? What responsibility does a reader have to seek to understand language and references that are unfamiliar to them?



Inquiry Activities

1. Students might investigate the food and cuisine of a culture that appeals to them. They can then find a recipe and prepare a dish they have not

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- previously enjoyed and share the experience with their classmates.
2. Students can research how cultures around the world think about parenting. From this research, students can synthesize and rank a set of criteria that they think best represents their personal views of effective parenting.
 3. Students can watch video clips about the experiences of immigrants around the world. Video clips can be found on websites such as www.cbc.ca and www.curio.ca. They can focus this research on the reasons why people emigrate, organizing their findings into a chart of push and pull factors.
 4. Students might research school- and community-based supports for victims of domestic or sexual violence in their area. The teacher could follow this activity by inviting an outreach worker from one of these organizations to visit the class. (PLEASE NOTE: Teachers should consult with their administrators and guidance department in advance as these topics can prove to be triggering for some students.)



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Butter Honey Pig Bread* and watch Francesca Ekwuyasi discuss her book.