

*Martin County Library System Book Discussion Kit:*

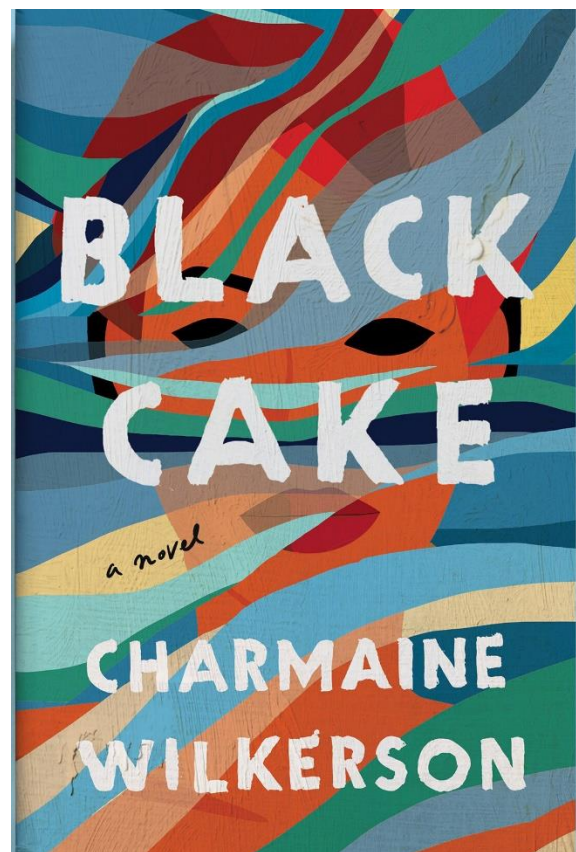
## *Black Cake* by Charmaine Wilkerson

Included in the Kit:

- [Book summary](#)
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- [Discussion questions](#)
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Book Summary:

Byron and Benny haven't seen each other in years. Now these estranged siblings must set aside their differences to deal with their mother's hidden past. When their mother Eleanor dies in California, they are left with a puzzling inheritance: a traditional Caribbean black cake and a voice recording whose contents will change Byron and Benny's lives. Will hearing their story help them to repair their broken family bonds and resolve their own struggles with identity? Or will they end up feeling more lost than ever? Theirs is a journey of discovery that takes them from the Caribbean to the UK and back to California. This is a story of how the inheritance of betrayals, secrets, memories, and even names, can shape relationships and history.



also available to  
download from Libby

Source: Author's website (<https://charmспен.com/>)



# *Black Cake* by Charmaine Wilkerson

## Meet the Author:

Charmaine Wilkerson is a Caribbean-American journalist, writer, and author. Wilkerson is originally from New York. She has moved around a lot in her own life. She spent much of her childhood living in Jamaica and some time as an adult living in Los Angeles. She currently lives in Rome, where she has been living for over two decades. Both of Wilkerson's parents are Caribbean-American. Her mother was born and raised in Jamaica. Her father was a textile artist. Wilkerson is a graduate of Barnard College and Stanford University. Wilkerson spent much of her career as a journalist. She began her reporting in California in a major agricultural area. For a period, she also worked for a United Nations agency with a focus on agriculture, poverty reduction, and hunger reduction. As a writer, Wilkerson has published a number of short stories. *Black Cake*, a New York Times Bestseller, is her debut novel.



Source: Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/>)



# *Black Cake* by Charmaine Wilkerson

## Discussion Questions:

1. In *Black Cake*, Eleanor Bennett leaves behind a voice recording for her children, disclosing the story of her life. What was the most surprising part of her past for you? The saddest? The most interesting?
2. Secrets are a huge part of the novel. Why do you think Eleanor kept her story from her children for so long and only shared it posthumously?
3. What do you think is more complicated: the secrets you keep or the secrets you share?
4. Eleanor wanted Mr. Mitch, Benny, and Byron to listen to the voice message she left behind when all together. Why do you think she specifically made this request? What would have been different if Benny and Byron had listened to everything separately?
5. What was your favorite part of the story? Favorite location and time period? The character who interested you the most?
6. *Black cake* was a Bennett family recipe, made for weddings, anniversaries, Christmas, and other special occasions. Do you have a traditional family recipe? What does it mean to you?
7. Eleanor didn't tell Bert about her firstborn daughter out of fear of what he might think, just as Benny was afraid to disclose details of her sexuality. Do you find this fear to be reasonable given all the love Benny and Eleanor receive from their family? Why or why not? How do you think Bert would have responded if Eleanor had told him the truth?
8. "The thing about identity. There's your family history, there's how you see yourself, then there's what others see in you." Do you find this statement to be true for the characters in the novel? Discuss.
9. Having come from China as a young boy, Johnny "Lin" Lyncook was still seen as a foreigner to many from the Islands, "even after he'd gone to school in the same town, run a business here, taken a wife here, and raised a child here." Why do you think that is? Did Lin not fit in because of his debts or would he always be an outsider, no matter how integrated into the community he became?





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10. When Bert was too stubborn to apologize to Benny, Eleanor stayed by his side out of loyalty. Do you think she made the right decision? Why or why not?
11. After Bert's death, Eleanor has another chance at love. After the sweeping love story that brought Bert and Eleanor back together again, do you find it surprising that she dated someone else after his death? Why or why not?
12. Eleanor's greatest passion growing up was swimming, but, as life got in the way, she was forced to let it go. If she'd never run away, do you think Eleanor would have had a career similar to that of Etta Pringle? Were there regrets for giving up her passion, or do you find that she received greater ones in return?
13. Do you think Covey knew about Bunny's feelings for her? Were you surprised?
14. Forgiveness is a major theme: Eleanor struggles to forgive herself, Marble to forgive her parents, Benny to forgive her family, Byron to forgive Lin. Do you find any of the characters' actions in the book to be unforgivable? Why or why not?

Source: Random House Books

(<https://www.randomhousebooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/black-cake-by-charmaine-wilkerson-book-club-kit.pdf>)



# Black Cake

by Charmaine Wilkerson

## Recipes:

### Eleanor's Black Cake

- $\frac{3}{4}$  lb. flour
- $\frac{1}{4}$  lb. breadcrumbs
- 1 lb. dark brown sugar (plus extra for the blacking)
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. baking soda
- 1 or  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. mixed spice
- 2 tsp. vanilla
- 1 lb. butter, room temperature
- 1 dozen eggs



5–6 cups fruits, soaked at least 4 months (raisins, prunes, soaked fruits, currants, dates soaked in white rum or dark rum and port). Add dates and maraschino cherries only at mixing time.

Mix all dry ingredients. In a separate bowl rub or mix on low: sugar, butter until smooth and fluffy. Add 1 egg, mix  $1\frac{1}{2}$  minutes, add  $\frac{1}{3}$  ounces flour/breadcrumbs mixture. Repeat until all eggs and flour are gone. Mix in the blacking. Make the blacking by cooking brown sugar in a saucepan on low heat until it is caramelized. You will need more than you think! Chop up half the fruits in a blender. Combine and add to the mix. Grease 2 tin pans, cut wax paper to fit containers. Fill to  $\frac{3}{4}$  full with batter. Bake: Place pans in 350°F oven. Add a separate pan filled with water. Bake for 2 hours or less until a knife inserted in the middle comes out dry. Sometimes much less. Depends on oven and weather. “Quantities are approximate. Eleanor never did write them down.”

Source: Random House  
([randomhousebooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/black-cake-by-charmaine-wilkerson-book-club-kit.pdf](https://randomhousebooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/black-cake-by-charmaine-wilkerson-book-club-kit.pdf))

# *Black Cake* by Charmaine Wilkerson

## Jamaican Limeade

- 3 limes
- 1 lemon
- 3 cups hot water (700 ml)
- Sweetener to taste see notes
- 5 cups cold water (1.18 L)

Remove the ends from the lime/lemon then cut off the outer peel, discard the peel and place the fruit in a small bowl. Meanwhile, pour 3 cups of hot water into a blender along with the raw cane sugar (you may want to add more later). Make

sure the lid is secure as you are dealing with HOT water then carefully blitz the lime/sugar/water into a smooth consistency. Grab a large bowl with a fine mesh strain/cheesecloth placed over it and pour the contents from the blender into it. Discard whatever excess is left in the strainer. Pour 5 cups of cold water into the large bowl and stir. If the lemonade is slightly warm, simply allow to completely cool. Do a taste test in case you want to add more sugar, if so simply dissolve the amount you desire into a very small amount of hot water before adjusting the sweetness/taste.



Source: That Girl Cooks Healthy  
(<https://thatgirlcookshealthy.com/jamaican-lemonade/>)

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