



## Resource Guide to "Girl, Woman, Other"

Resource Guide to *Girl, Woman, Other*  
One Book One Campus  
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Dušan Janković, Loïs van Albada, Agnes Andeweg (project leader)

Contact: [Onebookonecampus@uu.nl](mailto:Onebookonecampus@uu.nl)

Onebook/uu.nl

FB onebookonecampus

IG @onebook\_onecampus

Dear reader,

**One Book One Campus** is a communal reading project that will take place at Utrecht University during Diversity Month of the 2022/2023 academic year. Modeled after community reading projects initiated in the US, One Book One Campus was first introduced in the Netherlands at University College Utrecht. This year, the project will expand across the wider community of Utrecht University (UU) in partnership with the UU Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Programme (EDI).

One Book One Campus aims to stimulate conversations among staff and students on equality, diversity & inclusion, both in and beyond the classroom. Furthermore, it aims to foster students' and employees' sense of belonging to the UU community, and to promote reading as being part and parcel of academic life. Everyone at UU is invited to read the same book, talk about it with colleagues, friends, students or teachers, and join one of the events: live reading groups, the creative contest, or the author's visit.

The book chosen for this year's One Book One Campus is Bernardine Evaristo's Booker Prize winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019). From mid-September onwards, you can get your discounted copy of the book (€6,-) in English or Dutch via [onebook/uu.nl](https://onebook/uu.nl), and pick it up at one of the UU Student Desks, the Bestuursgebouw or Parnassos.

We invite you to read *Girl, Woman, Other* in the hope that it will spark conversations and creative responses all around the university, spontaneously or staged, among students, in class, or among colleagues. To support this, from early October we will organize shared reading events, and all UU faculty, staff, and students are welcome to attend. These shared reading groups do not require preparation. One of our volunteers will read a part of the novel together with attendees and facilitate the conversations which emerge. Aspiring writers and artists can take part in the creative contest, submit a creative response to the novel, and win a prize up to €250,-.

It is with great pride that we are also able to welcome you to the flagship event of One Book One Campus – an evening with Evaristo in the Utrecht Library on the Neude! Evaristo will visit Utrecht on October 31<sup>st</sup> to read and discuss her novel with the audience. Reserve your seats via the website! And if you wish to stay in tune with One Book One Campus, you can do so via [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and on our [website](#).

This resource guide offers you an introduction into *Girl, Woman, Other*, consisting of background information on the book and the author, cultural references in the novel, as well as selected quotes and discussion questions (loosely) relating to a range of academic disciplines and to diversity & inclusion in education. We hope these suggestions provide points of entry into the novel and stimulate (classroom) conversations. This guide may help you make connections between the novel and your own field and teaching, but we want to stress that this guide is by no means exhaustive. We are curious to hear about your experiences and welcome your thoughts about One Book One Campus!

## Background Information

### About the Novel

*Girl, Woman, Other* is Bernardine Evaristo's eighth novel. Published in the spring of 2019, the text received critical acclaim soon after its release. Most notably, the novel won the 2019 Booker Prize and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2020.

Set in past and present Britain, *Girl, Woman, Other* tells the lives of twelve predominantly black and predominantly female characters radically different across the lines of class, geography, sexuality, and culture.

### List of the 12 Main Characters

**Amma** — Theater director, her play *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* is performed at the National Theatre, connects the 12 characters.

**Yazz**— Amma's daughter, university student.

**Dominique** — Amma's friend, leaves London to live with her lover in the United States.

**Carole** — Businesswoman, previously a student in Shirley's class.

**Bummi** — Carole's mother, immigrant from Nigeria and a cleaning business entrepreneur.

**LaTisha** —Carole's former friend, grocery store supervisor, previously a student of Shirley's.

**Shirley** — High school teacher, Amma's friend from grammar school.

**Winsome** — Shirley's mother.

**Penelope** — High school teacher, Shirley's colleague.

**Megan/Morgan** — Gender-free social media influencer, great grandchild of Hattie.

**Hattie** — Farmer and Morgan's great grandmother, Grace's daughter, Penelope's birthmother.

**Grace** — Hattie's mother.

### About the Author

Bernardine Anne Mobolaji Evaristo (London 1959) is a British author and academic. She was born the fourth out of eight children to an English mother and Nigerian father. Evaristo studied at the Rose Bruford College of Speech & Drama, and later obtained her doctorate in creative writing at the Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Evaristo first got involved in the arts as a teenager at 'Greenwich Young People's Theatre,' later co-founding the 'Theatre of Black Women' in 1982 upon her graduation from Rose Bruford College. Her novel *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and her novella *Hello Mum* (2010) were adapted into radio plays at the BBC Radio 4 in 2013 and 2015, respectively. She was a guest-editor for the UK *Sunday Times Style* magazine, and her writing appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines including the *Guardian*, *Times*, *Vogue*, and *Observer*. Her eighth work of fiction and the chosen novel for this year's One Book One Campus, *Girl, Woman, Other*, won the prestigious Booker Prize. Evaristo is the first black British author to win the Booker Prize.

Much of Evaristo's work explores blackness, femininity, and the African diaspora in the British context. A longstanding activist for inclusion and diversity in the arts, she initiated many projects aimed at curbing the under-representation of people of color in the arts sector. Some of these include founding the 'Brunel International African Poetry Prize' and a mentoring program for poets of color under the name 'The Complete Works,' as well as curating sets of fiction and non-fiction books entitled 'Black Britain: Writing Back.'

Evaristo taught many writers and university professors' courses with the British Council and worked as a visiting professor at institutions such as Dartmouth College, Barnard College, and Columbia University. She is currently a professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University London.

She lives in London with her husband.

## Cultural References in *Girl, Woman, Other*

There are many references to popular and academic culture in the novel.

### Texts

*Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Audre Lorde

*The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan

*I is a long memoried woman*, Grace Nichols

*The Lonely Londoners*, Samuel Selvon

*Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, translated by Edward FitzGerald

### Authors

Kwame Anthony Appiah, British-Ghanian philosopher

Judith Butler, American Philosopher

Aime Cesaire, Martinican poet and politician

Angela Davis, American political activist and philosopher

Simone de Beauvoir, French philosopher

Franz Fanon, Martinican-French political philosopher

Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian-French philosopher

Audre Lorde, American writer and feminist

Edward Said, Palestinian-American academic

Gayatri Spivak, Indian-American academic

V.Y. Mudimbe, Congolese-French philosopher

Cornell West, American philosopher, and political activist

Roxane Gay, American writer

Gloria Steinem, American journalist, and political activist

### Films

*Pink Flamingos*, part of the "Trash Trilogy" directed by John Waters

*Born in Flames*, feminist fiction film directed by Lizzie Borden

*Daughters of the Dust*, independent film directed by Julie Dash

*Farewell My Concubine*, Chinese historical drama directed by Chen Kaige

*A Place of Rage*, documentary directed by Pratibha Parmar

*Handsworth Songs*, documentary directed by John Akomfrah

## TV

*Dynasty*, American soap opera (1981-1989)

*Dallas*, American soap opera (1978-1991)

*America's Next Top Model*, American reality television (2003-)

*The Millionaire Matchmaker*, American reality television (2008-2015)

*Big Brother*, American reality television (2000-)

## Music

Donna Summer, American singer

Sister Sledge, American musical vocal group

Minnie Riperton, American singer

Chaka Khan, American singer

Amr Diab, Egyptian singer

Fela Kuti, Nigerian musician

Parliament-Funkadelic, American music collective

James Brown, American Singer

Ken Boothe, Jamaican vocalist

John Holt, Jamaican reggae singer

Dusty Springfield, English singer

Petula Clark, British singer

Cilla Black, English singer

Rolling Stones, English rock band

Louis Armstrong, American trumpeter and vocalist

Ella Fitzgerald, American jazz singer

George Gershwin, American pianist

Fats Waller, American jazz pianist

Jelly Roll Morton, American jazz pianist

Also check out a Spotify playlist containing the mentioned music:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7dZcoLmYHBejWuDmCz5B89?si=60899ef037c543>

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## Quotes and Questions – Disciplinary Perspectives

This section of the Resource Guide presents a small selection of quotes from *Girl, Woman, Other* which may be associated – however loosely – to academic fields and questions, highlighting the novel’s versatility and potential connections between fiction and academic questions.

### *Sustainability (p. 160)*

and they fled the orange gas flares of the refineries burning twenty-four hours a day into the humid skyline for hundreds of miles

they fled the toxic fumes that made breathing the very air difficult because to inhale deeply was to die slowly

they fled the acid rain that made the water undrinkable

they fled the oil spills poisoning the crops, the diseased fisheries in the soupy creeks, the fishing baskets lifted out of the water congealed with gummy black oil

crayfish, crab, lobster – don die

swordfish, cat-fish, croakers – don die

barracuda, bongashad, pampano – don die

### *Questions:*

- What risks does the fossil fuel industry pose to people’s health from an environmental perspective, besides the indirect and long-term threat of climate change? Are some communities or groups of people at greater risk?
- Is it possible to escape environmental degradation and contamination, or are the consequences of pollution simply too systemic to prevent major negative impacts on our wellbeing?

### *Biology (p. 190)*

she’s made sure the displays of fruit are neatly arranged, all of them perfectly shaped and unblemished as per customers’ wishes, who don’t realize that most fruit in its original, unadulterated state looks anything but standardized in shape, texture, size and colour

as she learned at the supermarket training academy

or that carrots were purple, yellow or white until seventeenth-century Dutch farmers cultivated the mutant orange ones of today

*Questions:*

- How much does non-human altered biology differ from the items most people have contact with on an everyday basis - such as vegetables in supermarkets, animals in zoos, etc.?
- How are human attitudes towards nature – biodiversity protection, for one – impacted by modern society's (mostly) infrequent contacts with non-human life?

*Veterinary Science (p. 267)*

they'll go out before daylight to capture flying fish, drop lines to pick up dorado and billfish along the way, once they're far out, they'll throw cane trash and palm fronds on to the sea to act as a screen, drop baskets underneath them that release bait slowly, once the flying fish have gathered for this meal, they'll be scooped into nets, although hauling in nets is harder when you're older, Clovis says, when he returns with an aching back that she massages for him

*Questions:*

- Is there ethical fishing/hunting?
- How much suffering would the portrayed methods cause to the fish in question?

*Mathematics (p. 121)*

let us wonder, Carole, at the genius of hyperbolic geometry, where the sum of the angles adds up to less than 180 degrees

let us wonder at how the ancient Egyptians worked out how to measure an irregularly-shaped field

let us wonder at how X was just a rare letter until algebra came along and made it something special that can be unravelled to reveal its inner value

you see, maths is a process of discovery, Carole, it is like the exploration of space, the planets were always there, it just took us a long time to find them

*Questions:*

- How much does the general perception of mathematics differ from the work done on an academic level by mathematicians?
- What attracts you to mathematics? Do you believe it is a process of discovery, like the quotes defend?

### *Urban Geography (p. 416)*

although, and this is a little-known fact, Le Skyscraper was actually indebted to various high-rise precedents such as the eleventh-century high-rises of Egypt, the Renaissance tower houses of Florence and Bologna, the five-hundred-year-old mud-brick constructions of Shibam in Yemen

you see, Yazz, the concept wasn't new at all, it was the ancient municipal solution applied to the mid-century population expansion that resulted in dense urbanization

#### *Questions:*

- Do you know of any other historical precedents in modern urban society that are generally not known?
- Is high-density urbanization a good solution to population growth and the subsequently increased economic needs?

### *Psychology (p. 292)*

what happened to you as a child, Penny? he'd ask, it's clear you have abandonment issues, let's unearth your subconscious memory, shall we?

I'd rather my subconscious memory remain just that, she replied  
then let's uncover your repressed sexual desires to see what's holding you back from being a better person?

#### *Questions:*

- Based on the quote, do you believe the popular perception of psychology is one which is fundamentally tied to Freudian concepts and psychoanalysis?
- How can we know what aspects of psychology as discipline and psychotherapy as a practice can be considered trustworthy and/or effective?

### *Economics (p. 115)*

at least her addiction to the electronic motherboard is productive, she tries to convince herself, clicking on the never-ending monetary websites of cyberspace that pop up, NASDAQ, Wall Street Journal, London Stock Exchange

while also monitoring the international news that affects market conditions, the weather conditions that affect crops, the terrorism that destabilizes countries, the elections that affect trading agreements, the natural disasters that can wipe out whole industries, agricultures and communities

*Questions:*

- How do everyday perceptions of investment, profit and other economic concepts affect consumer behavior? How do they differ from formal/academic conceptions?
- Do you think everyday and media discourses accurately portray economic issues? Do you think economic issues receive appropriate levels of interest and scrutiny?

*Law (p. 277)*

she'd been born in the newly created Union of South Africa after her English parents sold up their failing barley farm at Hutton Conyers in Yorkshire to take advantage of the Natives Land Act of 1913 which allocated over 80% of land ownership to the only people capable of looking after it, her mother told her the white race us

*Questions:*

- Are laws mostly technical and ideology-neutral solutions to societal issues, or are they influenced by political and cultural beliefs? Has this changed throughout history - if so, how?
- How can the law be prevented from being used to legitimize inhumane or unjust treatment of people, even if it translates the will of those in power?

*Educational Science, Political Science -Policy (p. 235)*

it was bad and got worse when the Thatcher government began to implement its Master Plan for Education teachers went into meltdown with pay battles and three-day strikes and when the public lost patience with them the Third Reich took advantage and steam-rolled in the dreaded National Curriculum which imposed a syllabus that curbed her own pedagogical freedoms that produced excellent results

*Questions:*

- What effects did the 1980s' turn towards neoliberal policies have on public service provision in the UK? Were there similar effects in other countries?
- How does education policy promote democratic or undemocratic societies?

- What do you see as the pros and cons of having a prescribed national curriculum?

*Political Science – Political Theory (p. 12)*

Dad lives for campaigning meetings, demos, picketing Parliament and standing in Lewisham Market selling the *Socialist Worker*

I grew up listening to his sermons during our evening meal on the evils of capitalism and colonialism and the merits of socialism

it was his pulpit and we were his captive congregation

it was like we were literally being force-fed his politics

he'd probably be an important person in Ghana if he'd returned after Independence

instead he's President for Life of our family

*Questions:*

- What is the relationship between anti-colonial political sentiments, namely independence movements, and Marxist/socialist political ideology?
- The use of "captive" and "force-fed" imply a coercive nature to the relationship between the father and the rest of the family. How can patriarchal behavior intersect/co-exist with a socialist, anti-colonial worldview?

### *History – Ancient Period; Urban Geography (p. 80)*

she became Nzinga's personal guide around the city, keen to show off how well she knew its history and hotspots, hopping on and off buses, taking shortcuts through the labyrinthine tunnels of the underground, slipping down ancient alleyways in the city's oldest parts, showing her the remnants of the Roman wall from nearly two thousand years ago, taking her on to the pebbly Thames beaches when the tide was out, where mud-larkers trawled for buried archaeological relics, through the numerous parks, greens, public gardens and wilder commons, on canal walks that lasted hours from Little Venice to the marshes of Walthamstow, on river cruises to Greenwich and Kew

#### *Questions:*

- Describe the urban development of Roman London (Londinium).
- What continued effects do Roman/Greek/other pre-medieval civilizations' city planning/organization have in our present-day urban life?

### *History – Late Modern History, Colonial History (p. 363)*

his father had to give half his sugar cane yield to the landowner, was in never-ending debt to the merchant who sold them seeds, clothes and tools, and ran the risk of eviction if the crop failed

Slim said many of his people left the land after slavery because it reminded them of it

the government had promised them all forty acres and a mule  
it was the bitterest pill when it didn't deliver, folks had to stay wage slaves

#### *Questions:*

- Describe the economic relationships former slaves prominently entered or were forced into with former owners, after the legal abolition of slavery in the US. Feel free to discuss similar patterns in other countries, namely European colonial empires.
- What did "forty acres and a mule" mean, and what are your thoughts on the political and practical consequences of this promise? Were there similar policies for post-slavery economic settlements in European powers' colonial empires?

### *Religious Studies (p. 172)*

had they not paid a tithe of 10% of their monthly conjoined income into his begging bowl for many years? money they could ill afford

Augustine had believed the pastor's sermons, that to commit financially to his church was to commit to God, and to commit to God would lead to prosperity untold and a reserved front row seat in heaven

#### *Questions:*

- Using the notion of "religious giving," how would you best describe Augustine's financial relationship to his church?
- What religions other than Christianity practice tithing, for what purposes, and in what way?

### *Music Theory (p. 29)*

Lakshmi has also developed an improbable guru persona for the gullible students she tutors at music college who gather around the hearth of her council flat sipping cheap cider from tea cups

while she sits cross-legged on the sofa in flowing robes, long hair streaked with silver

denouncing chord progressions in favour of micro-tonal improvisation and poly-tempic, poly-rhythmic and multi-phonic structures and effects

while declaring that composition is dead, girls and boys  
I'm all about the contemporary extemporary

#### *Questions:*

- What rules of western musical tradition is Lakshmi denouncing by advocating for a poly-tempic, poly-rhythmic and multi-phonic musical structure?
- What effect would abandoning musical composition have on musical production? What purpose would this serve?

*Museum Studies (p. 194)*

her parents used to take her and Jayla to all the free museums in London  
Mummy said children who did well in life had parents who took them to  
museums, and you don't need to be rich to do that

...

if LaTisha wanted to spend forever looking at the scary dinosaurs before  
anything else, it was allowed

she did just that for years, wishing she could climb inside their skeletons  
until she got bored of their prehistoric weirdness and Mummy said, I'm  
glad that phase is over

*Questions:*

- How does the passage address class distinctions and cultural consumption in relation to the museum as a knowledge site?
- Elaborate on LaTisha's desire to "climb inside [the] skeletons" and the 'mummifying' practices of modern-day museums.



## Quotes and Questions – Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Education

This section of this Resource Guide uses a small selection of quotes from *Girl, Woman, Other* to prompt questions regarding positionality, race, class, and gender in educational settings.

### *Black Teacher (p. 222)*

Shirley

was praised by the headmaster, Mr Waverly, as a natural teacher, with an easy rapport with the children, who goes above and beyond the call of duty, achieves excellent exam results with her exemplary teaching skills and who is a credit to her people

in her first annual job assessment

Shirley felt the pressure was now on to be a great teacher *and* an ambassador

for every black person in the world.

### *Questions:*

- How does the notion of “teacher authority” manifest in Shirley’s case as a black female teacher?
- Shirley is said to be “a credit to her people” in addition to achieving excellent exam results. What additional expectations does Shirley have to meet at her place of work, and how could this affect her teaching?

### *Black Student (p. 230)*

he was a good student at secondary school but soon understood he was seen as a bad person outside it

an enemy of the nation on account of his skin colour

to be stopped and frisked by the cops, which began when he was twelve and looked fifteen, terrified when these grown men manhandled him in the street in front of everyone, tried hard not to cry, sometimes did

### *Questions:*

- How do societal structures outside the classroom inform the educational experience of this black student?
- What classroom mechanisms can be employed to acknowledge this and similar experiences at educational institutions?

*Discipline and Punishment (p. 226)*

Penelope addresses the issue of the school's poor exam performance, declaring that half the kids are so thick and badly behaved they should be suspended or even expelled from school

everyone knows which half she means

Penelope is known to give the misbehaving Pete Bennetts of this world detention, whereas the Winston Blackstocks are suspended

...

*our* kids, she emphasizes (the possibility of shared ownership), have been told they're failures, thick, as you put it, before they've proven otherwise

exams are all well and good but not everyone performs well under pressure or manifests their intelligence at a young age, it can be acquired later, you know, nurtured by us, we have to be more than teachers, we have to look after them, believe in them

if we don't help them, who will

Penelope?

...

Penelope doesn't disappoint, I, for one, am not a social worker, she replies in a tone that affects great weariness at Shirley's obvious naïveté and dim-wittedness, and I really think you need more than two terms on the job before you challenge someone with fifteen years' experience to a duel

*Questions:*

- How does the notion of "discipline" inform Penelope's educational philosophy? And how does this shape her response to the disagreement expressed by Shirley?
- What kind of punishment does Penelope deploy against Shirley and propose against students' disobedience? Can we understand it as structural?
- Contextualize Shirley and Penelope's racial identity in the meta-conversation on discipline and punishment in the educational system portrayed in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Shirley is black and Penelope was raised white by her adoptive parents.

*Women Teachers (p. 299)*

why didn't Saint Shirley attack one of the male chauvinist pigs who pontificated ad infinitum instead of a strong woman who'd brought petitions into work for both the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act, both of which were eventually passed into law  
improving the situation for all working women  
she should be admired and respected by her female colleagues

*Questions:*

- What streams of (advocated) institutional and educational reform can we observe in Shirley and Penelope's conflict?
- What complexities do the racial and gender identities of these teachers add to the conflict?



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