

PICADOR

Discussion Guide

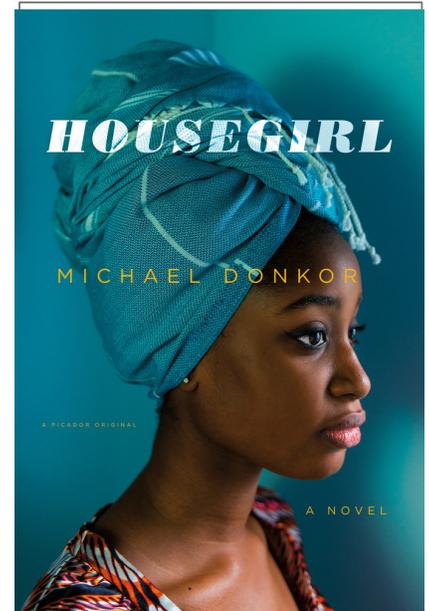
Housegirl

by Michael Donkor

A moving and unexpectedly funny exploration of friendship and family, shame and forgiveness, Michael Donkor's debut novel follows three adolescent girls grappling with a shared experience: the joys and sorrows of growing up.

ABOUT THE BOOK

- Nominated for the Edinburgh First Book Award
- One of *The Observer's* "New Faces of Fiction"
- One of *The Millions'* "Most Anticipated Books of the Year"
- One of *The Guardian's* "Best Summer Books" (Selected by Kayo Chingonyi and Joe Dunthorne)
- One of *Library Journal's* "Books to Anticipate"



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Belinda knows how to follow the rules. As a housegirl, she has learned the right way to polish water glasses, to wash and fold a hundred handkerchiefs, and to keep a tight lid on memories of the village she left behind when she came to Kumasi.

Mary is still learning the rules. Eleven-years-old and irrepressible, the young housegirl-in-training is the little sister Belinda never had.

Amma has had enough of the rules. A straight-A student at her exclusive London school, she has always been the pride of her Ghanaian parents—until now. Watching their once-confident teenager grow sullen and wayward, they decide that sensible Belinda is the shining example Amma needs.

So Belinda must leave Mary behind as she is summoned from Ghana to London, where she tries to impose order on her unsettling new world. As summer turns to autumn, Belinda and Amma are surprised to discover common ground. But when the cracks in their defenses open up, the secrets they have both been holding tightly threaten to seep out.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) The preservation and garnering of material wealth is highly valued by the communities in the novel. Scenes from Auntie and Uncle's mansion, Nana and the Doctor's home, the party at the Yeboah's, and Mary's funeral are laced with visceral images of decoration, food, and showy displays. How would you characterize Belinda's relationship with such things?
- 2) The novel is written in a third-person limited perspective. Each chapter focuses on either Belinda or Amma. How might your understanding of the characters shift if Donkor had written in first-person? What kinds of information might be revealed or, alternately, obscured?
- 3) Characters in the novel explore different capacities for imagination. For example, Amma creates art, Belinda weaves herself stories and studies literature, and Belinda teaches Mary to inhabit a make-believe character. What function does power of imagination serve, particularly in helping these women face their hardships and traumas? How do their imaginations pair with rationality as a problem-solving skill?
- 4) Amma's queerness, her artistic ability, and her intellect all set her apart from those around her. She must constantly decide whether to conform to expectations or defy them, although each relationship offers her unique safe spaces. What does she value in her relationships with Belinda, Nana, Roisin, Helena and her other friends and family?
- 5) Consider instances of art in the novel. Amma reminisces on Alexander Calder sculptures, Belinda takes a literature course, Belinda sends Amma a Jack Gilbert poem, Amma draws, and at the end of the novel, even Belinda begins to draw. How do the women grow and develop from their encounters with art?
- 6) As a child, Belinda had to learn how to care for her mother and was subsequently sent away to work as a domestic servant in both Ghana and London. Housework is a coping mechanism she slowly grows independent from. What catalyzes this change? What other forms of caretaking, nurturing and intimacy occur in the novel, and when do they fail to suffice?
- 7) Belinda's phone calls with Mary are the main connective tissue between Britain and Ghana after Belinda moves. What makes her so hesitant to share her new life with Mary? What makes London different from home? What things stay the same?
- 8) At one point, Belinda thinks about "This bad behavior, badness, sickness, strangeness in the blood, handed down from mother to daughter" (168). Think about the characters' individual histories and the roles those histories play in their daily lives. Are they shaped by their circumstances, or do they fight circumstances?
- 9) The scene of Mary's vivid funeral—and the events leading up to it—accounts for the majority of the end of the novel. How does Donkor's writing style in these chapters relay the stream of emotion Belinda encounters during it all? Does she embrace or reject the traditions?
- 10) Belinda's relationship to her mother undergoes a shift over the course of the novel. What is it that makes her decide to go back to her hometown of Aderabaa at the end? What does she have to gain or lose from seeing her mother again?

Guide written by Naomi Falk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Donkor was born in London, to Ghanaian parents, and teaches English Literature in West London.



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