

Women's Prize for Fiction 2023



2023 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

FIRE RUSH JACQUELINE CROOKS



PLOT SUMMARY

Yamaye lives for the weekend, when she can go raving with her friends at The Crypt, an underground club in the industrial town on the outskirts of London where she was born and raised. A young woman unsure of her future, the sound is her guide – a chance to discover who she really is in the rhythms of those smoke-filled nights. In the dance-hall darkness, dub is the music of her soul, her friendships, her ancestry.

But everything changes when she meets Moose, who she falls deeply in love with, and who offers her the chance of freedom and escape. When their relationship is brutally cut short, Yamaye goes on a dramatic journey of transformation that takes her first to Bristol – where she is caught up in a criminal gang and the police riots sweeping the country – and then to Jamaica, where past and present collide with explosive consequences.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Fire Rush asks what it was to be a Black woman in 70s and 80s Britain. Yamaye is the child of immigrant parents, growing up on a deprived South London estate, not yet sure what she wants to do with her life. Her friend Asase is focused on starting her own business, unafraid to be enterprising and take advantage of situations that might benefit her. Both of them feel that Britain, and even multicultural London, is unwelcoming to them, and that there are only specific places such as The Crypt and Dub Steppaz where they feel safe being Black. However, even in those places they are not completely safe as young women: Crooks describes how Yamaye, Asase and Rumer would often stand behind the counter with the record shop owner,

Eustace, to avoid getting too much negative attention from the male customers.

In Bristol, with Monassa and his friends, Yamaye realises that the “safe house” is very far from safe, and that she is in danger as a young woman in a place where women are regularly coerced and abused.

Crooks makes the political context of the late 70s and early 80s sus law (repealed in 1981 after the Brixton riots) and police brutality clear: being Black in this environment is not safe, particularly when the structures designed to protect are racist and corrupt. Moose's death in custody all too chillingly recalls George Floyd's death, and Yamaye's experiences with the police, such as when the policeman questions her after Eustace is stabbed, are shocking. Being Black and being a woman are both plagued with difficulty and repression in 70s and 80s Britain. In fact, it is only when Yamaye goes to Jamaica – leaving Britain altogether – that she finds magic and empowerment in the Obeah tradition and in the ancestry of the land.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jacqueline Crooks grew up in 70s and 80s Southall. Immersed in the gang underworld as a young woman, she later discovered the power of writing and music to help her look outwards and engage differently with the world – a power that has driven her ever since, from her work with charities to her short stories, which have been nominated for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, the Wasafiri New Writing Prize and the BBC National Short Story Award.



‘A brilliant celebration of Black womanhood. It’s a story about dub reggae, friendships, love and loss, which spans London, Bristol and Jamaica.’

Irenosen Okojie, 2023 Judge

DISCUSSION POINTS

Despite the fact that Britain elected its first female prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, in 1979, it could be easily argued that the cultural climate for women – and especially women of colour – did not noticeably improve as a result of having a woman in charge of the country.

On p50, we see Yamaye, Asase and Rumer watching Margaret Thatcher taking up her role: while Asase is enthusiastic that Thatcher is, at least, a “bad blue bitch” that will shake up the male status quo, Rumer warns that Thatcher represents “The National Front in pussy-bow blouses”.

Instead, for Yamaye, it is the wisdom of mothers and grandmothers such as Asase’s mother Oraca and Moose’s grandmother Granny Itiba – and the connection to

her own Muma, who inspires her live performances – that provide strength and empowerment.

How do women help and hinder each other in *Fire Rush*, and to what extent are they powerful enough to do so? What does power look like for women – political power, spiritual power, physical power, sexual power? How is it used – effectively, ineffectively, abused? How powerful are Yamaye, Charmaine, Asase, Granny Itiba and Oraca? What restrictions to their power exist?

QUESTIONS

“Man preach revolution but woman carry its sound.” What is the role of music in the book? How does Yamaye find liberation in music?

How does Crooks use deathly or spectral symbolism in *Fire Rush* to represent Norwood? How does that symbolism compare with Crooks’ depiction of Jamaica?

How does Crooks use dialect to build character in the book? What else does the use of dialect add to the reading experience?

How do you feel about Moose – how is the way Crooks describes him different to other men in the book?

NEXT STEPS

Write about a time that music has transported you somewhere else or been profound in some way. It might be a song

that you associate with a fond memory or a person close to you, or even a type of music that is important to you, like dub reggae is to Yamaye. What does that music mean to you? Has it been there at important times in your life? Write about one of those times, if so.

Alternatively, write a poem or a few lines of rap inspired by Yamaye’s freestyling. You might want to choose a political issue you are passionate about as a focus. See how you can use rhyme – challenge yourself to rhyme, but in an original and fresh way! When you’re writing, keep reading your work aloud to see how it actually sounds, off the page.



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

Called “a love song to black womanhood in modern Great Britain” ***Girl, Woman, Other*** by Bernardine Evaristo follows a cast of twelve characters on their personal journeys in the UK over the last hundred years. In ***Black Cake*** by Charmaine Wilkerson, two estranged children reunite when their mother dies, reconnecting with their Caribbean identity in the process.

BLACK BUTTERFLIES PRISCILLA MORRIS

BARBARA KINGSOLVER DEMON COPPERHEAD

JACQUELINE CROOKS FIRE RUSH

POA LALINE PAULL

MAGGIE O'FARRELL THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT

TRESPASSES Louise Kennedy

WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?