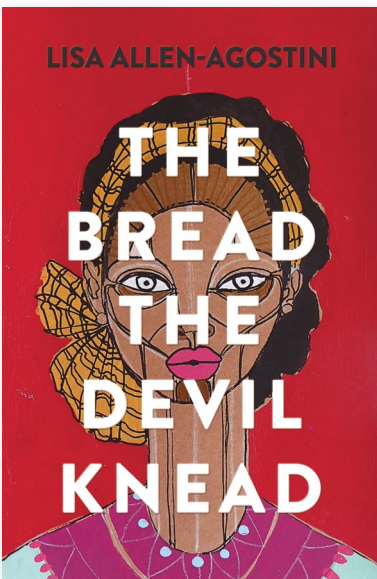


# Women's Prize for Fiction 2022



## 2022 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

### THE BREAD THE DEVIL KNEAD BY LISA ALLEN-AGOSTINI



#### PLOT SUMMARY

Alethea Lopez is about to turn 40. Fashionable, feisty and fiercely independent, she manages a boutique in Port of Spain, Trinidad – but behind closed doors she's covering up bruises from her abusive partner Leo and seeking solace in the arms of her boss, Bobby Sharma.

When Alethea witnesses a woman murdered by a jealous lover outside her shop, the reality of her own possible future dawns on her. At the same time, she starts to remember details of childhood abuse inflicted on her by those meant to protect her. Alethea realises that, despite the fact that Leo is sometimes good to her, it will only be a matter of time before he tries to kill her, so in a desperate moment, she sets herself free – but can she ever be free from her past?

Bringing us her truth in an arresting, unsparing voice, Alethea unravels memories repressed since childhood and begins to understand the person she has become. Her next step is to decide the woman she wants to be.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Lisa Allen-Agostini creates an immersive experience for the reader in her novel, in which we are transported to Port of Spain in Trinidad with a wealth of setting detail, narrated by Alethea in her authentic voice.

Allen-Agostini's use of Creole dialect is perfectly weighted, meaning the non-Trinidadian reader can follow her prose easily, while hearing Alethea and the rest of the character's voices in their minds as they read. This gives a sense of intimacy with the characters, making us feel as though we know them. Allen-Agostini reminds us that sometimes it's good to read something

in an unfamiliar voice or narrative style, when keen reader Alethea describes the experience of reading *Drown* by the author Junot Diaz:

*'Junot Diaz had a funny way of writing, I find. Some parts was in English and some parts was in Spanish... Half of Drown I didn't understand too good. But I read it, and something about it I like.'*

As well as character voices, *The Bread the Devil Knead* is replete with sensual detail that sets the scene and builds atmosphere for the reader. Allen-Agostini describes the poor neighbourhoods in Port of Spain, with children at the side of the road contrasting with Bobby and Sita's silver and gold BMWs. Alethea and Leo's house is mouldy and uncared for, reflecting the negative dynamics of their relationship, and the maxi-bus Alethea takes to work every day is crowded and uncomfortable. In contrast, Alethea's two places of sanctuary – the clothes shop she works in and the retreat centre at the end of the book – are clean and orderly.

Allen-Agostini's world-building and control of atmosphere throughout the book is excellent, as it only ever accompanies the drama of the story and never detracts from it, ensuring that the reader follows Alethea's story closely and relates to her deeply.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lisa Allen-Agostini is a writer, editor and stand-up comedian from Trinidad and Tobago. She is a contributor to *New Daughters of Africa* edited by Margaret Busby, and has widely published short fiction and poetry. She has written four Young Adult novels, including *Home Home*, winner of a CODE Burt Award for Caribbean Young Adult Literature. She has been a journalist and critic for over 20 years, and writes and performs stand-up comedy with her company FemCom TT. *The Bread the Devil Knead* is her first adult novel.



*The Bread the Devil Knead* is the most immersive book. It's full of warmth and humanity, humour and sadness.'

Mary Ann Sieghart, 2022 Judge

## DISCUSSION POINTS

As Alethea points out in *The Bread the Devil Knead*, society always asks the victim of domestic abuse why they don't leave, rather than asking the perpetrator why they don't stop. Alethea struggles with the question of why she stays with Leo as the book progresses, while Allen-Agostini shows us exactly how difficult it is to leave an abusive partner: how many attempts it takes, how much support an abused person needs to exit the situation and – in the case of the woman who Alethea sees shot by her partner outside the shop – how many times people simply do not escape.

Alethea's friend Jerry, a survivor of domestic abuse himself, tells her that she is lucky because she has no children to

think of and has her own job, so it should be easier for her to leave Leo. Yet, Alethea struggles to see an alternative to Leo's beatings and rape. Her abuse at the hands of her uncle left her unable to have children as an adult, and Leo is the only partner Alethea has ever had who occasionally treats her nicely, apart from Bobby Sharma, who can't be her partner because he is married.

Discuss how Lisa Allen-Agostini unravels the many layers of abuse in Alethea's life. How does reading *The Bread the Devil Knead* give us an insight into the ways abuse is perpetuated, and how common domestic abuse is? Is it remarkable that Alethea manages to change her life at all?

## QUESTIONS

How does Indra compare to Mammie as a mother? What does the scene with the snake show us about Indra?

Has Alethea's ability to 'pass' as white helped her in life?

How does Colin's experience with the Church differ to Mammie's?

Is Bobby a healthy relationship for Alethea?

## NEXT STEPS

Alethea's voice runs throughout the narrative, steering our experience as a reader and engendering our empathy,

incredulity and anger. But there are always a multiplicity of perspectives, so how might another character put their spin on what Alethea goes through? Write a scene from Leo or Bobby Sharma's perspective, trying to employ their authentic dialect.

Alternatively, you might like to research real-life stories of women who have suffered abuse, either from history or contemporary times. Are these stories easy to find? If not, why do you think this might be?



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

*How The One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* by Cherie Jones, shortlisted for the Women's Prize for fiction in 2021, tells the intersecting stories of three women in Barbados: Mira, Lala and Wilma, and how their lives are changed forever by violence and abuse.

*Home Home* by Lisa Allen-Agostini is the author's YA novel, in which the protagonist is sent to Canada from her home in Trinidad in an effort to help her move past her depression. Is the start of a new life possible?



WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?