

Room to Read Book Group

Black Cake by Charmaine Wilkerson - Report by Kate and Annie

Opinions were divided on this novel, a creative, engaging, entertaining but over-long novel, skipping in very short chapters from one character to another. Set in the Caribbean initially the island people are larger than life and not entirely believable but Covey's neighbourhood and friends, the food, the colours and the culture are vividly described. Admittedly it reads like a TV screenplay, but the idea of a young woman reinventing herself and keeping multiple secrets from everyone all her life is an entertaining fictional theme.

Characters include Chinese father Johnny Lincook, cake-making (the Black Cake of the title – an iconic cultural artefact) mother Mathilda who disappears, a housekeeper called Pearl and a child called Covey/ Coventina who is in her element swimming and surfing with her girlfriend Bunny and her boyfriend Gibbs. Covey's hapless debt-ridden father forces her to marry a local gangster, who is killed on their wedding day. She is the chief suspect and flees – by swimming out to sea - and the plot then moves to the UK.

Covey, in fear of recognition within the Jamaican community, switches identity and miraculously finds her childhood sweetheart, Gibbs. They move to US have two children; a son Byron becomes a famous marine biologist; a daughter Bunny becomes a college dropout and an unsuccessful artist who dreams of opening a coffee shop. Both have unhappy relationships, no children of their own and become resentful, self-centred adults who haven't communicated for many years.

In amongst all the plot twists, the author introduces, but skims over, lots of social issues which are a distraction from the main theme of secrets, lies and misunderstandings between parents and children and siblings. In places there's too much going on and it needed better editing. The thread running through the novel seems to be about the redemptive power of full disclosure, albeit posthumously. Our overall feeling about the book was that there was too much flitting about and because of that serious themes were dealt with in a superficial way.

Scores: 2.5 stars for Book Groups and 1.5 for recommending to friends.