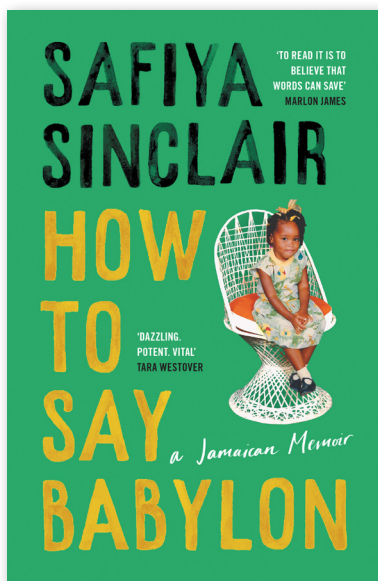


How to Say Babylon

A Jamaican Memoir

by Safiya Sinclair



PLOT SUMMARY

Born in Montego Bay, Jamaica, where luxury hotels line pristine white sand beaches, Safiya Sinclair grew up guarding herself against an ever-present threat. Her father, a volatile reggae musician and strict believer in a militant sect of Rastafari, railed against Babylon, the corrupting influence of the immoral Western world just beyond their gate. To protect the purity of the women in their family, he forbade almost everything: no short skirts and no opinions, nowhere but home and school, no friends but this family and no future but this path.

Rastas were ostracised in Jamaica, and in this isolation Safiya's father's rule was absolute. Her mother did what she could to bring joy to her children with books and poetry. But as Safiya's imagination reached beyond its restrictive borders, that burgeoning independence brought with it ever greater clashes with her father. Soon, she realised that if she was to live at all, she had to find some way to leave home. But how?

In seeking to understand the past of her family, Safiya Sinclair takes readers inside a world of Rastafari that is little understood by those outside it and offers an astonishing personal reckoning with history, family and the legacy of empire. Lyrical and heart wrenching, *How to Say Babylon* is an unforgettable story of a young woman's determination to live life on her own terms.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *How to Say Babylon*, Sinclair's representation of her father is complex. On one hand, he is a tyrant and ideologue, whose fanatic adherence to the extremist brand of Rastafarian belief leads to the physical, emotional and intellectual neglect, abuse and repression of his wife and children. On the other, he is an intelligent, passionate man, dedicated to resisting the colonial British powers in Jamaica, and the capitalist takeover of the island.

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“A lyrical, evocative, and beautifully written memoir about growing up Rastafari in rural Jamaica.”

PROF. NICOLA ROLLOCK,
2024 JUDGE

Sinclair reminds us of the political and cultural context of Jamaica and its colonial relationship to Britain, and the power of and necessity for political resistance that Rastafarianism represented at that time. Though Sinclair’s father’s rule is absolute, he is – in his own mind – protecting Safiya, her mother and her siblings from the corruption of Babylon. The irony is, of course, that, arguably, Safiya was in more immediate danger from her father at home than from being in the world outside, both in terms of his effect on her development – at one stage, Sinclair notes how soft her teeth are, because of her restricted diet – his forbidding of her socialising with friends, and his physical violence and psychological control.

Yet, there is a complexity in Sinclair’s tale. As a child and young woman, she faced prejudice in Jamaica because of her Rastafarian culture. And, in the wider world, colonial power and racism retains its grip, so that as a black woman, Sinclair continues to face prejudice and injustice. On p311, when at University in the US, she notes, ‘Here, I find that every day is a renegotiation of my body. I am reminded of my Blackness in all the spaces I enter’.

Her father isn’t wrong about the existence of Babylon. Yet, his solution (withdrawal and control) hurts his family.

DISCUSSION POINTS

‘I came to realise that what my father wanted...was the perfect daughter. And when a Rastaman said daughter, he meant both his wife and his child, as my father called my mother his ‘dawta’ when speaking to his Rasta bredren...For the men of Rastafari, the perfect daughter was everything a woman was supposed to be. The perfect daughter was whittled from Jah’s mighty oak, cultivating her holy silence. She spoke only when spoken to. The perfect daughter was humble and had no care for vanity. She had no needs, yet nursed the needs of others, breastfeeding an army of Jah’s mighty warriors. The perfect daughter sat under the apple shade and waited to be called, her mind empty and emptying. She followed no god but her father, until he was replaced by her husband. The perfect daughter was nothing but a vessel for the man’s seed’ (p107).

How does the toxic patriarchal structure of Rastafarian belief that Sinclair describes mirror that of other present day patriarchal religions and cultures? These beliefs about the role of women, with their primacy in reproduction and passivity, in society are still present, and, it could be said, have experienced a resurgence in recent years, with the rise of far-right politics and its influence on mass culture.

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Shortlist
2024

How deeply do you think patriarchal beliefs about the role of women depend on religion, and how much in your opinion should religion affect culture?

QUESTIONS

How did you feel about Safiya Sinclair's mother, and her role in her children's upbringing?

Sinclair refers to a number of powerful mythological goddesses in her memoir: Hydra, Eurydice, Jezebel, Salome, Medusa, Galatea, Lilith, Iphigenia. Why do you think she does this?

What did you think of Sinclair's relationship with the Old Poet?

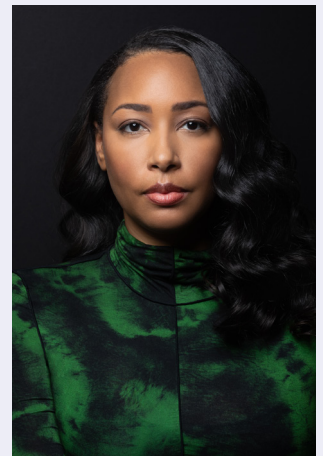
What effect does education have on Sinclair's life? What relationship does she have with it, and how does her cultural heritage affect her experience?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Safiya Sinclair was born and raised in Montego Bay, Jamaica. She is the author of *Cannibal*, winner of a Whiting Writers' Award and the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Poetry, among others. *Cannibal* was a finalist for the Seamus Heaney First Book Award and was longlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize.

How to Say Babylon is a finalist for National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography. Her work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Granta*, *the Guardian* and elsewhere.



If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

NEXT STEPS

Sinclair's father purposefully disrupts language, deliberately misusing words in his speech, to make a point about political resistance. This is a technique also sometimes used in poetry, often for political reasons and/or to consciously disrupt language and meaning. Safiya Sinclair's own poetry also gave her a site for resistance. In the poem 'Daddy', she hits back at her father, taking pleasure from his reaction as he reads it, in much the same way as her father resists colonial power by referring to Queen Elizabeth as 'Eliza-Bat'.

Write a poem inspired by your own childhood. It might express any emotion – anger, resentment, rebellion, peace or joy – but try and remember a time when you resisted something. How did it feel, and what did you do?

Alternatively, research Britain's colonial past. Were you taught about this at school? If not, why might that have been? Find a variety of modern books on the subject by authors of colour, including other personal memoirs and accounts. ■



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If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

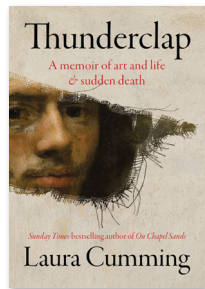
In *Sins of My Father*, Lily Dunn tells the story of her father, whose pursuit of transcendence took him from sex addiction, via a religious cult, to a relentless chase of money, which ended in ruin and finally addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs.

In *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, Reni Eddo-Lodge explores everything from eradicated black history to the inextricable link between class and race.

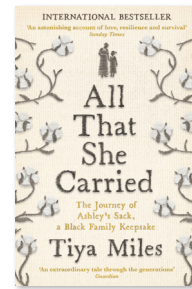
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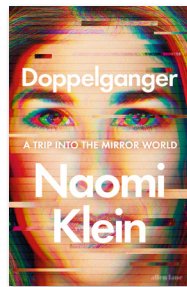
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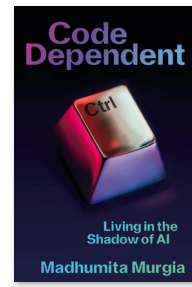
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Sudden Death**
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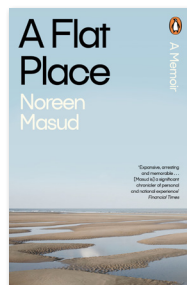
**All That She
Carried:
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Keepsake**
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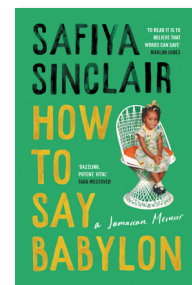
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discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

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