

Women's Prize for Fiction 2021



2021 SHORTLIST

HOW THE ONE-ARMED SISTER SWEEPS HER HOUSE by CHERIE JONES

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Cherie Jones is a lawyer based in Barbados. She won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize in 1999. She then studied Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam in 2015, where she won both the Archie Markham Award and the A.M. Heath Prize. In 2015 she was also awarded a full fellowship from the Vermont Studio Centre. A collection of interconnected stories set in a different small community in Barbados won the third prize in the Frank Collymore Endowment Literary Awards in 2016. *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* is her first novel.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Baxter's Beach, Barbados, Lala's grandmother Wilma tells her a cautionary tale about what happens to girls who disobey their mothers. For Wilma, it's the story of a wilful adventurer, who ignores the warnings of those around her and suffers as a result.

When Lala grows up, she sees the story offers hope – of life and love after losing a baby in the most terrible of circumstances, and marrying the wrong man.

Mira Whalen's story is about keeping alive, trying to make sense of the fact that her husband has been murdered and that she didn't get the chance to tell him she loved him after all.

How The One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House is a powerful, visceral novel of lives across race and class, and of the sacrifices some women make to survive.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Jones' layered, detailed depiction of coercive control and domestic abuse in *How The One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* is chilling and masterful. Lala's relationship with Adan is carefully rendered, showing the reader exactly how Adan attracts and keeps Lala with attentive sweetness before

releasing his rage and aggression on her, repeating the cycle in unpredictable rhythms to keep her off-balance.

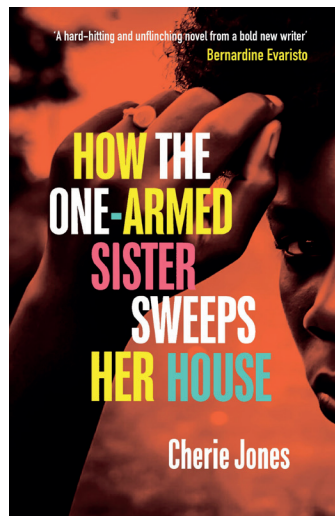
Adan's game of trying to sing Lala's name in just the right way shows us how, for Adan, the relationship with Lala is all about control. Adan wants to know Lala better than anyone, to possess her, even to be the one who knows a secret cadence

to her name, thereby somehow owning her. The scene where Adan tries to find the right way to sing Lala's name also shows how Lala carefully manages his temper: when Adan has failed enough times, she pretends he has found the great secret, to avoid him losing his temper.

Like a child, Adan's games turn sour at a moment's notice. Unlike a child, Adan has the strength of a man, and uses it to punish and beat Lala. Therefore, Lala's name game is never a game for Lala, who has to remain vigilant at all times. Adan is a violent predator, which, like all women trapped in relationships with men like him, Lala realises too late, and too late for her baby.

Yet, we are also shown how Lala comes to find herself with Adan, both of them the

products of pervasive misogyny and abuse. Lala is herself the child of an incestuous rape, and grows up in a society where she is viewed as having some kind of magnetic sexual allure over men, excusing their terrible behaviour towards her and other women. It is attitudes like these that perpetuate misogyny and allow domestic abuse to go unpunished and unheard, and attitudes like these that are held by women as well as men, as shown in Wilma's story of the one-armed sister. To Wilma, the one-armed girl is at fault for going into the tunnel in the first place: it is her own fault for losing an arm because she put herself into what was perceived as a dangerous situation. Yet to Lala, listening, the fault lies with the monsters in the tunnel, not the brave, innocent girl who ventured inside.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Baxter's Beach seems like paradise for some, but not for those who live on the island full-time. Lala braids the hair of the tourists on the beach, but returns to a life of poverty and domestic abuse; Mira, an "island girl" marries Peter, who owns a holiday home on the beach. For Peter, it's love at first sight – for Mira, it's a little more pragmatic than that. Tone makes a living by sleeping with wealthy white women tourists. Jones shows us the haves- and have-nots on the island, and the violence that erupts from the uneven distribution of wealth, ultimately resulting in Peter's murder by Adan.

Is Peter, as a man who has spent a lot of time on the island, naïve in his perception of the island as a paradise, and in Mira as his true love? Should he have been more aware of his position of power in the relationship, and the reality of life on the island for Mira? Why does Mira have an affair?

QUESTIONS

How did Adan's upbringing contribute to who he is as a man?

Why does Lala decide to run away instead of calling the police when Mira is found bleeding out on the patio?

What is your opinion of the policemen in the story?

What are the differences and similarities between Adan and Tone?

NEXT STEPS

Wilma begins the book by telling Lala the story of the two girls in the tunnel, which she intends as a cautionary tale. Many fairy and folk tales were originally written as cautionary tales for children, to warn them against natural dangers and human and animal predators. Yet, Lala doesn't see the story in the same way as Wilma, and sides with the one-armed sister.

Find a folk or fairy tale that has a traditional cautionary element or moral to the story and rewrite it from a

more empowering viewpoint. You could look at the *Anansi* folk tales of the Caribbean and West Africa, Grimm's Fairy Tales or traditional tales from India like the *Panchatantra* and the *Mahabharata*. Does the original moral still stand, or should a different message take its place now? What are the male and female characters like in these stories? Are the female characters well rounded or stereotypes? What would you change?

Alternatively, rewrite Wilma's story of the one-armed sister and the tunnel. How does the sister lose her arm in your story – or does she lose it at

all? What is in the tunnel? What adventure do the sisters go on, and what do they discover? In Wilma's telling of the story, it's inevitable that the one-armed sister will still have to sweep her house. Is that inevitable in your story? Why or why not?



THE 2021 WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION SHORTLIST

“ A TALE OF VIOLENCE, LOSS AND LOVE IN BARBADOS, SEEN THROUGH FOUR VERY VIVID VOICES ”
ELIZABETH DAY
2021 JUDGE

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

IN THE DREAM HOUSE by CARMEN MARIA MACHADO
A WOMAN IS NO MAN by CARMEN ETAF RUM