

# Women's Prize for Fiction 2021



## 2021 SHORTLIST

### TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM by YAA GYASI

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Yaa Gyasi was born in Mampong, Ghana and raised in Huntsville, Alabama. Her first novel, *Homegoing*, was a *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestseller, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best First Novel and was shortlisted for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction. In 2017 Yaa Gyasi was selected as one of Granta's Best of Young American Novelists and in 2019 the BBC selected her debut as one of the 100 Novels that Shaped Our World. She lives in Berkley, California.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

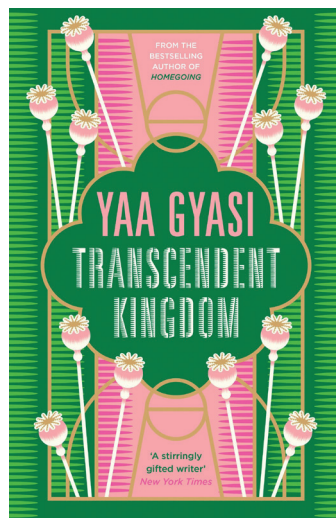
As a child, Gifty asks her parents to tell her the story of their journey from Ghana to Alabama, seeking escape in myths of heroism and romance. When her father and brother succumb to the hard reality of immigrant life in the American South, their family of four becomes two – and the life Gifty dreams of slips away.

Years later, desperate to understand the addiction that destroyed her brother's life, she turns to science for answers. But when her mother comes to stay, Gifty learns that the roots of their tangled traumas reach further than she thought. Tracing her family's story through continents and generations will take her deep into the dark heart of modern America.

*Transcendent Kingdom* is a searing novel about a family ravaged by forces both within and beyond their control. It is a story of love, loss, inheritance, and the myriad ways we try to rebuild our lives from the rubble of our collective pasts.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gyasi explores the different ways Gifty's family experience themselves as simultaneously included and yet not wholly accepted within a number of establishments and structures: the church, organised sport, language and academia, particularly science – Gifty's specialism.



Gifty's mother makes a concerted effort to fit into the local Ghanaian community, but Gifty's father returns to Ghana because he hates his life as an immigrant in America: racism, low status and badly paid work as well as what he perceives as the moral laxity of American culture.

Gifty's mother's relationship with language reflects her presence at the intersection of three different identities – speaking Fante with her friends, Twi when she is a confident, assertive mother, and stumbling English that reflects her lack of confidence as a black woman in modern American culture.

As a gifted athlete, Nana (also known by the American nickname Buzz, symbolising his conditional inclusion in American culture) is feted by his football and basketball teams, but only when he's instrumental to them winning. When Nana has a bad game, the racist abuse begins – and when he's injured and becomes an addict, there is no support from the community at all. Finally, Nana's death in the parking lot of a Starbucks seems a terrible and yet symbolic epitaph of another young black man, killed by American culture.

Gifty finds that, as a black woman in her science department at university, she is even rarer for believing in God. Yet, Gifty's family's experience of religion in Alabama is somewhat different to church in Ghana, and while Gifty remains a believer, she finds that her church doesn't necessarily accept her in the way that it should. As a neuroscientist, Gifty finds herself looking for the soul in the brain of mice, and looking for answers to her brother's addiction in science, when the church can't help.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

Nana's addiction highlights the current opioid addiction crisis in America (and across the world) and chronicles how addiction affects him, but also Gifty and her mother too. Gifty's response to her brother's addiction and death is to try and find answers in science, and her mother's is eventually to retreat into depression.

When the church community find out that Nana is an addict, some people comment about Nana being more likely to become an addict because he is a black man, despite the fact that opioid addiction spans race, class and age in America.

Discuss the way that Nana's addiction and death is portrayed by Gyasi. Is there a sense of inevitability about Nana's story, or merely a sense of sadness? What is the role of the medical profession in prescribing opioids, and what is your understanding of how the opioid addiction crisis has been created?

Has Nana's story in *Transcendent Kingdom* altered your perception of what an addict is, and how someone becomes an addict? Is it the case that, as a young black man, Nana would be disproportionately vulnerable to addiction for a number of socioeconomic reasons that are created by structural racism?

## QUESTIONS

Gifty's experiments with mice mirror aim to investigate addictive behaviour, but how does her work also reflect her own experience of trauma, religion and her relationship with her family?

How does Gyasi represent the church's attitude towards its young people with the character of Miss Cindy and the religious abstinence group?

How is masculinity framed in *Transcendent Kingdom*? What are the differences in expectations of manhood in Ghana and Alabama?



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How does Gyasi represent Gifty's mother's expectations for her son and daughter? How do these compare to stereotypical perceptions of immigrant parents?

## NEXT STEPS

In *Transcendent Kingdom* we see some of the diary Gifty writes as a child. Write some entries from Nana's childhood diary or from an older Nana who is immersed in sports. What are his thoughts and feelings? How does he feel about his family? How does he feel about his father returning to Ghana? Maybe you could

include Nana's reactions to his daily phone calls with his dad after school that stop after a while. What does Nana think about church, school and football?

Alternatively, write a diary as Gifty's mother. What are her private thoughts about her husband's absence, her children, church, her work as a carer? Maybe her diary is where she vents all her feelings – she is clearly a woman of strong emotions. How does she feel, being left in America to support her two children? How does she feel after Nana's death and through his addiction?

“ I COULDN'T SLEEP THE NIGHT I READ THIS, THERE WAS SO MUCH TO THINK ABOUT. ”

VICK HOPE  
2021 JUDGE

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

*HOMEGOING* by YAA GYASI

*HIS ONLY WIFE* by PEACE ADZO MEDIE