

Transcript of Book Club Girl Podcast, Season 2

Episode 8: Bolu Babalola on *Love in Color*

Bianca:

Welcome to the Book Club Girl podcast, where we chat about great books with awesome authors and you our listeners get to ask the questions. I'm Bianca Flores and the book we're going to be discussing today, a collection of retellings, had me thinking a lot about other retellings I've read in the past, like *A Wild Winter Swan* by Gregory Maguire. I adore Gregory so much. I'm probably his biggest fan <laugh>. And in this book, he reimagine the Hans Christian Anderson story, "The Wild Swans."

Tavia:

You know, I love Gregory too. I think you're not alone. I think you'd have some competition for that biggest fan <laugh> biggest fan title, in effect.

Bianca:

I definitely would. <laugh>

Tavia:

We interviewed him last season on the anniversary of *Wicked* and I fangirled all over the place. I was like, gushing. I could have talked to him for hours. I'm Tavia Kowalchuk. And you know, I can't remember a retelling that I've read. I know that I have, but I'll tell you one that I've always wanted to read is *Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller. And I mean, I feel like I'm the only person left in the world who hasn't yet read this book. It's all over TikTok. I don't know if any of our listeners are like, as bonkers into BookTok as I am, but it's -- all of these BookTokkers seem to have thoroughly embraced Madeline Miller's books. And you know, I wanted to read it. I first came out years ago and now I'm like, okay, to you really got to get on this.

Bianca:

Tavia, I'm the same as you. I have not read this. So I think this is also another white whale of ours that we need to overcome.

Tavia:

Well, it's not that I, I don't have a resistance. I just haven't gotten to it. So yeah, I wouldn't call it a white whale. I totally want to read it, but I just haven't figured out when. Yeah.

Bianca:

I need, yes, same. I need to. *Circe* as well. All right. So on today's show, we'll discuss a book that is filled with love stories, myths, and folk tales from around the world. And later in the show, we'll be joined by author, screenwriter, and journalist Bolu Babalola.

Tavia:

Before we get into it, though, I just wanted to remind you all. I am so excited that we're doing this again. We're doing this super fun thing that we did at the end of last season. It's coming up this summer on June 8th, Bianca and I are hosting a virtual wrap party for season two of the podcast. So the last episode will drop the week prior. And then the week following, we're going to have a big old party online. There'll be authors. There'll be, you know, a raffle. There's going to be like good laughs and good fun. Bianca and I of course will be there. So I really encourage you all to attend. You can register for free. So it's free to everyone. You can just register and sign up and join the event. Or if you want

some special VIP Book Club Girl swag, and early access to some books that aren't yet published. You can buy a VIP ticket for \$45. So you can get more information about all of those registration options on bookclubgirl.com/podcast.

Bianca:

Ooh, I love free registration for anything, but also Book Club Girl swag and early copies. I mean, yes. Even more so. Yes. Tavia what's the swag?

Tavia:

So the swag is going to be an awesome Baggu tote. I don't know if you've ever seen those. You can like squish them up to like teeny weeny and like put them in your purse. So a Baggu tote, we're going to give away a tumbler and a picnic blanket just in time for the summer picnic season.

Bianca:

That sounds so awesome. I love the idea of being able to put like my wine and the Baggu bag and like be on my picnic blanket and stuff. I think that's great swag. So what time is it then?, Tavia?

Tavia:

It's at eight o'clock. It's eight o'clock in the evening, Eastern New York time. So that our friends on the west coast can also join, they won't be having to like duck out of work early to, to have some fun with us. And yeah, I mean, you were just talking about the idea of throwing wine in that Baggu like, obviously, and also, I mean, I just go on a picnic for one, I take my book, my wine, my tumbler, my picnic blanket, my Baggu yes. And my phone and my headphones so that I could listen to the Book Club Girl podcast on my picnic.

Bianca:

I love it. That sounds like a perfect evening or afternoon or morning <laugh>

Tavia:

Any time of the day.

Bianca:

Um, what about the authors Tavia? How are we involving them?

Tavia:

Okay. So the authors who are going to show up, I'm super excited about talking to all of them. Elly Griffiths.

Bianca:

Ooh,

Tavia:

Kirstin Chen, author of *Counterfeit*.

Bianca:

Such a good idea.

Tavia:

Um, Tessa Bailey.

Bianca:

Mm, yes.

Tavia:

Ann Mah

Bianca:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>

Tavia:

And there could potentially be more so like we're still working out the final guest list, but I'm super excited. And like I've already talked to Kirstin Chen a bunch of times and I adore her and I think Elly Griffiths, I'm so excited to meet her. She writes these awesome mystery novels. So I'm just, I think it's going to be a really, really good mix of folks.

Bianca:

That's going to be really fun. I agree. That's a good mix. And I can't wait. Mark it on your calendars everybody: June eighth! <Laugh>

Tavia:

And now we present to you *Love in Color*, abridged.

Bianca:

Love in Color is a collection of thirteen stories by Bolu Babalola that retell the most beautiful romances from history and mythology, at times using modern settings and attitudes for her characters. Babalola revisits, folk tales of West Africa, Greek myths, ancient legends from the Middle East and stories from long erased places. In "Nefertiti" the Egyptian queen is recast as a woman's only club owner who rose from the streets to champion other neglected and abused women. In "Yaa," college sweethearts are reunited when one of them chooses to step away from the family expectations that have defined her life. In "Attem," a king's wife takes on lovers to exercise freedom and finds herself falling in love instead. In "Siya," softness and strength unite in both love and warmth. "Psyche" revisits Greek mythology. It stars Psyche, Eros, Venus, Hera, and Athena as Babalola shows us how one young woman steels herself against a tyrannical boss to win at both her career and love. In "Thisbe," the author uses multiple narrators to tell the tale of two college students, neighbors in the same dorm who inadvertently woo each other with music that seeps between their common wall. And the very last story in the collection "Alagomeji," is inspired by the author's own parents. So Tavia, what did you think of the book?

Tavia:

You know, it's been a long time since I've read short stories and what always happens when I read a collection of anything, whether it's essays or stories or poems is like, I'm like, what's the through line, you know, what is the, the thing that ties these stories or has them at least loosely hang together? And you know, I so appreciated her, the author's bottomless faith in the power of love. I mean, I, I couldn't believe it. I, I'm so cynical and these stories are so they're so just wide eyed. They really are. They really it's. It's like I said, that she has a bottomless faith in the power of love. Yeah. In, in "Zhinu," a pop star finds her voice after she finds love. And like, she falls in love over the course of one evening. Like she spends a night with this guy who works in a hotel where she randomly had to stay and, and they end up totally bonding over the course of the night. And, and then she shows up on this morning show the next day and like performs, like she's never performed before. I just it's, you know, that kind of a story is...it boggles my mind.

Bianca:

I know, I know exactly what you mean. Um, and again, like you said, it was such a, you know, refreshing portrayal of love. I feel like things are just darker and darker every day with the news that it was just so nice to read something

like this that was really positive and really just like a celebration of love too. Um, and it was also refreshing to have retellings about legends and myths of West Africa and the Middle East. I feel like so much of what we read these days is so Eurocentric. It was just really nice to have stories that highlight parts of the world and histories that unfortunately aren't popularized the way they should be.

Tavia:

A hundred percent. I so appreciate that. You know, I just feel like that is something that we strive to share with our listeners on this podcast... is, you know, diverse voices telling diverse stories and Um, this book absolutely fulfilled that for me. You know, even though these characters always ended up with their one true love, these stories, they never were saccharin or cliché. They, they had a freshness about them that really allowed that sort of the beauty of their love to shine through. And, and I didn't come away from these stories feeling like, yeah, right. Whatever, you know.

Bianca:

Right?!

Tavia:

It was, they, they're love stories, but they're not, they're not necessarily like slipping into that... like the tropes we talk about in certain romances.

Bianca:

No, they felt so authentic. And like you were saying, like, I never felt once that they were like cheesy or something like that, I'm like, no, these are like really rich portrayals of deep and true loves. It just, it just really like hit me in that way. Um, and it was also really great to see how Bolu flipped these stories. So all these women are just incredibly empowered. Um, of course, marginalized women have been denied romantic agency for far too long and it just felt really nice to see Bolu center these women the way that they should be centered. Um, I just wanted to be all the women in these stories Tavia, I was like, I just need to be this one and this person, and I need to be like doing all of this. <Laugh>

Tavia:

I know! When they come out of their shell, it's really like a bombshell they're out. They're like, here I am, hear me roar. So...

Bianca:

That's so true.

Tavia:

My favorite story hands down is psyche. I just it's set in the office of a women's magazine.

Bianca:

That's a good one.

Tavia:

And she does kind of go into the friends-to-lovers trope here, but she just handles it in such a way that it is so satisfying. And I really, I mean, we were talking about, you know, Eurocentric like, yes, these are, this is Greek mythology, but it was really fun to see the way she played with these Greek gods and really like brought out their, you know, their sort of like historical personalities in this very uber-contemporary setting. It was really fun.

Bianca:

Yeah. That was really fun. Toast to strong, powerful women falling in love.

Tavia:

Always, always, always here's to that. Love making them stronger.

Bianca:

<laugh>

Tavia:

We love hearing from our listeners, you can rate and review the podcast on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you're listening to this episode. And you can also participate in conversations about great books in the lively comment section of our Instagram feed @bookclubgirl. I also love talking directly with listeners. Sometimes you guys find me on @taviareads, please do connect with me there. It's so much fun.

Bianca:

Today, we're joined by internationally, acclaimed writer, Bolu Babalola, whose book *Love in Color* is out now.

Tavia:

Bolu, welcome to the Book Club Girl podcast. We are really excited to have you here with us on this episode.

Bolu Babalola:

Hello. Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

Bianca:

Okay, Bolu, so one of my favorite things about this collection is how it celebrates love through the lens of joy. I feel like there's so much pain and suffering, and so much doom scrolling in our lives, that it was just so nice to reminded of sheer joy and you know, to celebrate love too. So I'd love to ask you, you know, why you decided to focus on the stories this way?

Bolu Babalola:

I think it's just, it was, wasn't even like a conscious decision. I think that's just how I am and that's what I'm drawn to in terms of the art that I consume and it's what I enjoy writing. And I think that is also how I see love. Like of course love can have its trials for me. The beauty of love is the joy that we can derive from it, you know, being seen and seeing someone and having this connection with someone. And I feel like life is so hard and love is kind of... It's so hard. It's so dark. There's so much unavoidable darkness in life. And I feel like love is such a, it's such a lovely vacuum where we kind of escape. Or not even escape, but also use it as a tool to like kind of go through life. You know, I think, equipped with love, it just makes life a lot easier to do, you know.

Bianca:

Absolutely. Life becomes so much more bearable when you're in love and when you are loved in return. <laugh> I love that. I also love the way love fits into the lives of these women. It's, you know, I just felt like it was very special and important for us to talk about, you know, it's, it's more supplemental for the women in these stories. They don't necessarily need the love, you know, they're thriving on their own. And I just found that really great for, you know, people to read about <laugh>. Can you talk a little bit about your thought process behind that decision?

Bolu Babalola:

Yeah, that was definitely a conscious decision of mine, because I mean, in my life, in all my friends' lives, my women friend lives, love is a great thing that we like, you know, we want, you know, we hold dear, we cherish. But also we

are very like self-determined people and we have our own ambitions and dreams. And it's like, if this man, or this partner is not adding to my life in that way, it's kind of a waste of time. Like, what are you, what are you adding? Because my life is already so full and so rich. I really like myself, you know? And it's like, what are you, what are you adding to it? And also what can I share with you? You know, how do we complement each other? So that's why it was really important for me to like work on the connection between the people. Because I think what I find very frustrating is like, when I watch a romcom, or read a book, and I end up going away, like, okay, they're together, but why like why, what do they like about each other? Why do they work? Not just how like they work together, but also how do they challenge each other to be like better people or to just be better versions of themselves? Um, so yeah, it was a very conscious decision to me, for me to like work on the connection and like why they like each other and why this person, this woman would choose for this person to be in their life and how they would add to their life. And also what the woman would add to their life, to the, the partner's life as well. You know?

Bianca:

Totally. I feel like I could have read a story about any of these women just doing their own thing too. <laugh> You know what I mean? Like they get, like you were saying their lives were already really full, you know, it was nice to see their lives added to because they were loved.

Bolu Babalola:

Yeah. And also I feel like there's this idea that, you know, if a woman has it all or she's like a career woman, and she doesn't have time for romance or like she's really hard. And I think that it's okay to want both, you know, it's okay to, to be really ambitious and like love your career and love yourself fully and also still want somebody to, to, to hold you and, and to cherish you, you know, and to cherish someone else as well.

Bianca:

Absolutely.

Tavia:

So some of your stories like "Psyche" or like "Nefertiti" were written in a modern setting, like it's a world that the contemporary reader recognizes as one that we inhabit and others like "Osum" and "Attem" maintain an older, more folklorish setting. They feel more traditional, they feel more like of the past. How did you decide which stories would get the modern treatment?

Bolu Babalola:

Honestly, it just was like, I decided on the fly, like it was, who this character is. And I was like, okay, this suits her. Like, it wasn't really something that I predetermined. Because I realized with a lot of the stories when I predetermined stuff, it just never worked out that way. So I would work with the character and then move backwards from there and just figure out, okay, who is my girl? I just called them all my girls, who is my girl, what does she want in life? And how would she interact with the world? What is the story that would work for her and then fix kind of the timeframe around that, the period around that. So yeah, it was just really working with, okay, where does this girl fit in? You know?

Tavia:

Well, I just absolutely loved Nefertiti as like this badass, you know, sort of avenger for abused women. I just, I, I thought that was absolutely genius.

Bolu Babalola:

Yeah. I just really wanted, I think that I wanted that. What I love about loving colors that I got to like genre hop within like the romance sphere. So, so "Nefertiti" is kind of like a noir thriller kind of vibe and you have "Naneli", which is like, kind of like a high school kind of like romcom vibe, you know, the "Clueless," like "To All the Boys," like that kind

of thing, which I love. So what I really love about writing this, this book is that I got to really explore and celebrate the elasticity of romance, which is like, it can be any different setting, you know, it's so versatile.

Bianca:

Right. You're going to find love anywhere. I hope. Right?

Bolu Babalola:

You're going to love anywhere. Exactly.

Bianca:

You're listening to the Book Club Girl podcast where our guest this week is Bolu Babalola whose book *Love in Color* is out now. You can read more about Bolu's books at bookclubgirl.com

Tavia:

Coming up on the Book Club Girl podcast, we ask Bolu about her affinity literary character. Do not miss this one.

Bianca:

This episode of the Book Club Girl podcast is brought to you by *Punch Me Up to the Gods* by Brian Broome. This memoir explores his heartbreaking, eye-opening, moving and at times hilarious experiences as a young Black boy, desperately trying to fit in as an outsider growing up in Ohio.

Tavia:

Welcome back to the show. Each week, we bring you a fascinating new conversation with an author who's written a book we think is a great choice for book clubs to read together. Today, internationally acclaimed writer, Bolu Babalola is here with us answering questions about her collection of short stories, *Love in Color*.

Bianca:

So one of our listeners Christabel reached out to us and she wants to know Bolu, what is your favorite love story of all time?

Bolu Babalola:

Of all time? Oh gosh, I have so many that I just don't. I can say like my favorite type of love story. I think that's better, because there's so many. I don't even know where to begin.

Bianca:

There's so many.

Bolu Babalola:

Yeah. But my favorite kind of love story is one that is like friendship-based. So that's like the *When Harry Met Sally's* um, oh yes. Yeah. I just love that. Obviously in terms of TV, I really love *New Girl* because of Nick and Jess. I just love it when there's humor and there's warmth and there's friendship. And it's just like, even if you don't really understand, even if you don't like the characters individually, like I don't really, I'm not a massive fan of Harry as a person in *When Harry Met Sally*. But that being said, like, I wouldn't date a guy like Harry, but I can see why they would work. And I can see that their friendship is so real and the foundation is real and that's what romance is to me. I just love friendship-based romance. Like I said, like, I always want to know why they work together, why they've chosen each other. And I think friendship is such a great prism to see that, you know, for me romance doesn't really, for me, romance doesn't exist without friendship.

Bianca:

I really like that. And now I want to go see When Harry Met Sally again, it's been too long. It's been a year, it's too long!

Tavia:

<laugh>

Bolu Babalola:

Way too long.

Tavia:

<laugh> In the short story, "Naleli" you, you almost invert the original story, which is "How Khosi Chose His Wife." And would you tell us a little bit about how you rewrote this legend from a modern and feminist point of view?

Bolu Babalola:

Yeah, so the original story, I was, I really struggled with it. I was going to abandon it and my editor was like, no, no, you can do something with this. So she, uh, was given a crocodile skin to hide her beauty or something, an original folk story. And one day she was bathing and Khosi saw her without the, the, the crocodile skin and fell in love with her because he saw that she was beautiful underneath that. Obviously it's like a load of misogynistic undertones and like creepy undertones. And I was like, I don't know, <laugh> I don't know if I can fix this one.

Tavia:

<laugh>

Bolu Babalola:

But when I really thought about it, I was like, actually I can do something about being seen for who you are regardless of, you know, what other people think about you because in the original story, people were mocking her because they thought, you know, she had like a weird skin thing because of the crocodile skin. And I was like, there's people with real skin conditions in real life who are beautiful and, but don't conform to what society says is beautiful. And I thought that, okay, this is a really great way to tell that story. And I also, what I loved about Naleli as a character is that even though, you know, she's bullied a little bit and you know, she has struggles fitting in. She really does like herself. Like she may have some low self-esteem and lapses in confidence, but fundamentally she really does value herself as a person. So one of my favorite lines in her story actually in the book is when, um, Khosi's like, you know, you think you're better than my friends and she's like, I am better than better than your friends because they're mean!

Bianca:

She's like, your friend suck.

Bolu Babalola:

Yeah, exactly. What are you talking about? He's kind of a dick. He's a bit of a himbo. But, but that's what I love about her. Um, yeah, but it's really important for me to, for, for me to have written a girl who is just... because Khosi has always liked her, but his problem is that he's almost privileged to the point where he can't see what she's talking about. Like, even though you like me, your friends don't like me. And it's like kind of when people say they're colorblind, it's like, they don't see race. It's like, I don't need you to be colorblind. Like I don't mind if you see me as black because I am, I just need you to see me as a person. So I think that was the issue that Naleli was exploring. But yeah, I really enjoyed writing her. And just writing a story about a teenage girl in general, who was really confident, was fun to me.

Tavia:

I will say, when she jumped in that pool, I was cheering. I was so excited and happy. I was like, yeah, you jump.

Bianca:

Yeah me too. I wish I had read that story when I was a teenager. I feel like every like teenage girl, everybody should be that.

Bolu Babalola:

Yeah. I think it was a liberated story for me. Cause I kind of write the stories that I also wanted to read when I was younger too.

Bianca:

Mm-hmm <affirmative> totally. So I already know the answer to this question Bolu, but would you please tell us, so all of your fans and all of our listeners know what we can expect from you in the future in terms of books?

Bolu Babalola:

Yeah. So I have *Honey and Spice*, my debut novel, because this is, you know, this is anthology. So my debut novel coming out in July, which I'm so excited about, it's very much in the it's modern. So it's very different from like a lot the stories in *Love in Color*, but it's similar to like "Orin" and "Tiara." And it's a campus-based romcom about a girl who has a radio show where she gives romantic advice to the people, you know, her, her constituents, the members of the ACS, which is the African Caribbean Society. And they all look up to her for romantic advice. But um, she's kind of, I don't want to say she's a bit of a hypocrite, but you know, all is not, <laugh> all is not as it seems. And somebody comes to university and kind of rattles her notion of what a player is and all the girls in the campus kind of fall for him. And she's like, wait guys, I thought I taught you better. But through a series of events, they have a clash. A fake relationship ensues to, to save both their reputations and obviously, you know, sparks, sparks, fly. But yeah, it's a romcom that definitely explores friendship, not just between, you know, a woman and her partner, but also friendship among women as well and community, which I, which is really fun for me to write too.

Tavia:

That sounds so good. Oh my gosh. I love campus novels first of all, hands down. And the fact that she has a radio show, I mean, I totally, totally am down with that. <laugh>

Bianca:

<laugh>

Tavia:

We have one final question for you. Every episode we ask an author, if you could be any character from any novel, who would it be?

Bolu Babalola:

Okay. So I don't know if I would be her because she's very, very, I find her frustrating at times <laugh> but I think the first, the first kind of character in a romance novel that I really identified with was Elizabeth Bennet, weirdly enough. Because I was like, she's got a really sharp tongue and I, and... It just really struck me because I was like 13 when I read it and I was like, okay, she's in the olden times, but she's really like witty and smart. Yeah. It's like the olden times I was like, how? And I was like, how do I relate to this girl who was born in like, I don't know, Georgian England. And I'm a modern Black girl in London. And like, I just, how do I relate to her? But I really enjoy her because she's really strong-minded. And she does make some little bit of, you know, weird decisions in the book. But also ultimately she's a woman who knows her mind and also knows when she's wrong and has the grace to recognize when she's

wrong. So I think, I don't know if she's what the person that I would be like of all time, but she's definitely the, one of the first kind of protagonists that I saw myself in.

Bianca:

Jane Austen is like transcending time. You're the, the third author who, who said a Jane Austen character. Really.

Bolu Babalola:

Really. That's amazing. I love that. For me, she's like the blueprint of like romcoms. *Pride and Prejudice* for sure.

Tavia:

Yeah. Bolu thank you so much for joining us today. We had an awesome conversation with you. Thanks for having me. I am so excited for *Honey and Spice*. It's so good to know that there's more coming after *Love in Color*. It was such an enjoyable read and I wish you the best of luck with that when, when it comes out.

Bolu Babalola:

Thank you so much. I had so much fun you guys. Thank you.

Bianca:

Thank you. In just a short moment, we have a special treat for you. This episode's audiobook clip is from Bolu Babalola's forthcoming novel, *Honey and Spice*. Thank you for listening to our interview with Bolu whose book *Love in Color* is out now. To find out more about Bolu and *Honey and Spice*, head to bookclubgirl.com/podcast, where you can also find links to everything mentioned in this episode.

Tavia:

Like what you heard? Subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, wherever you get your podcast. And while you're there, give us a rating and leave a review. Another way to help spread the word about the Book Club Girl podcast, tell a friend -- it really helps others to find us.

Bianca:

This is our last author interview in season two of the Book Club Girl podcast. Next week, tune in for our season two wrap up show. You won't want to miss it. And don't forget if you haven't read any of the books we discussed this season, you can head over to hc.com and use promo code BOOKCLUBGIRL for 25% off. That is a whole 25% off and free shipping for any book discussed on this podcast.

Tavia:

Oh my God guys. I totally hope you join us for the wrap show. It's going to be online with video. Go to bookclubgirl.com/podcast to get your tickets, free or paid your choice. We love hearing from our listeners as we say over and over. So please do email us at the girls book club girl dot com or post something in the comments on our Instagram feed @bookclubgirl, you can also leave us a voicemail, very old school, 2 1 2 2 0 7 7 3 3 6. Your voicemail or email could very well end up being read on the show.

Bianca:

But before we go, we'd like to thank Caroline Kwash of the Hangar Studios who produced today's episode and Roscelia Ryan, our editor and audio engineer at Hangar Studios

Tavia:

Until next time I'm Tavia...

Bianca:

And I'm Bianca

Tavia:

Happy reading!