

Transcript of Book Club Girl Podcast, Season 2

Episode 7: Vanessa Riley on *Island Queen*

Tavia:

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 Tavia Kowalchuk, co-host of the Book Club Girl podcast. And today we're talking about a book that is set on a few Caribbean islands, is also historical fiction. And this made me think of another book set in the Caribbean That's on the island of Barbados that we discussed with the author on last season's podcast, it's *Summer Country* by Lauren Willig. And I'll never forget that conversation because there's actually a pandemic sweeping the Barbados in this book. And when we, when we interviewed Lauren, we were in the middle of the COVID pandemic. So it was like a very strong parallel, completely unintentional, you know, when Lauren was writing the book, but yeah.

Bianca:

Oh my goodness. That is so timely. I'm Bianca Flores, Tavia's co-host and I didn't realize that that book had a pandemic theme in it. Wow.

Tavia:

Well, it has a pandemic's section. It's not like the theme.

Bianca:

Section. Yes. <laugh> Pandemic section. Um, wow. I, that has to be put on my reading list. Now the book that got me or that to mind when I was reading this one was *Patsy* by Nicole Dennis-Benn. Um, it's partly set in Jamaica and I have not read it. It is also on my very long to read list. Um, but I I've heard so many amazing things Tavia about this book. It was, I'm pretty sure the Read with Jenna pick at the time. And yeah there was just so much buzz surrounding it.

Tavia:

Oh my gosh. I haven't heard of it. I don't know how I missed it if it was a Jenna Pick because I watch, I pay attention, all that stuff. On today's show. We are discussing *Island Queen*, which is a historical novel based on the true story, the life of Dorothy "Doll" Kirwan Thomas. It's a rags to riches story from slavery to extreme wealth as a Black woman in the late 1800s Caribbean. And later in the show, we'll be joined by award-winning author, Vanessa Riley.

Bianca:

So before we get into our discussion of *Island Queen*, I also wanted to remind everybody about our wrap up party that will stream online on Wednesday, June 8th at 8:00 PM. I am so excited for this wrap up party. You can find a link and more information in our show notes. And we look forward to having all of our book club girls and guys there.

Tavia:

Oh my gosh. I cannot wait. I, first of all, I had so much fun at last year's wrap up event. It just, I loved hanging out with all those authors and, and just, you know, switching from podcast to video was so much fun. So we'll be joined by a bunch of authors, including Kirsten Chen, whose third book *Counterfeit* is coming out this June and Ann Mah who wrote *The Lost Vintage*, which some of you may have read. And her new novel she's going to talk about is coming out in the fall is called *Jacqueline in Paris* and it's about Jacqueline Onassis and when she was in Paris. So I think it's going to be really a really interesting conversation, even if those were the only authors that are going to be there and they're not, we're going to have four more. So register for free. It's a free event. You just have to sign up to get the link or you can get a special \$45 VIP ticket, which comes with a, a big old box of Book Club Girl swag, some books and some early galleys. So that is truly, truly a good value.

Bianca:

I love me some swag Tavia. <laugh>

Tavia:

Me. Yeah. I got my, got my, got my water bottle right here. I got my sticker That says Reads well with others. I have my coaster that says my wine club has a book problem. <laugh>

Bianca:

I love it.

Tavia:

Book Club Girl swag. Yes. Love it.

Bianca:

All right. And now we present to you *Island Queen* abridged.

Tavia:

Born a slave, Dorothy Dolly Kirwan's father was her white landowner. Dolly spent her childhood in defiance of her abusive older brother, the white free son of her biological dad. She also took every opportunity to ask her dad to put his name on her birth certificate, so she would one day have the chance to buy her own freedom. Dolly spent her days as a huckster selling blankets in the local market, laying the groundwork towards becoming a business mogul. Later when Dolly's sister Kitty is subjected to horrific abuse from Dolly's older brother, they escaped to Demerara for a better life. There, she starts a whirlwind romance with her friend, John Cosevelt Sells, takes advantage of her ignorance and fathers her even more children. By this point, she has four children. Eventually her father and brother visit Demerara, bringing Dolly's mom and daughter, allowing Dolly to purchase their manumission. Now that she's free, Dolly's business really starts to take off. Her romantic nature and beautiful appearance, lead her into love stories with other white men, a lawyer and merchant, John Thomas and Prince William and Admiral in Her Royal Navy. Prince William takes Dolly on his ship for her first visit to London, which greatly informs her approach to doing business in the islands. Upon her return, her empire grows across multiple islands with her elder children running various arms of the company. Ultimately Dorothy Kirwan Thomas and her force of character lead her into some of the most powerful halls of government in England to lobby for the interests of free Black business owners on the islands to repeal unfair taxation. Her legacy is deep and wide, from 10 children plus grandchildren, all of them educated in the UK to business partners, friends and lovers. Dolly is an epic woman.

Tavia:

Bianca, what did you think of *Island Queen*?

Bianca:

Oh, Tavia. I am so impressed with this book. What Vanessa has done here is just masterful. The writing is so gorgeous and so immersive. Um, I also just really loved all the fashion descriptions as well as like the, the little details she put here and there like the sweet, the smell of the sweet mangoes that just made me think about like my upbringing in Honolulu. So I think that just like rang really true to me. I just, I could not put this one down. <Laugh>

Tavia:

So I agree with everything you said. I, I, one thing I noticed was she would always remark on the type of fabric that her family was wearing. And there was a definite that there was a difference in the fabric that they made the slaves' clothes with versus the fabric that free people wore. And she was very, very sensitive and attuned to that. And it was a point of pride that her children did not wear slave fabric clothes.

Bianca:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I loved how much hats played a role in this book Tavia. In the beginning, we see Dolly, you know, she just wants a hat so badly. And then later on in the book, she is owning the finest hats in town. I just felt it was such a great symbol of her success.

Tavia:

I mean, it's on the cover like this amazing hat is on the cover. And this goes back to the whole fabric thing. Like slaves didn't wear hats. They wear maybe a kerchief. So the fact that she could go and buy a bonnet and wear a hat was, was a symbol of her freedom.

Bianca:

Exactly.

Tavia:

So Dolly is the energy of this book. She's the main character she is, you know...

Bianca:

So well put.

Tavia:

She is just larger than life. She's such devotion to her family. She's got this fiery spirit, so passionate and romantic, you know, I, I felt like every other chapter, she was like, no, actually, you know what, every chapter she was tumbling into bed with a lover, like, and she had many lovers and she was unapologetic about that. You know, we sort of have these little flashbacks when she's talking to like the, the, the head mistress of a private school in London and, um, and, and someone's like confront her with these rumors of these men that she slept with. And she's like, basically like, Yeah, so what are you going to do about it? <laugh>

Bianca:

I love it. Yeah. Yeah. You're totally right. She is 100%, one of the best people I think I've ever seen depicted in a novel. Um, and you know, just going back to the whole, you know, the men part of in this book, the men pale so much in comparison to Dolly, she is like you were saying, so fiery, so fierce, so smart and savvy. And they just like, they're just like fine or awful. Most of the time awful <laugh>. So she, again, I mean, even regardless of that, she's incredible. Um, and yeah, all the men, you know, they, they see that though, like they're drawn to her like bees to honey and, you know, she's just way better than them.

Tavia:

Yeah. I think most of the men see her strength and want to possess it or control it. But the last man that she, she, she chooses John Thomas, um, you know, he, he defers to her, like he loves her strength. He, he, he always says like, I'm just following you around, like, listen, you know, do whatever you want, but it's really like you're running the show. As it should be, as it should be. Um, and you know, for a woman who had such massive financial success and such, and, you know, she's such a formidable business woman, she had so much sorrow in her life. Forget the fact that she came from slavery and all the trauma that, that just, you know, like sort of etched into her soul. She bore 10 children. And she suffered from postpartum depression, every single all time she gave birth. Which is, and she, I mean, astounding, like there was no birth control, you know, she was just going to have more kids and such a strength of character to push through that. And then, you know, also she had at least two children who died young, who died while she was still alive. One of, one of her sons died, I think he was maybe what, ten, thirteen? Like very young. And then her other son died in his twenties. He had built up this plantation and he got an infectious disease and kicked the bucket.

Bianca:

So awful. I can't even having more than two children sounds horrific to me. Having any children sounds horrific. I mean, so the idea that she was able to have, you know, this many and that she, you know, she did it so well. She, you know, the fact, it just astounds me. It's incredible.

Tavia:

She was a fierce mama fierce, super fierce mama.

Bianca:

Let's toast to that.

Tavia:

Absolutely toasting to the fierce mama and...

Bianca:

Toasting to the fierce mama.

Tavia:

Go Dolly. May you live in greater glory in history than you have had up until this point.

Bianca:

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 .

Tavia:

Today, we're joined by Vanessa Riley whose book *Island Queen* is out now.

Bianca:

Vanessa. Hello. Welcome to the Book Club Girl podcast. We are so thrilled to have you here.

Vanessa Riley:

Bianca, Tavia. Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

Bianca:

Oh, so excited.

Tavia:

We're going to have fun.

Bianca:

So *Island Queen* was of course an amazing read and we have listeners who are such major fans of yours, Vanessa. So first up we want to ask you a few questions from them. First we have Sharon who wants to know how did you first discover Dorothy's story?

Vanessa Riley:

Dorothy's story was a complete accident. So I tell all my writer, friends, when you're doing research for something totally different and you find something amazing screen capture it, video, record it, do whatever you have to do. You'll never find it again.

Bianca:

<laugh>

Vanessa Riley:

Um, so I was doing research. I'm looking for something and I stumbled upon a cartoon, uh, a political cartoon, um, by a man named Gilroy. Um, and a little, just a little background of Gilroy. Gilroy is an IST he's misogynist. He's a sexist. So his, his, his there's always a charge to his cartoon. Um, he doesn't like women exactly. At least that's my interpretation. <laugh> Uh, because he loves to make us the joke of his, of any sketch that he does. And of course, when he gets a Black woman, he just goes to town and every kind of, you know, oddity you can think of, he throws it in there. But I come across a sketch and the woman, it's an intimate picture, you've got Prince William Henry, the future King William IV lovingly embracing a black woman and she's drawn beautifully. So she's not the joke. She's the

tattle: this is what your prince is doing in the West Indies. So I had a suspicion one that this was a true story. Two, that if I followed the rich man, I would find him. That's how I found Dorothy.

Bianca:

Wow. I love the idea that this was an accident and I feel like you get some of the best stories through that. Right?

Tavia:

Well, and you also talk about that comic in the book, like it shows up it's described. I think that's so cool. Mm-hmm

Bianca:

<affirmative>

Tavia:

So keeping sort of in this vein of the history piece of book. Christa, one of our listeners wants to know, and I think this is actually a very interesting question, given probably all of the descendants of Doll that there are now in the world... Were you able to do any interviews with her relatives?

Vanessa Riley:

Yes. Um, and this is another fluke, right? I had, I had dressed up as Dorothy for an RWA function. Uh, the, it was the Beaumont chapter. And so I dressed up as Dorothy and her great, great, great, great grandson, who's in Japan, saw the image on Facebook and he's like, that's my grandmother!

Tavia:

<laugh>.

Vanessa Riley:

And so we started chatting back and forth at Chris Rathbone is his name. He connected me with a professor in Australia who had done some, uh, some of the Caribbean research originally on Dorothy and some of her counterparts. And so he was one of the first books I signed and sent off to Japan.

Tavia:

That is incredible. I thought, for sure you were going to say, no, I, I can't believe that.

Bianca:

Me too! I was like, there's no way. Oh my God, I am shocked.

Vanessa Riley:

This is one of the oddities. I love it. I love it. When a plan comes together that I hadn't planned.

Tavia:

Well, you have to share that picture with us, dressed up as Dorothy.

Bianca:

Yes, please do. We'll link to it in our show notes or something. <laugh>.

Vanessa Riley:

I love that.

Tavia:

So let's get into juice. Dolly is an extremely passionate woman. She had at least three big loves in her life Sells. I'm counting Sells. I'm counting Thomas and I'm counting Prince William. It just seems to me. So I just, this was like one of

these marvelous contradictions of her personality. She's so disciplined and ambitious in her business life, right. She's like down to every detail, she's fierce focused. But in her personal life, in these love relationships, she was ruled by emotion and sort of like physical desire. What, and, and I'm so curious, like, was this a choice you made when building her character or were there facts from her history that, that you realized this must have been part of who she was?

Vanessa Riley:

Um, it goes back to all those kids, right?

Tavia:

<laugh>

Vanessa Riley:

Um, you know, she has ten children and it's like, okay, the first two were not of consent. We, we get that. But that's still eight more. Um, how do you weave a woman who's trying to build these businesses together? You know, I, I can't see her just one in a piece, right?

Tavia:

<laugh> mm-hmm, <affirmative>

Vanessa Riley:

<laugh> So to me, it's got to be more, a man has to be coming for her, has to be saying, you know, that he wants in, on her world. And every little girl I personally believe and this is part of my story, when your father is absent from the home, there's this thing in your head where you want to be loved. You want that undying love that you never actually got, and you're still looking for it in every man that shows up in your life. And so I, I painted that into Dorothy because of just knowing her story. And then once again, to explain, you know, after some point with all those children, you, you know, you would stop, right? <Laugh> You would figure out ways to stop. But I believe that many of them were of love that she loved these men and, or, or felt, felt love at the time and conception happened. And so it, it was just weaving that piece of the story for her.

Tavia:

Well, I love that. And I, I do really love the way that you wrote about the, you know, how she would try to resist. She, she, she did, her intention was to resist and then eventually they would wear her down. She, she would be like, yes. Okay. I surrender. Yes. I want you. Okay. Let's do this.

Bianca:

She's like, yes, I want this too. All right, let's do it. <laugh>

Vanessa Riley:

I love it. Just funny thing is -- the description of Dorothy and the way these men were just, she just had that presence. Like they wouldn't let her alone.

Bianca:

Yes.

Vanessa Riley:

And so, you know, I could see, I saw that the wearing the, her down, the cording, her, the going after her, because they want piece of that light that's in her and, and so just wear her down. So I, I I'm glad that conveyed.

Bianca:

Yeah. Tavia and I, yeah, we were talking about that earlier. How they, they go to her like bees to honey. They just like they want, but they also kind of want to possess that power. That's what Tavia was saying earlier and it's just, it's irresistible. <laugh>

Tavia:

You're listening to the Book Club Girl podcast where our guest this week is Vanessa Riley, whose book *Island Queen* is out now. You can read more about Vanessa's books at bookclubgirl.com

Bianca:

And coming up on the book club girl podcast, we ask Vanessa about her affinity, literary character stick around

Tavia:

This episode of the Book Club Girl podcast is brought to you by Thoughts from a Page, a podcast by Cindy Burnett.

Bianca:

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 award-winning author Vanessa Riley is here with us answering questions about her historical fiction novel *Island Queen*. So to switch things up a bit, Vanessa, I want to talk to you about legacy. So towards the end of the book legacy, it becomes this major theme and worry in Dolly's life. Um, one of my favorite lines in the book actually dives into this Dolly asks, "What was the use of building a legacy if the ones who deserved the fruit never lived long enough for the harvest?" I just, I love that line. Can you talk a bit about what legacy means to Dolly?

Vanessa Riley:

Dolly lived literally three lifetimes. The average Black person lived only like 33 years. And so at the point in the she's in her sixties, she's, you know, every day is a gift. Every day is a promise and she's beginning to outlive her children. To me, she was always this fighter: fighting for her freedom, fighting for their freedom. And now she's done all these things. She's made these sacrifices and she's losing the kids that she was trying to save these for. So, so legacy becomes everything, you know. There's that, that trip, which is true, where she took 18 grandkids from Demerara on a boat. (We can't go to Walmart with one in the back seat.) She goes.

Bianca:

<laugh> oh my God.

Vanessa Riley:

...with 18 from Demerara all the way up to, to Glasgow Scotland, because she's showing her grandkids, the world that's been opened to up because she has this access to money. So legacy is just so important and, and what she wants her kids to live forever. Uh, and, and to enjoy the fruits and yet still be free because at that time you could, you know, if, if, if somebody ran into problems in their business, they could lose their business. They could go to Debtor's prison. But if you were Black, you could possibly be re enslaved. And so there's that thing always in her mind. And I, I, I see, I felt that and, and that's what legacy means.

Tavia:

So switching gears to, to a couple more serious parts of the book. In the novel Dolly says to herself and says sometimes to her children, how she, she won't look to the left. And that's where, when she used to work in the sick house, that's where the worst victims of slavery's violence would be, would be and would be taken care of, was on the left. And, and it seems like it's a motif for Dolly and it's, and it's, it seems to me to be the one area where as strong and as fierce as she is, she can't truly triumph over the system because unfortunately she eventually comes to own slaves herself. And I feel like we would not be having a book club discussion with the author if we did not talk about this part of the book. And she admits herself in the book that she recognizes the, the inherent sort of hypocrisy or, or conflict within that. And, and just as the author of this character, I, I would just love to hear your thoughts about how, how Dolly, in your mind, lives with inconvenient truth.

Vanessa Riley:

It was, it was a struggle. But, but looking at her, I know that, uh, in Demerara, when I looked at the different cases, particularly of her son-in-law DP Simons, who was, um, actually, um, persecuted because of his faith, the owners, uh, the other, um, plantation owners would systematically drive you out of business if they didn't like you, if you weren't one of the..., Black men that had plantations that had, um, free, free labor, um, they ran them out of business. DP Simons it's, it's documented how he, you know, these loans were higher priced, the, the amounts that he was buying, they forced basically he, he becomes bankrupt. So Dorothy is looking at all of this and being pressured that why isn't she using, uh, enslaved labor? You know, the, the, the, the market for, uh, free labor is very tight. And she understands that if she keeps, um, adhering to her principles, uh, she's not going to be able to build everything she's going to build as well as this additional pressure. And, and once again, if you are black, not only could you end up in debtor's prison, you could be re-enslaved. So I think for me, that was the magic bell of I'm going to participate so that I have a seat at a table and I, I can do these things. But then I look at the rest of the history and she keeps owning more people than she has any land for.

Tavia:

mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Vanessa Riley:

She and the other women. So I was like, okay, this is possibly what she was doing. She was buying them so other people couldn't buy them. And she was putting them on a path like she was put on a path of learning how to be your own business person. So learning a, a skill that you could go and actually, um, make money for. Because once again, if you're Black and you run into debts, not only could you go to prison, you could be re-enslaved. And so the worst thing in the world is she had somebody and they were, they became free, and then a couple years later, they get in troubles with debts and being re-enslaved. So I think she had a master plan. I don't have any, you know, full documentation, but looking at the amount of land she owned and the, of people in the end that she ended up purchasing.

Tavia:

So every episode we ask an author, if you could be any character from a novel, who would you be?

Vanessa Riley:

Okay. A toss up here, toss up here. So some of me wants to be Evangeline in you know, Chanel Cleeton's, uh, *The Most beautiful Girl in Cuba*.

Bianca:

Ooh.

Vanessa Riley:

Uh, and some of me wants me, Dana, except I want to keep my arm. In *Kindred*.

Bianca:

<laugh>.

Tavia:

So why do you want to be the first character I for, I forgot her name already. I'm sorry,

Vanessa Riley:

Evangeline. Um,

Tavia:

Evangeline,

Vanessa Riley:

Evangeline. She's, she's just very strong and it's in Cuba and it's, it's, she's fighting, uh, uh, she she's, she's the most be, well, she's the most beautiful girl in Cuba <laugh>

Tavia:

Which is saying a lot because Cuban people are gorgeous.

Vanessa Riley:

Are gorgeous people, gorgeous people. She's just, she's very strong. Going against the soldiers. You know, just, I love women who decide, you know, I don't care. What's going to happen to me. I am fighting the fight. And so I just, I just love that about her.

Bianca:

Vanessa, on that note. Thank you so much for joining us today. It has really been so fun talking to you. Thank you.

Tavia:

This was really fun. This was great.

Vanessa Riley:

Thank you ladies.

Tavia:

That was Vanessa Riley, whose book *Island Queen* is out now. To find out more about Vanessa Riley and her work, head to bookclubgirl.com/podcast, where you can also find links to everything mentioned in this episode.

Bianca:

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.

Tavia:

You'll hear from us again next week, where we'll be speaking with Bolu Babalola, author of the collection of love stories, myths, and folk tales from around the world, *Love in Color*. If you want to read the book before its podcast drops, head over to hc.com and use promo code BOOKCLUBGIRL, all one word for 25% off and free shipping for any book discussed on this podcast. That includes past seasons, you know.

Bianca:

And we love hearing from our listeners, email us at the girls at book club girl dot com or post in the comments on our Instagram feed @bookclubgirl. You can also leave us a voicemail. Our number is 2 1 2 2 0 7 7 3 3 6. Yes, we do listen to them and your voicemail or email could very well end up being read on the show.

Tavia:

Before we go. We'd like to thank Caroline Kwash of the Hanger Studios who produced today's episode and Roscelia Ryan, our audio engineer, and editor. Until next time I'm Tavia.

Bianca:

And I'm Bianca.

Tavia:

Happy reading!