



2019 WINNER

AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE BY TAYARI JONES

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tayari Jones is the internationally bestselling author of four novels, including *An American Marriage* which won the Women's Prize for Fiction 2019, was an Oprah's Book Club Selection and featured on Barack Obama's summer reading list. She is currently Professor of Creative Writing at Emory University. She lives in Atlanta.

PLOT SUMMARY

Newlyweds Celestial and Roy are the embodiment of the American Dream: he's a young executive and she's an artist on the brink of an exciting career, until one day when their lives are changed forever by circumstances neither of them could have imagined. Roy is arrested and sentenced to twelve years in prison for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. Devastated and unmoored, Celestial struggles to hold on to her love for Roy, finding comfort in the arms of her oldest friend Andre. When Roy's conviction is suddenly overturned, he returns home ready to resume their life together. But is it that easy?

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

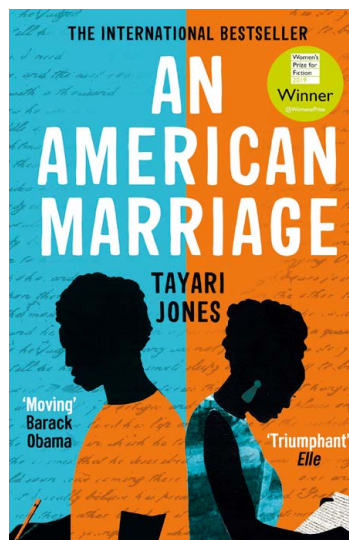
The theme of babies, pregnancy and abortion is woven through *An American Marriage*. Celestial makes realistic baby dolls (which, tellingly, as a

female artist and especially as a black woman, she herself knows will fall into the 'craft' or 'popular art' category rather than be received as Art), one of which she copies from a baby picture of Roy. When Roy's mother Olive sees it, she is taken aback by its similarity; Celestial offers it to her as a gift because she obviously wants it, but Olive refuses.

When Roy is in prison, Celestial finds out that she's pregnant and decides to have an abortion. Afterwards, in their letters, Celestial and Roy argue about the abortion and Celestial tells Roy that she had a previous abortion as a young student. She talks about making the dolls as a kind of therapy; she says she 'dolled her way out' from the weight pressed on her soul after that first abortion, and that she uses that same method to cope with her

second abortion and with Roy's imprisonment.

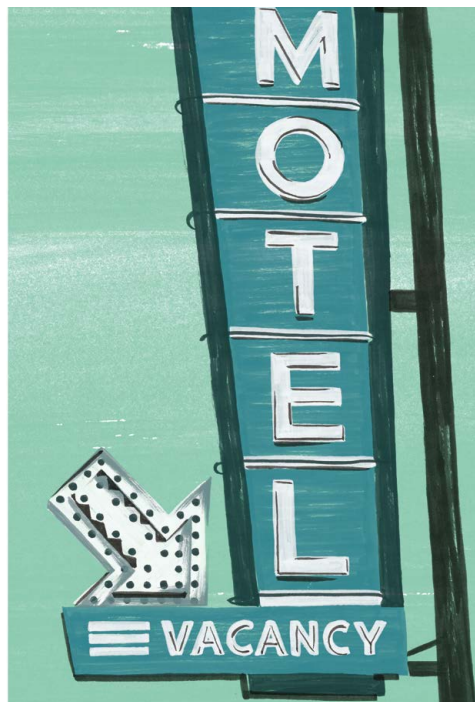
Last, Celestial's making of the dolls – specifically 'pretty brown dolls for pretty brown girls' – brings to mind the current drives for greater diversity and representation of ethnicities, identities and abilities in children's toys and books, for instance Mattel's introduction of a greater range of Barbie dolls, the backlash against the 'pinkification' of girl's toys and clothes, and modern campaigns for all children to see themselves reflected in books.



DISCUSSION POINTS

When Celestial gives her testimony at Roy's trial, she feels that none of the jury believe her. It seems that being a black man and being at the scene gives Roy enough reason to be suspected of the attack, despite Celestial's testimony (and despite the fact that Roy in fact helped the woman, warning her about the broken doorknob). What is Tayari Jones telling us about being black in America here? When Roy writes to Celestial from prison, he says that almost all of the men incarcerated are black. What does the book say about the American justice system and institutional racism?

And what do you think Jones is trying to say about marriage, in particular Celestial and Roy's marriage? Jones has said that *An American Marriage* is a novel in conversation with *The Odyssey*; the story of a man trying to get back home to a waiting wife and a wife unsure of the extent to which she is permitted to rebuild her own life. Do you blame Celestial for her infidelity? Are Roy's expectations of Celeste unreasonable? But even before Roy is sent to prison, there are signs that the marriage is troubled. Would the marriage have lasted had Roy not gone to prison? Would the baby have sealed them together once and for all as a strong family unit?



“ AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE IS AN INCREDIBLE EXAMINATION OF AMERICA AND AMERICAN LIFE, FOCUSING ON THE INTIMACY OF A MARRIAGE BUT ON A HUGE POLITICAL CANVAS. THE PROSE IS LUMINOUS, STRIKING AND UTTERLY MOVING, [DEPICTING] HOW HARD IT IS EVEN WHEN YOU'RE ON THE OUTSIDE AND ARE FREE, HOW YOU'RE NOT REALLY FREE WHEN YOU HAVE SOMEONE IN PRISON ”

KATE WILLIAMS,
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2019

QUESTIONS

At one point in the book, Roy describes Celestial's upbringing as being like 'The Huxtables'. This is a cultural reference to *The Cosby Show*, a 1980s American comedy series featuring a wealthy black family. How is the plot of *An American Marriage* contrary to the American Dream presented in *The Cosby Show*?

Even though Celestial and Roy's relationship is described as being 'The American Dream', their experience of being a successful, affluent black couple is quickly destroyed by the system that claims to support everyone equally and reward hard work. Has Roy

always been set up to fail? If they were a white couple, would Roy have been accused of the rape in the first place? And would the jury have been more likely to believe Celestial's testimony in court?

Roy and Celestial's childhoods are quite different. How are they different and why is it important for authors to represent a faithful spectrum of lived experience for all characters but particularly black or minority ethnic families?

NEXT STEPS

Inspired by Celestial's 'dolling' you might like to research the art of contemporary women of colour or contemporary 'folk' artists. Pull together a Pinterest board or a blog featuring your favourite finds:

think about common themes, techniques and even materials, and why those might be used.

Alternatively, *An American Marriage* features a dual narrative, told respectively by Celestial and Roy, with occasional interceptions from Andre and Roy's father, Roy Senior. Think about writing one of the scenes from a different point of view we don't hear from: perhaps the woman in the motel that Roy helps out can retell the events from her point of view, including or excluding the attack. What sort of person is she? What happened from her point of view?

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

SILVER SPARROW BY TAYARI JONES

EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU BY CELESTE NG

THE CONFESSIONS OF FRANNIE LANGTON BY SARA COLLINS