

## Author Spotlight

# YAA GYASI



Yaa Gyasi was born in Ghana and raised in Alabama. She earned a BA in English from Stanford University and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she held a Dean's Graduate Research Fellowship. Her debut novel, *Homegoing*, was published in 2016 to great acclaim. It won her, at the age of 26, the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Award for best first book, the PEN/Hemingway Award for a first book of fiction, and an American Book Award. She lives in New York City.

*Homegoing* traces the descendants of half-sisters, Effia and Esi, across continents and centuries. Its power lies in showing, on a very individual scale, the effects slavery had on millions of lives. As the *New York Times* said, "The book leaves the reader with a visceral understanding of both the savage realities of slavery and the emotional damage that is handed down over the centuries."

Gyasi originally had intended to write a straightforward book about a mother and a daughter. But after a visit to Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, she decided to expand the book's concept to a larger exploration of slavery and its effects.

Built by slave traders, the castle illustrates the sharp contrast between freedom and slavery. "That juxtaposition of the majesty upstairs with the awfulness and despair downstairs really struck me," Gyasi said. "I was really struck also that there were [people] upstairs who maybe didn't understand or realize what was going on underneath them."

Through its many characters, *Homegoing* makes the historical personal—the novel's structure gives the reader a wide-angle view of history, while each character reveals the very intimate traumas caused by slavery and its legacy.

Yaa Gyasi drew attention from the literary world with *Homegoing* for its ambitious scope and structure—and a million-dollar advance for the book deal. Among the book's early admirers were Ta-Nehisi Coates, Zadie Smith, and Roxane Gay, with Ta-Nehisi Coates writing, "This is the book I'd give to my kid if he asked about the trans-Atlantic slave trade... *Homegoing* is an inspiration."

Prepared by Katie McNeirney

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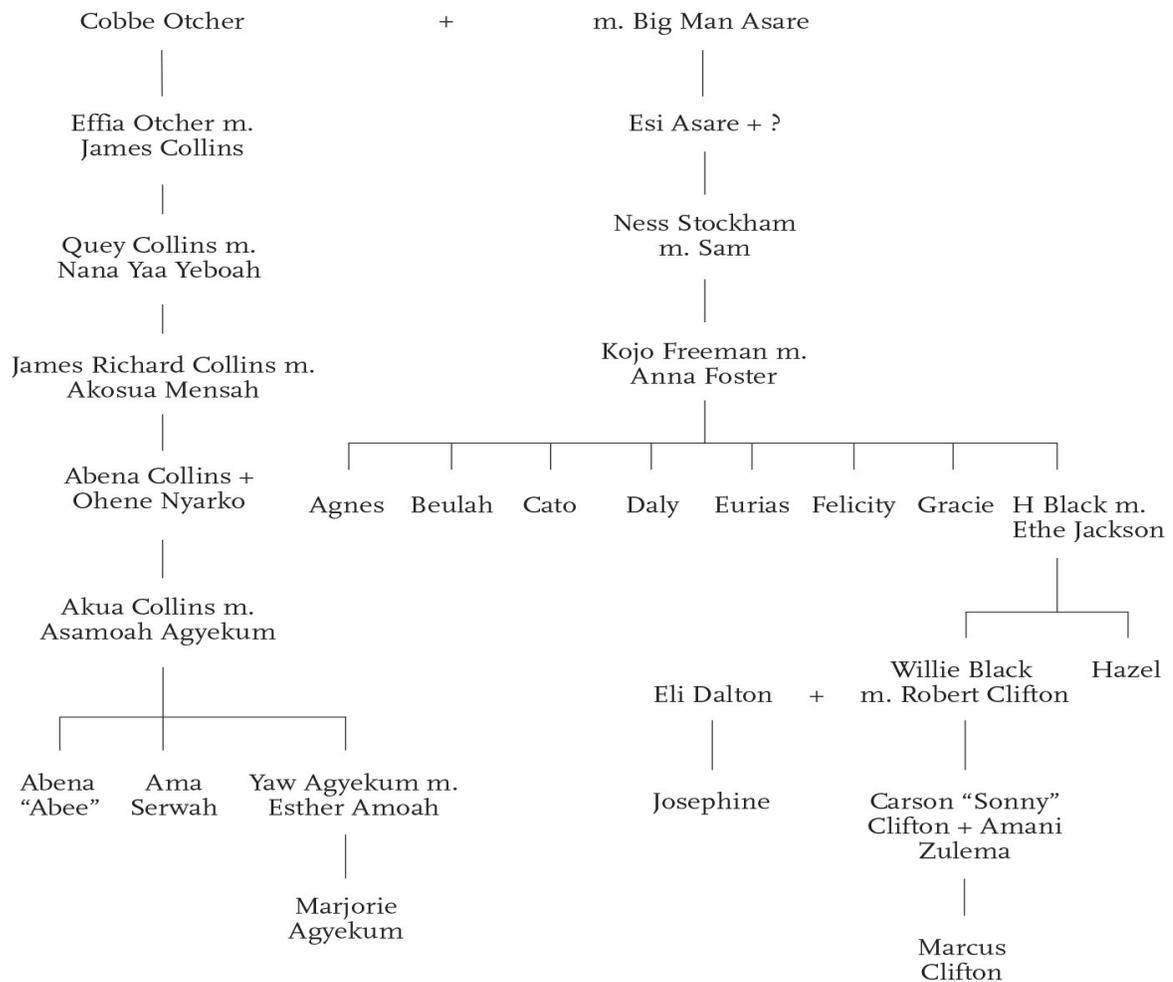
Sources: Time, New York Times, Kirkus Reviews, Penguin Random House

## Discussion Questions for *Homegoing*

1. The novel's structure is unusual. Rather than a narrative that follows a central few characters, each chapter features a different member of the family, forming a non-linear, braided, complexly woven tale. What was the effect of this structure? How did the structure affect the pacing of the novel? And how would your interpretation of the novel change if the story had been told from a single point of view?
2. With each chapter focused on one character at the time, were there characters you wanted more time with? Which characters or moments were particularly vivid to you?
3. The motif of fire recurs throughout the book. Generally speaking, what is the significance of fire? Specifically, what is the role of fire in connection with the depiction of mental illness? See Akua's chapter.
4. What was the overall characterization of mental illness (including characters' responses to trauma) in the novel? How were sleep disorders represented?
5. How are women treated in the book and how are their bodies described? How does each woman's culture affect her treatment? Which characters seem to be actively shaping their own destiny and who seems to be at the mercy of their circumstances?
6. Both Esi's mother Maame and Esi are raped. How do their rapes shape their narratives? What do their experiences say about power, and who holds it?
7. Despite the rapes and the violence, there are some touching love stories in the novel. How is romantic love depicted throughout the book? Which pairing was most memorable to you?
8. Compare and contrast the sense of community in the chapters set in Ghana and those set in America.
9. How do the characters Marjorie and Marcus represent the author's experiences as a Ghanaian-American?
10. What effect does slavery have on the characters' awareness and knowledge of their own ancestry and history?
11. How do the experiences of Effia's descendants differ from those of Esi's descendants? How are they similar?
12. What is your interpretation of the title? Is it a collective or a personal 'homegoing'?
13. What was your opinion of the ending of the book?

# Homegoing Family Tree from the novel

Maame



## Homegoing Chapter Narrators

Chapter 1 — Effia

Chapter 8 — H

Chapter 2 — Esi

Chapter 9 — Akua

Chapter 3 — Quey

Chapter 10 — Willie

Chapter 4 — Ness

Chapter 11 — Yaw

Chapter 5 — James

Chapter 12 — Sonny

Chapter 6 — Kojo

Chapter 13 — Marjorie

Chapter 7 — Abena

Chapter 14 — Marcus