

BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Readers,

This work rattled around in my head long before I felt skilled enough to tackle it, but it always felt like “the book I was born to write.” That’s because it introduces Guyana and Guyanese characters onto a mainstream literary stage where they’ve long been missing.

To those who are unfamiliar with Guyana, I’m so very proud to give you a glimpse of this beautiful post-colonial country. But please note that this fictional work is not meant to carry the mantle of representation. To my fellow Guyanese, I hope the work feels honest and that you celebrate seeing echoes of our culture on the page. But I also hope you understand that the difficult themes I explore are not meant to make broad statements about Guyana. This is a singular story.

I’ve always felt that deep, singular stories act like mirrors, reflecting and connecting us as humans. Sunny’s story is unique, but it’s also an everyman story. That’s because she grapples with identity, and who among us hasn’t questioned who they really are or wondered how their past defines them? I hope this universal theme strikes a chord with you.

I’m grateful you’ve chosen this book and have allowed me to perform the magic act of transporting a tale from my head into yours. I hope it stays with you well beyond the last page.

With gratitude,

Nanda Reddy



A GIRL WITHIN A GIRL WITHIN A GIRL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This novel's scope encompasses many themes: coming-of-age, immigration, and survival, to name a few. In your view, what is the most important one? And why?
2. The novel is uniquely structured in parts that coincide with shifts in the protagonist's identity. How did this structure influence your understanding of the formation of identity as a journey and, to some extent, an individual choice? Did the structure and different names the protagonist uses emphasize transitional chapters in your own life or times when you had to embrace change?
3. Maya worries that Dwayne will no longer love her if she reveals the truth about her identity. How did the backstory Maya created for herself affect who she was in her marriage?
4. As depicted in the book, code-switching is part of the assimilation process. Based on the dramatic range of Sunny's experiences, how much do you think code-switching is a natural part of everyday life versus a social requirement, given current cultural standards?
5. The protagonist tattoos the words "Begin Again" on her ankle—those words become her mantra. What does *Begin Again* mean to you?

6. Compare and contrast the United States that Sunny envisions at the start of the novel while still in Guyana to her experiences once she arrives. How do the realities she encounters growing up in the United States differ from the sparkling vision of the country she had as a child? How does her vision of Guyana change over time?

7. There are a lot of characters throughout the novel who help our protagonist along her journey—specifically Lila, Yvonne, and Janna. How are these women similar? How are they different? Is there anyone else in the novel you might describe as a helper?

8. The protagonist goes through a great deal of trauma throughout her adolescence—from a sense of abandonment and a massive amount of pressure from her family's expectations, to physical and sexual abuse at the hands of Prem. How did these traumas impact her self-image?

9. The protagonist consistently mourns and thinks about her connection to her sister, Roshi, as she grows older. This connection becomes physical when it is revealed that they each might carry a cancerous gene. What does this physical bond represent in a novel that constantly emphasizes reinvention and stripping oneself of previously held identities?

10. What do you imagine Maya's experience is of returning to Guyana with her new family and reconnecting with her old family?

TEN FACTS ABOUT GUYANA

1. Guyana is a product of French, Dutch, and British colonization. It was a British colony from 1814 until its independence in 1966. This is how it became the only English-speaking South American country.
2. Many of the Amerindian communities that populated Guyana during colonization still maintain their traditions. They are the fourth largest ethnic group in the country.
3. Guyana means “land of many waters,” deriving from a native language.
4. Over three-fourths of Guyana is covered with dense rainforest. Most of the population live along the coast.
5. The two largest ethnic groups in Guyana arrived primarily as slaves from Africa or indentured servants from India. After the British abolished slavery in 1834, the British East India Company began a contracted version of slavery by promising land in exchange for 5-10 years of slave-like indentureship.
6. British cultural legacy can be seen in Guyanese love of tea, cricket, and marmite; in the school system; and in left-hand driving.
7. Gold is a valuable natural resource in Guyana and Sir Walter Raleigh famously searched for “El Dorado,” a mythical city of gold, in the country. However, Guyana’s most famous rum brand took up the renowned name, El Dorado.
8. Many unique species of animals and plants live in the Guyanese forests, some only recently discovered, like the Blue Tarantula (found in 2017).
9. The “land of many waters” is crisscrossed by black-water rivers and waterfalls draining from the Amazon. This tea-like coloration comes from tannins in the rich leaf detritus.
10. Because of mass emigration after its independence, more Guyanese people now live outside of the country than in it. Today, the population of Guyana is under a million.



The author's childhood home 40 years after she left. This house has no "bottom house," which is designed to be used as a shop.



A "fireside" similar to what Sunny's family would have used for cooking.



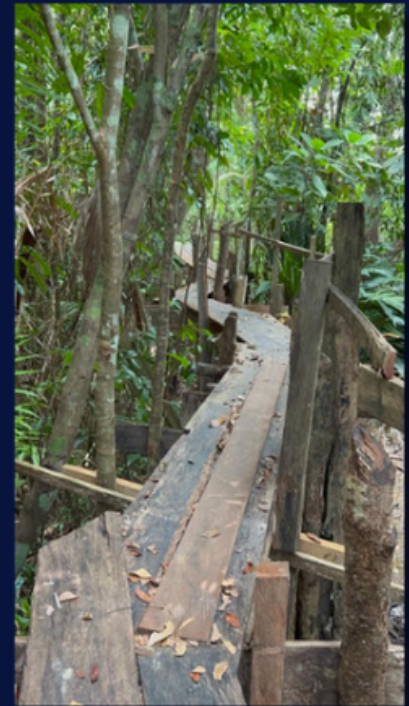
A wooden house with a "bottom house."



A marketplace, known as a "stelling."



Bed framed with mosquito netting.



A hiking bridge on Sloth Island, taken during the author's visit in 2024.



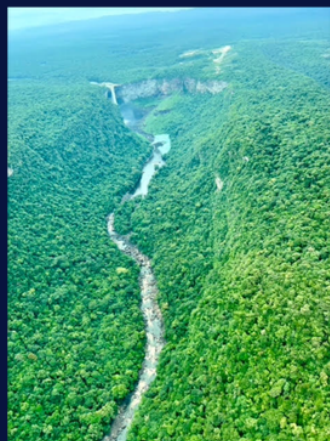
The conservancy in 2024 when water was low due to drought. Also pictured a typical wooden boat, used for fishing and transportation.



Canal #1 is a setting found in part one of the novel. Sunny's family would have lived in a fictional home on the left side, on an interior side road or "backdam" road. Water is currently low due to a prolonged drought.



The author swimming in Guyanese "black water" at Orinduik Falls.



Kaieteur Falls, one of Guyana's attractions, only accessible via plane and a hike.



Boats used to access remote, interior parts of Guyana with a typical stilt house beyond.



A home along the Bonasika, which is part of the "interior" community with no access to roads.



A large tidal beach visible during low tide. At high tide, it's entirely submerged.



Guyanese pride on display.

Q&A

with Nanda Reddy



1. What was your inspiration for the book?

This story came to me a few years before I wrote a word of it. I was on vacation in Costa Rica, and a tour guide made the honest assumption that I was from India. I didn't correct him because it didn't bother me, and there wasn't time to discuss the Indian diaspora, but the idea of an Indo-Caribbean woman who hides her true identity popped into my head. I was intrigued by the idea of someone who allows others' assumptions to shape what they know about her, someone who reinvents herself to erase her past. I didn't know the details of the story then, but I knew I'd end up mining small truths from my life for the book.

As an immigrant who is brown, I've grown adept at code-switching. I'm aware I will always be perceived as an other, at least initially, anytime I meet someone, and that acting and sounding "American" changes how they behave toward me. That's always fascinated me, and it's something I explore with my main character. I also examine the idea of curating a life to hide all the ugly things, the secret, unfaceable things. On some level, it's something I think everyone does, hiding parts of ourselves and showing only the pretty stuff. My protagonist builds a life on this for the most part.

"I knew I'd end up mining small truths from my life for the book."

2. Your own immigration story is quite different from that of your protagonist. What was your experience as a young immigrant to the U.S.? In what ways did it inform this story?

Unlike my protagonist, I arrived in the U.S. with papers and with my entire family. We were welcomed by my father's extended family, with whom we lived for about a year, who set my parents up for success by facilitating jobs, helping with rides, watching us kids, etc.

Even so, I was a fish out of water and floundered upon arrival. Ah, the shock of it! I was nine, and all I knew of America were the things relatives had brought to Guyana during visits.

Apples and Crayola crayons; store-bought clothes and dolls. With my accented English, braided hair, homemade clothes, and shy demeanor, I did not fit into the treacherous American school culture. We were the last of my father's family to arrive, so I didn't even fit in with my many cousins, who'd arrived years before me or were born in America. This compounded my sense of isolation, and I assumed there was something wrong with me. Feelings and experiences from that time definitely informed my character's journey.

3. Over the course of the novel, the protagonist becomes an expert at code-switching. How do you think code-switching factors into our everyday lives in today's culture?

In my novel, the young protagonist speaks a form of Creole English, and she's judged negatively for this, even by the Guyanese people among her. She works to "fix" her speech, but she quickly learns that acceptance into American culture requires more than just language. Much of her identity shifting in the story is related to learning to code-switch on a macro level to survive.

But I believe code-switching occurs at a micro level for most people, particularly as we've grown accustomed to social media. Everyone everywhere understands that most profiles are curated to some degree, that posters follow a code in their profiles, and that nuanced, messy, honest selves might implode their personas. I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with this; I think it's natural for us to speak and act differently in different situations, at work versus around friends, for example. But, I'm not sure we fess up to our own multiple selves, much less examine and come to terms with them.

4. What was behind your choice to include several deaf characters in the novel?

I didn't set out to write deaf characters, but they showed up as soon as I started writing. That's likely because I have a deaf sister, and we mine from our lives, us novelists.

Q&A (continued)

In one of the first scenes, the protagonist is with her deaf older sister, and there's a dynamic in which she wonders what her sister is thinking but can't just ask. She serves as her sister's interpreter, but their communication is coarse and rudimentary, and they've reached an age where it's stopped serving them. She's also desperate to be alone and leave her sister, who's always by her side. A similar dynamic once existed between me and my deaf older sister when we were young; I leaned into this and exaggerated it in the fictional setting.

In my early draft, I worried people might assume the sister relationship is autobiographical, but Roshi is very different from my sister, and their lives are drastically different. I kept the character because she quickly became pivotal AND because I felt her representation mattered. And my sister was excited to know I included a deaf character in the book.

The protagonist's deaf son and her husband's deaf sister were created for tension since she keeps her sister a secret. Plus, I loved the idea of showing a utopic deaf world full of sign language, something my sister, sadly, did not live.

5. This book features a notably diverse cast of characters. How did you address differences in language from Guyanese patois to sign language to Spanish in your writing process?

Authenticity was important to me as these characters sprung up and spoke, and I often went by intuition as I wrote. But my intuition was fed by experience. I grew up in Miami in a diverse neighborhood and attended diverse schools where Spanish was prevalent; as someone who was self-conscious about her accent and speech, I studied how different groups spoke—their slang and their mannerisms. I had no idea this would serve me as a writer in my adulthood. For the patois and sign language, I created a style guide to stay consistent on the page. I also worked hard to represent the characters and their speech with respect, which is important to me.

6. Your protagonist is a book lover. Is there a novel that has been particularly influential to you?

The books cited in the novel have been influential during different periods of my life.

I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou, was one of the first books I read that showed me honest, gritty stories by non-whites can be told. *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand, was influential in my late adolescence, though I no longer believe its tenets. *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver, was one of the first novels I read that addressed colonialism in a critical light, and it was the first time I began thinking critically about Guyana as a British colony. But the book that made me want to read again and inspired me to write is *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch. Its poetic prose felt like magic, and I wanted to try my hand at it, though I did it secretly and badly for years!

7. What do you hope readers take away from this novel?

I hope this book causes readers to think about the dimensionality of identity. Their own identity—the versions of themselves that have existed. And others' identities, which we often try to pigeonhole, not wanting to deal with complexity and nuance.

I also hope this book helps readers look at immigration and assimilation in a nuanced and critical way. There is no right-wrong position presented in this novel, but there is a complicated situation that's worth discussing. Finally, I hope readers are curious about Guyana and the Indian diaspora there—enough to learn more about it.

I hope this book causes readers to think about the dimensionality of identity.

8. Can you speak to your writing process a little bit? Do you follow a set routine and schedule, or were you looser in your approach to writing this novel?

I wish I were the sort of writer who sets a schedule and sticks to it, but I'm a lot looser than that. In drafting this book, I signed up for a course that forced me to meet word count deadlines, and I learned that showing up often triggers the muse. But sometimes it helps to let story ideas marinate; I've learned that, too.

9. Are you working on anything new?

My WIP is a departure from this novel, a psychological thriller that addresses the aftermath of a kidnapping. But the protagonist is also a Guyanese-American woman, and identity is also a theme.

A GIRL WITHIN A GIRL WITHIN A GIRL

Playlist



***Take Me
Home Tonight***
Eddie Money

Tiny Winey
Byron Lee &
the Dragonaires

***Pride (In The
Name Of Love)***
U2

Hot Hot Hot
Arrow

Long Time
Arrow

Against All Odds
Phil Collins

Für Elise
Ludwig van Beethoven

Caribbean Queen
Billy Ocean

***Girls Just Want to
Have Fun***
Cyndi Lauper

Holiday
Madonna

Bad
U2



























***What's Love Got to
Do with It***
Tina Turner

Like a Virgin
Madonna

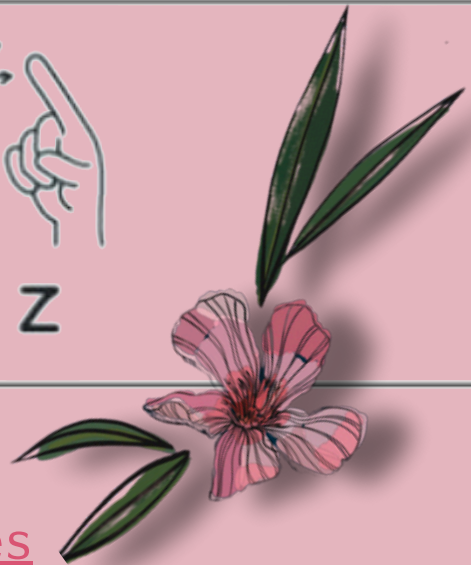
King of Rock
Run-D.M.C



SIGN LANGUAGE FOR BEGINNERS

						
A	B	C	D	E	F	G
						
H	I	J	K	L	M	N
						
O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
						
V	W	X	Y	Z		

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Caribbean Black Cake (rum soaked fruit cake)

One 9-inch or 10-inch pan

Caribbean black cake is a rich, dense fruit cake with deep roots in the region's colonial history. A descendant of British figgy pudding, it was transformed in the Caribbean with local ingredients and techniques, becoming a cherished treat for holidays and celebrations. Traditionally, dried fruits are soaked in rum and wine for months or even years before being added to a spiced cake batter, but this recipe offers the same bold flavors without the long wait. The fruit puree is blended into the batter and slow-baked, resulting in a fudgy, brownie-like texture that only gets better with time. Preserved by alcohol, this cake lasts for weeks, making it perfect for sharing. This single-pan recipe is ideal for first-timers looking to experience a unique taste of the Caribbean.

Ingredients

For the Cake batter

1 cup unsalted butter, room temperature
1 cup light brown sugar
5 eggs, room temperature
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 teaspoon almond extract
1 teaspoon orange or lemon zest
1/4 cup Caribbean browning
1 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
1 1/4 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
1/4 teaspoon ground clove
1/2 teaspoon salt

For the Fruit mixture

1/2 cup prunes
1/2 cup raisins
1/2 cup glazed cherries
1/2 cup mixed peel (or more glazed cherries)
1 cup port wine
1/4 cup dark or white rum

For soaking

1/4 cup dark rum
1/4 cup cherry brandy

Created by [@alicaspepperpot](https://www.instagram.com/alicaspepperpot)
alicaspepperpot.com

Directions

In a deep mixing bowl, combine prunes, raisins, cherries, and mixed peel. Pour the port wine and rum over the fruits, cover, and let soak for about 4 hours. This allows the fruits to absorb the liquid and rehydrate slightly. Then blend the soaked fruit mixture (with all the liquid) in a food processor or blender until smooth. You should have about 2 cups of fruit purée.

Preheat the oven to 275°F (135°C). Place a small pan with 2 cups of hot water on the bottom rack to create steam and keep the cake moist while baking. Cut a piece of parchment paper to line the bottom of a 9-inch or 10-inch light-colored baking pan. Lightly grease the pan with cooking spray before placing the parchment inside.

In a bowl, sift together the flour, baking powder, cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, and salt. Set aside.

In a stand mixer (or using a hand mixer), cream the butter and brown sugar together on medium-high speed until light and fluffy. This will take a few minutes. Reduce to medium speed and add the eggs one at a time, mixing well after each addition. Mix in the vanilla extract, almond extract, and citrus zest. Add the 2 cups of pureed fruit mixture and blend until fully incorporated. The batter should look speckled with fruit. Blend in 1/4 cup of Caribbean browning to darken the batter.

Gradually fold the sifted flour mixture into the batter in four parts, using a spatula to mix. Be careful not to overmix—stop once flour is fully incorporated. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and smooth the top with a spatula.

If using a 9-inch pan, bake for 2 hours 15 minutes. If using a 10-inch pan, bake for about 2 hours. At the 1-hour mark, check the cake's progress—insert a toothpick in the center. It should come out with some pasty batter, similar to undercooked brownies. When the cake is fully baked, the toothpick should come out clean with no crumbs or pasty batter. Remove from the oven.

Let the cake cool in the pan for 10 minutes. If you'd like to transfer the cake onto a serving platter, do so before soaking the cake with rum (see note below). Transferring the cake after soaking can make it fragile and prone to breaking, so it's best to do it before adding the rum. If you do not want to transfer the cake to a serving platter, it is perfectly okay to leave it in the baking pan while it soaks up the rum. Combine the dark rum and cherry brandy in a cup then pour it over the cake while the cake is still warm. Use a basting brush to evenly distribute the liquid. Allow the cake to absorb the alcohol as it cools completely. Once fully cooled, leave cake in pan and cover with plastic wrap.

This cake becomes even more flavorful as it ages over time, tasting best after a few days as the flavors deepen. You can slice it into small portions, as it is a dense cake. Store the cake in an airtight container at room temperature—it will stay fresh for weeks due to the alcohol preserving it. You can also wrap it tightly and freeze for longer storage. For a Boozier Cake: Add a few teaspoons more rum or brandy every few days for extra moisture and flavor.

Notes

If you'd like to serve this cake on a serving platter, let the cake cool in the pan for 15 minutes after baking. Run a butter knife around the edges to loosen it. Place a piece of wax or parchment paper over the top of the cake. Set the serving platter on top of the pan, then carefully flip the cake onto the platter. Gently turn the cake so the top is facing up. Remove the wax or parchment paper, and then proceed with soaking the cake.

You can add a couple tablespoons of rum to the cake after a week if it looks like it is drying out.

Caribbean browning is a burnt sugar syrup that gives the cake its characteristic dark color. It can be purchased online through Amazon or at Caribbean grocery stores. If you're unable to find it, you can omit it—the cake will still taste great, though it won't have the same deep color.

Guyanese oil roti, also known as paratha, is a soft layered flatbread that is a staple in Guyanese cuisine. The dough is a simple kneading of flour, leavening, and a little fat, then rolled, layered with oil, sealed, and cooked on a skillet. It is then clapped or shaken to release its layers. Oil roti is popularly served with curries, stews, or simply with a bowl of dhal.

Guyanese Paratha (Oil Roti)

Makes 6 rotis

Ingredients

Flour mixture:

3 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon softened butter
or ghee
1 ½ cups water

For layering dough:

½ cup thin neutral oil,
softened butter, or melted
ghee
½ cup flour for sprinkling on
top

For Cooking:

½ cup neutral oil such as
grapeseed, canola, or
vegetable oil

Directions

Prepare the dough:

Sift the flour, baking powder, and salt into a large mixing bowl. Pinch the butter and flour together until it is combined with the flour. Make a well in the center bowl, and gradually pour in half the water. Stir the dough using your hands or a spatula. Pour just enough water to form large pieces of dough, then knead it until a soft, smooth dough forms.

Rub a thin layer of oil on the dough to prevent it from forming a crust. Tightly cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let it rest for 30 minutes.

Shape the dough ball:

Divide the dough into 6 equal portions. Working with one dough ball at a time, pull the outer edges of the dough toward the center, going all around. Gently pinch the gathered edges together to seal, like shaping a dinner roll. Flip the ball over so the seam is facing down and place on a small baking tray or large plate.

Layer the dough:

Lightly flour your work surface and roll each dough ball to about ¼-inch thickness. Dip a basting brush in oil and brush the entire surface of the rolled dough. Starting at one end, roll the dough up like a cinnamon roll, then coil it into a spiral shape. Tuck the other end on the top into the center to seal it. Cover the spiraled dough balls with damp paper towels and let them rest for 10 minutes.

Roll the dough:

Preheat your skillet over medium-low heat. Dust your work surface with flour and gently roll each spiraled dough ball, flipping it over and stretching it to form a large circle. Continue until the dough is about ¼ inch thick. Once the skillet is hot, place the dough on it and cook until small bubbles appear, then flip using a turner.

Cook the roti:

Brush the cooked side with oil and flip again. Brush the second side with oil, then flip once more to the first side. Cook for about 20 seconds, ensuring both sides are golden and the roti is fully cooked. If any spots appear doughy, give it more time. Roti should have golden brown spots; if it's darker, lower the heat.

Release the layers:

Place the cooked roti in a kitchen towel and gently clap the towel to release the layers. Alternatively, you can vigorously shake the roti in a Tupperware dish to achieve the same result.

Serve:

Serve hot with a bowl of dhal, curry, or your favorite stew. Enjoy!

Guyanese dhal - stovetop method

Serves 6

Directions

Boil the Split Peas:

Bring 7 cups of water to a boil in a large pot. Rinse the split peas thoroughly and add them to the boiling water.

Add Seasonings:

Add the onion, garlic, and pepper to the pot, along with the turmeric, ground geera, and salt. Stir to combine.

Cook the Peas:

Reduce to a medium simmer and cook for about 45 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the split peas are soft and tender.

Blend to Smoothness:

Remove the hot pepper from the pot and set aside on a small dish. Use an immersion blender to blend the dhal until it is mostly smooth. Add the pepper back to the pot and now add the spinach then bring the dhal to a gentle boil and cook for another 15-20 minutes, allowing it to thicken slightly.

Prepare the Chunkay (Tempering):

In a mini pan or ladle, heat the oil over low heat. Add the cumin seeds and fry it until it starts to look a shade darker. Add the garlic and fry until it is dark golden brown. Remove from the heat.

Combine the Chunkay with the Dhal:

Quickly pour the ladle of cumin seeds and garlic into the dhal. As you do this step, hold the lid of the pot in one hand and the ladle in the other and simultaneously cover the pot as the oil hits the dhal to contain any splatter. It is important to be cautious, as the oil will sizzle.

Serve:

Stir the tempered dhal to distribute the flavors evenly. Serve hot over rice, with roti, or enjoy it as a comforting soup.

Note: Two habanero peppers may be substituted for Guyanese Wiri Wiri pepper or scotch bonnet. I do not recommend using jalapeño peppers as a substitute.

Guyanese dhal is a dish made of yellow split peas slow-simmered with warm spices, onion, garlic, hot pepper, and finished with a tempering of roasted garlic and fried cumin seeds to infuse an additional layer of flavor. Dhal is meant to function like gravy and unites everything else on the plate. It's typically served with curries, sautéed vegetables, rice, roti or enjoyed on its own in a teacup.

Ingredients

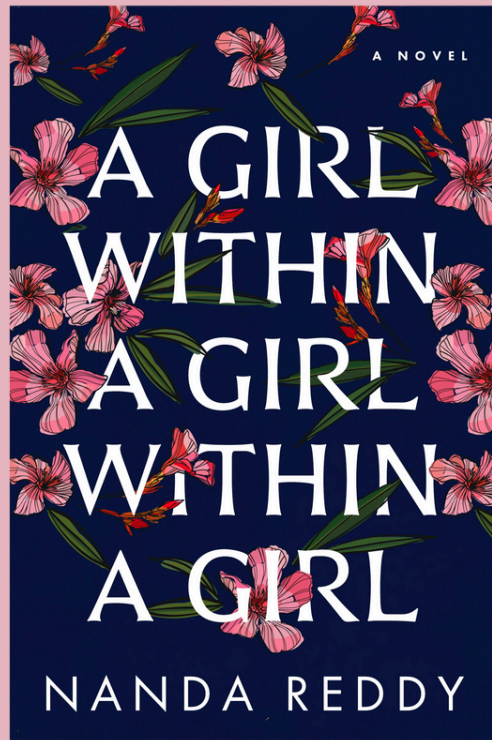
Dhal:

7 cups water
1 cup yellow split peas
2 medium garlic cloves, peeled and chopped finely
½ cup diced yellow onion
2 Guyanese Wiri Wiri peppers or 1 small scotch bonnet pepper
¼ teaspoon turmeric
½ teaspoon ground geera (roasted cumin)
1 ½ teaspoons salt (start with 1 teaspoon and adjust to taste)
Handful of fresh spinach leaves or ½ cup frozen chopped spinach

For chunkay (tempering):

½ teaspoon whole cumin seeds
1 garlic clove, thinly sliced
2 tablespoons neutral oil (grapeseed, canola, or vegetable)

Created by [@alicapepperpot](https://www.instagram.com/alicapepperpot)
[alicapepperpot.com](https://www.alicapepperpot.com)



THANK YOU FOR READING

If you selected *A Girl Within a Girl Within a Girl* for your book club, we would love to hear about it!

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