

BOOK CLUB KIT

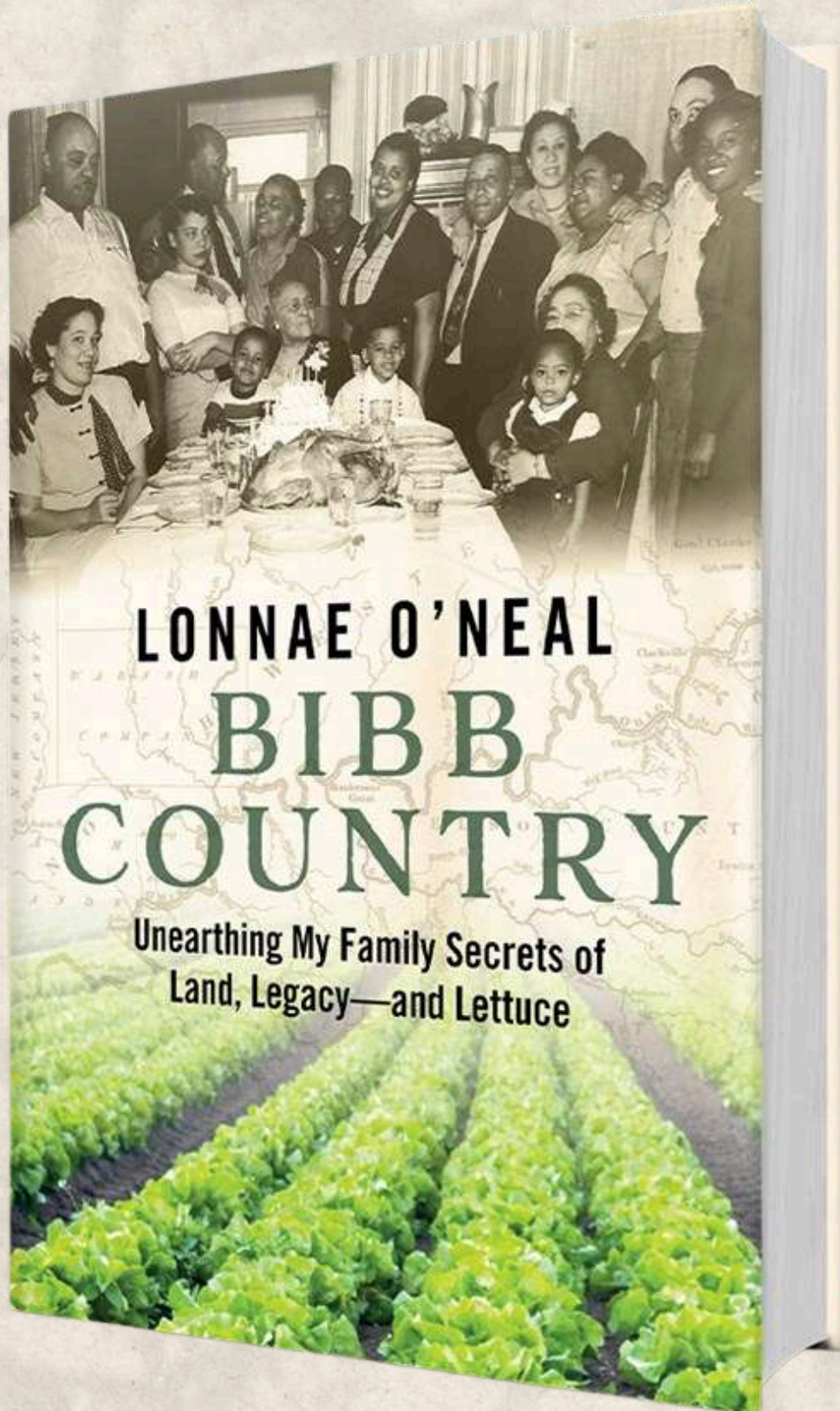
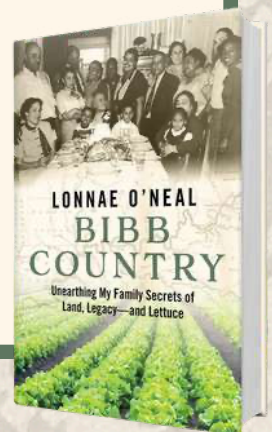


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DIRECTLY TO THAT SECTION**



NOTE TO READERS

SPOILER WARNING

This kit was created for book clubs to use in their discussions of *Bibb Country* by Lonnae O'Neal and contains spoilers.

CONTENT WARNINGS

This book explores the historic and continued impact of slavery on the Black community and includes discussions of racism, sexism, physical violence and abuse, death, rape, police brutality, torture, and suicide.

RESOURCES

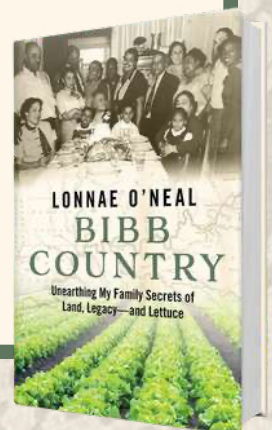
Books can serve as a mirror for our lives, and some of the themes in *Bibb Country* might affect readers in a very real way. Here are resources for those who want support for the issues they're facing.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness
nami.org | 800-950-6264

National Domestic Violence Hotline
thehotline.org | 800-799-7233

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)
rainn.org | 800-656-4673

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and
Mental Health Services Administration)
samhsa.gov | 800-662-4357



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

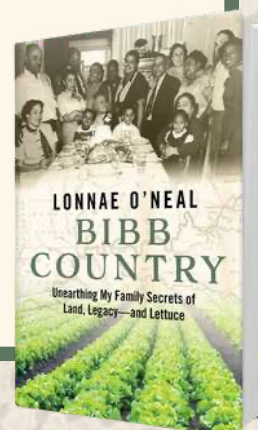
The first time you wrote about the Bibb House reunion was for a 2019 article. When did you realize you wanted to turn the story into a book? Did you have hopes of what the book could do or mean for yourself and your descendants?

I probably had some idea that it would be a book as soon as I wrote the story, so I come at this question a little backwards. I spent two years running away from the inevitability of a book. In many ways because I didn't want to tackle the bigness of the subject. Finally, in 2021, when I picked up those Bibb lettuce seeds at Home Depot and they "accidentally" got planted, I realized I needed to tackle this history and turn and face the ghosts. Mostly because I couldn't escape them. I couldn't unknow this history I'd learned. Since I couldn't let it go (or get away from it), I did what I always do when I want to know what I think about something, or understand it more deeply. I write.

At base, what I hope it can mean is a reckoning. I hope it means that people can turn and face the history and various layers of truth and meaning about that history, not just in my family, but in the larger context of American families, millions of whom have their own version of this same story. The specifics are different, but so many of the broadstrokes are the same, and they tell a bigger story than what is commonly understood about America.

This is a deeply personal book and a vulnerable one as well. What made you want to tell these stories, and what made you feel ready to tell them?

Well, I wasn't ready to tell them, and I don't know that I wanted to tell them. I just ran out of escape routes and ways not to tell them. I just began reporting and talking to family and reading deeper into the history, and I told the stories that bubbled up—the ones that were most resonant. Believe me, there were others which I may save for a memoir or a cocktail party, but as to your second question, I never felt ready to tell these stories. I was building the plane as I was flying it. As a writer, I've simply learned, I can't wait until I feel ready to write, just like I can't wait to write until I'm not scared. If I'm waiting for anything, I almost wait until I feel like have no choice. They're already oozing, or crawling, or pouring out of me. The stories were simply ripe for the telling, and I was the one with the pen.



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

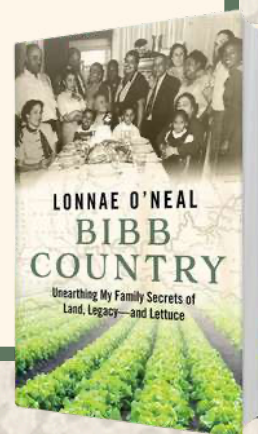
You wrote about your reluctance to attend the reunion and how “not knowing functions as necessary and protective when it comes to the backstories of Black people.” When it came time to write this book, did you find that family members had those same reactions of not wanting stories from Kentucky, or even more recent family history, to be shared?

Rarely. Once I explained where I was coming from and shared my own traumatic history, which lots of family had heard, but not in detail, people understood me to be a fellow traveler. A lot of the stories were traumatic, but after years and even decades of silence, folks were bubbling over with some of these stories and anecdotes. They had been on their own journeys to try to make sense of their histories and what they had been through. So the opportunity to speak their truth, ask their questions, and learn this fuller American history was an assertion, a kind of tool for breaking the cycle and the chains, including those of silence.

You use italicized asides throughout the book, often as a way of bringing in the voice of a family member. They mirror the ghosts you write about, lingering around us. What inspired that choice to have not just your voice but your family’s featured in this way?

You’re right! There are reasons this felt like a ghost story. It is no exaggeration to say that I was hearing these asides, these whispers, these riffs constantly throughout the writing. (A whole lot of times, I was hearing songs! I think Black ghosts should have their own channel on XM radio!)

In the author’s note, I liken the experiences of Black folks to playing ragtime, but it’s just another way to look at the W. E. B. Du Bois idea of double consciousness. I’m seeing and hearing what’s in front of me through a contemporary lens, and I’m also seeing and hearing and maybe even experiencing it from the lens of how it must have looked and sounded and felt to the Black people all around me, many of them long gone. Like ragtime, that was playing on my mind on a completely different time signature (maintaining different beats in the same piece of music). I didn’t stop to think about the meaning, or ask for permission—when I heard one of these voices, I just put it in the book.



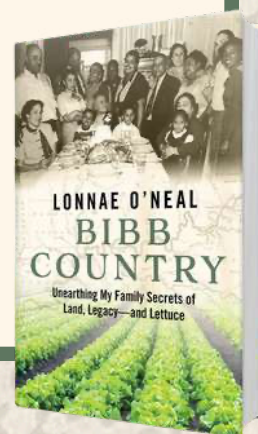
AUTHOR INTERVIEW

What was the research process like for this book? Are there questions you're still hoping to find answers to?

For the first year or even two, the research felt all over the place. I didn't know what I didn't know, and to even start to figure it out, I had to cast a very wide net. What is also true is I was writing a history book, a memoir, and a cultural critique, so I was reading and gathering information across genres: history, literature, pop culture, federal and municipal records, and dozens upon dozens of interviews. Once I began telling researchers in various places, most especially Kentucky, but also Southern Illinois, Chicago, and even Virginia, what I was writing, they often steered me in some helpful and important directions. For example, when I wanted to know about the late 18th-century migration from Virginia to the Kentucky frontier, I knew to look for historical accounts, but by talking to librarians, I also got the animating features and ethos of that migration and its philosophical underpinnings. This included looking at it from the point of view of the enslaved—what that migration might have looked and felt like if you were a child, as my great-grandmother, Momma Keziah would have been.

In terms of lingering questions—I'd love, one day, to find a death certificate or burial record or letter about what happened to my fourth great-grandmother, Momma Keziah, who falls out of the records after 1840. I have some hints, but I'd love to be able to pick up her trail once again. I'd also love to get a clearer answer regarding John Bibb's parentage. Who was his white father?

I have Census records, circumstantial evidence, and a clue from Ancestry where a white woman shows up as a cousin and her family tree has a Bibb ancestor, but I'd like to be able to at least get closer to the answer to that mystery. George Mortimer Bibb had more than a dozen children; his brother John Bigger Bibb and his wife were childless. Both of those facts feel compelling to me. As does the death of Richard Bibb, Jr., the same year as his father. At least one mulatto man who he'd enslaved and who had not been emancipated migrated to Centralia with my great-great grandfather. As the technology and genealogical tools and science continue to evolve, I will keep looking. Later. I need to be still for a while first.



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

In *Bibb Country*, readers watch as you go from not wanting to accept the reunion invitation to hoping one of your descendants gets married at Arnold's Chapel. In what ways did writing this book bring you to that place?

In many ways, it is its own form of migration, right? I went from resistance and denial—because as I write in the book, I had never wondered about this history, researched this history, or even taken the most basic DNA test—because I didn't want any of the feels. I didn't want to have to grapple with the bigness of it all. Not just the history, but what I was sure would be the pain. I wasn't wrong about that, but what is also true is that there is something powerful about turning to face the ghosts, the voices, the traumatic history that has such far-reaching tentacles all over the here and now. When I did that, I also learned about all the resilience, the creativity, and the coping strategies. All the grace places my ancestors had found in each other, and in community, at least some of the time. When I began facing the duality of that, then I could find a purchase in this history that felt custom. That felt right for me and mine, enduring and even joyful.

After unearthing all that history, what better way to keep the story going than by imagining a wedding, or even cookouts or church services, on the land that held such monumental significance for my family. Perhaps with the Frankie Beverly cookout anthem/theme song, "Before I Let Go" playing in the background. It's a way to honor and celebrate that Bibbtown legacy even as my own family journey is hundreds of years and miles away. It feels organic. It feels like the right way to think about my leg of this family story.

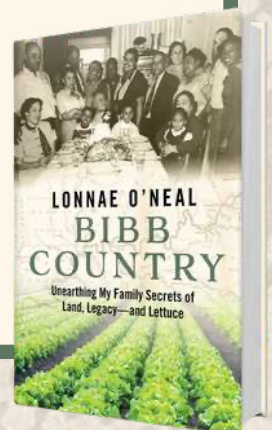
This book highlights the impact of generational trauma, but you also write that, sometimes, "hope, forgiveness, and grace" are passed down too. In what ways do you see those elements showing up in your life?

I've seen the hope, forgiveness, and grace I wrote about all around me. I was struck by how many times sons and daughters took care of parents and relatives they chose to forgive. It's like my momma once told me, "What are you going to do, lay down and die?" I think the off-ramp for all that trauma is what helps form the basis of Black creativity, and I've discovered all these ways that people made decisions to break with the trauma of the past. They've decided to reach for better tools, to get therapy, or just do things differently. They've decided to tell their own stories, because there are things unspoken that can become a rotor on your insides. They decided to face themselves, which is powerful, or stand still in the fire. And they've made decisions about forgiveness by recognizing that everybody plays the hand they are dealt. It allows you to have grace for other people. While that doesn't excuse the trauma, it gives us ways to think about it that can help us heal. You are not unloveable. Folks were just doing the best they could with the cards they had. And some of those cards were very old and very powerful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) O'Neal writes that "America's racial history can be most intuitively understood as it played out in families." What benefits do you see in viewing history through the lens of a family's history?
- 2) What function do you see memory playing in familial interactions, specifically those when someone claims to not remember having witnessed someone else's pain? What connections do you see between memory and O'Neal's comment about "not knowing [as] necessary and protective," if any?
- 3) Discuss the ways you see generational trauma existing in the family history that O'Neal explores. In what ways do you see the "hope, forgiveness, and grace" O'Neal mentions also being passed down?
- 4) O'Neal shares examples of the ways that Black contributions to American history have been erased. How do you think that erasure impacts a country? What responsibility do you think citizens have, if any, to searching out and understanding the full version of history?
- 5) The book used italicized asides as stand-ins for the voices of members of O'Neal's family. In what ways did these asides impact your reading experience?
- 6) O'Neal writes about how her reluctance to accept the original reunion invitation came from a protective place of not wanting to know what might lie in her family history. She then showcases the ways white Americans also prefer not to know about certain parts of American history. If O'Neal's desire is coming from a place to protect herself from harm, where do you think the white desire of not knowing comes from?
- 7) Discuss the use of the gardening metaphor in the book as representative of O'Neal's deep dive into her family history.
- 8) The book shows the way slavery was compartmentalized in the minds of white men and women in America. How do you see that act affecting the way white people view race and slavery today?

Find more questions on the next page.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

9) Near the end of the book, in reflecting on the forty-three acres held in a trust for the benefit of all Bibb descendants, O'Neal writes, "The land has rearranged me." What meaning do you take from this? In what ways did you witness this happening throughout the telling of her story?

10) Reclaiming Momma Keziah is a powerful moment for O'Neal. In what ways do you see this entire book as a reclamation?

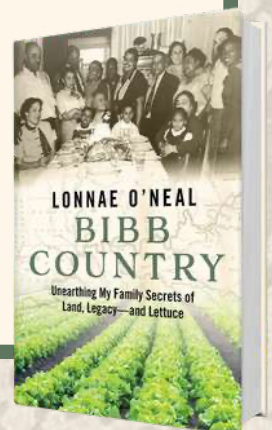
Two questions from author Lonnae O'Neal:

11) If you want to investigate/gather your own family history, where do you start?

Author Note: For the love of God, start right now talking to the oldest people in your family. Get their stories and artifacts, and ask them who else you can or should talk to.

12) In what ways do you see your past family history related to some of the issues now facing the nation or even just your own contemporary family dynamic? Education, faith, economics, colorism, abuse, entrepreneurship, etc.?

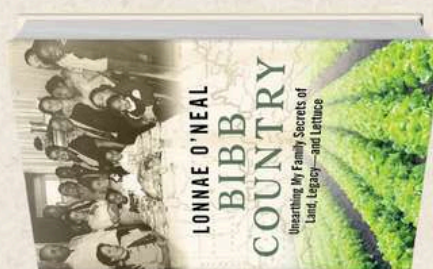
**Write down any questions you or other members
want to ask the group here:**



PRINTABLE BOOKMARKS

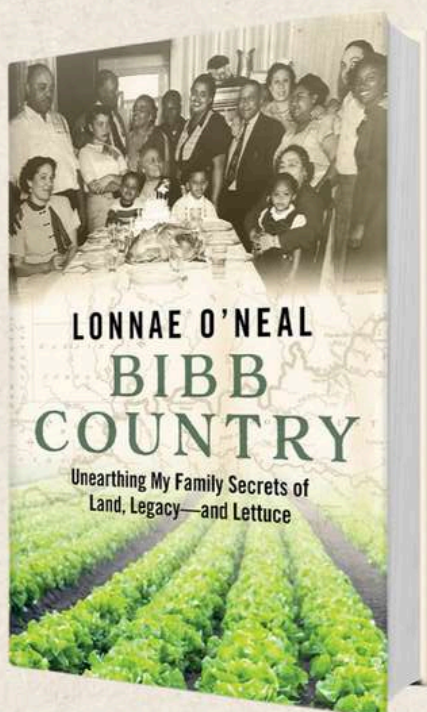


**“We’ve staked our lives on a vision
of America with ancestors and
children who both require truth,
and tending.”**

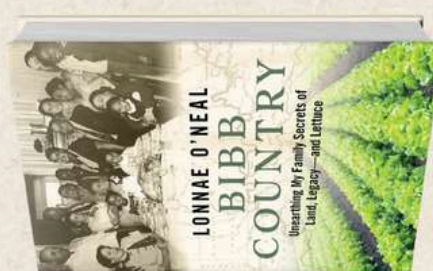


PRINTABLE BOOKMARKS

Generations
of family
history
against the
sweep of
American
history



“It wasn’t until much later that I
began to understand the corporeal
sense of this legacy, and what it
means to my ancestors to walk on
soil they called their own, in a way
that called them home.”



BITES & SIPS

A fun beverage or snack is a great treat for a book club meeting. Here are ideas inspired by *Bibb Country*.

Bibb Salad Bar

Early in the book, O'Neal shares her deep love of salad. If your group is meeting in person, encourage everyone to bring their favorite salad dressings, toppings, and ingredients to allow everyone to make their own perfect dish, with Bibb lettuce as the base. If you're virtual, try making your ideal Bibb lettuce salad at home and ask everyone to share their creations on camera or in the chat.

Bruschetta

In *Bibb Country*, O'Neal shares memories of growing tomatoes with her mother and the emotional moment of getting to eat them from her own garden as an adult. This bruschetta recipe from Orchids + Sweet Tea lets the tomato shine as the star O'Neal knows it to be.

orchidsandsweettea.com/my-fave-easy-classic-bruschetta

Mint Julep

While many know that this cocktail is a favorite of the Kentucky Derby, not enough are aware that its popularity is owed to Black bartenders like Julian Anderson and John Dabney.

liquor.com/recipes/mint-julep

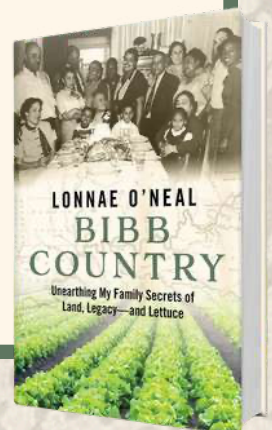
The South Side

This cocktail is rumored to be named for the South Side of Chicago, where O'Neal spent her childhood.

liquor.com/recipes/south-side

Supplement either of these with a zero proof spirit to make it a mocktail!

Remember to drink responsibly.



MOVIE NIGHT

You can add new layers to your book club discussion through hosting a movie night that explores similar or connected topics. Invite your book club members to gather in person or virtually for a screening of these documentaries mentioned in *Bibb Country*.

By Parties Unknown

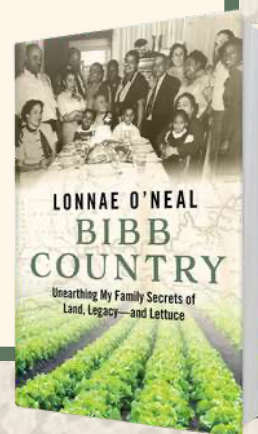
In *Bibb Country*, O'Neal shares the importance of the Emmy Award-winning PBS documentary *By Parties Unknown*. The film shares the story of the lynching of four Black men in 1908 Kentucky and is narrated by community scholar Michael Morrow. It's available for streaming on PBS:

pbs.org/show/parties-unknown

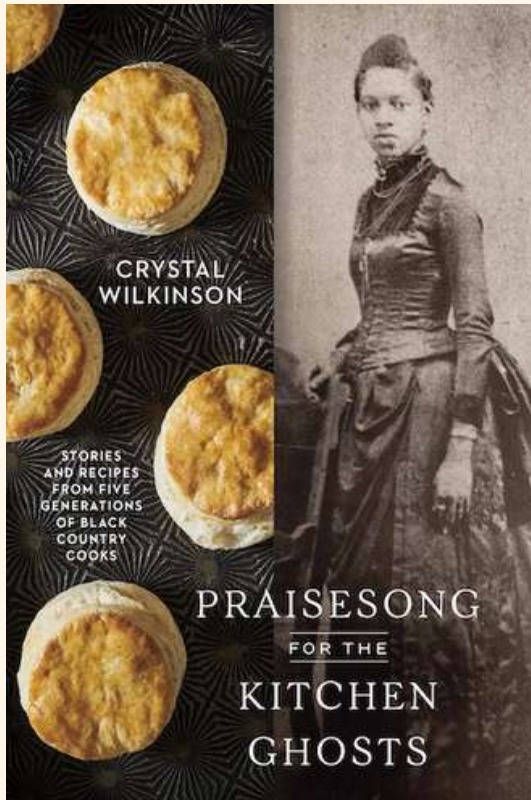
Invented Before You Were Born

In this documentary, O'Neal's cousins Jonathan and Rachel Knight take viewers along with them as they discover their connection to Richard Bibb and then set out to share the stories of his descendants. This documentary can be licensed for viewing from Good Docs for schools and libraries. See if your local branch is interested in hosting a showing:

gooddocs.net/products/invented-before-you-were-born



WHAT TO READ NEXT

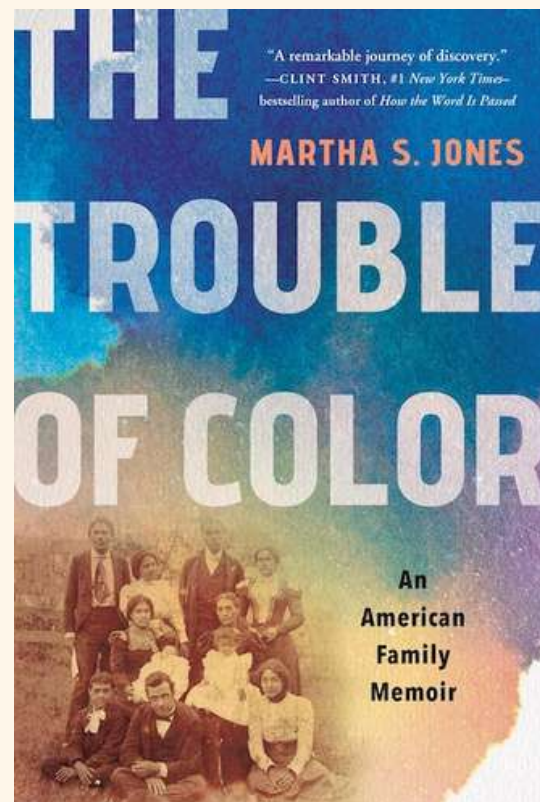


Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts by Crystal Wilkinson

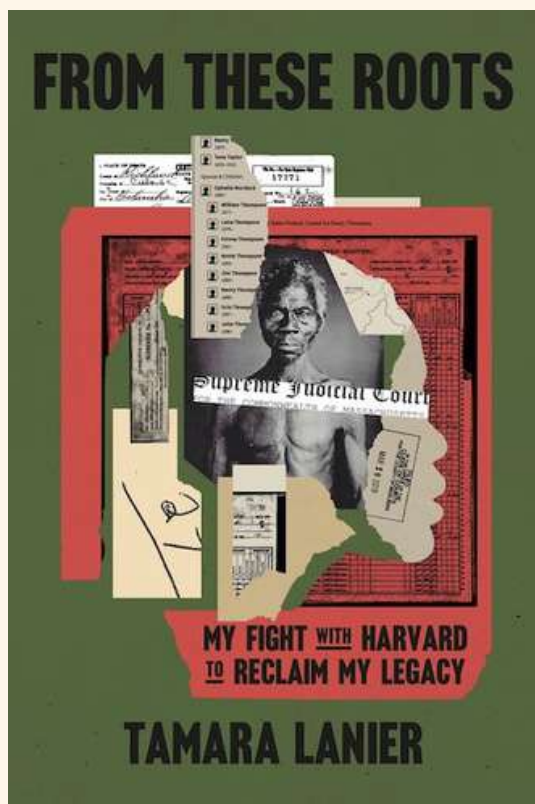
From growing tomatoes to connecting with her family's lettuce legacy, O'Neal shows the powerful connection between food and family in *Bibb Country*. Readers looking for more of the same will find a lot to love in this blend of recipes and stories from five generations of a Black Appalachian family.

The Trouble of Color by Martha S. Jones

Martha S. Jones, a prizewinning scholar of Black history, explores the differences between race and color in this memoir. After being accused of not being 'Black enough' in college, Jones set out to dig through and understand her family history as a way of better understanding her own identity.



WHAT TO READ NEXT

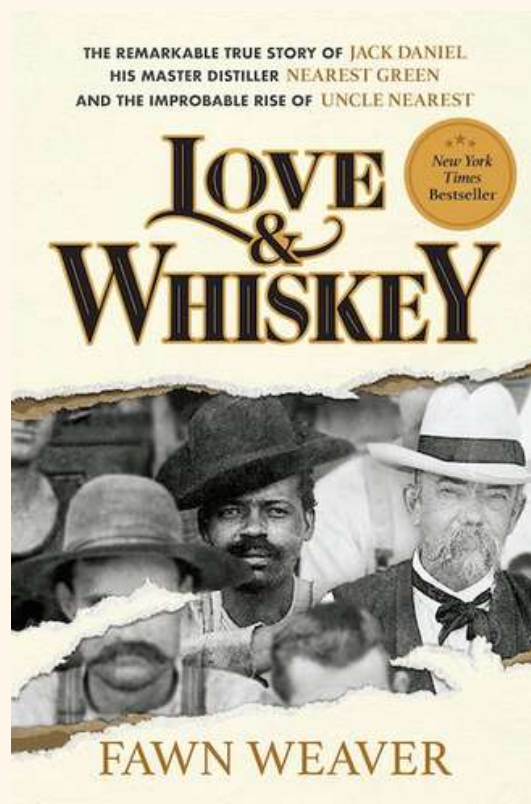


From These Roots by Tamara Lanier

This memoir explores the question of who is allowed to claim the artifacts of history through the lens of one woman's battle against Harvard. Tamara Lanier shares her journey of proving her connection to her great-great-great grandfather Renty Taylor in the hope that Harvard will agree to give her and her family the images of Renty and his daughter they have on display.

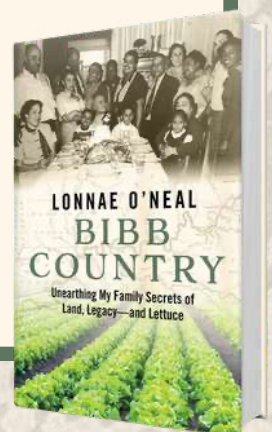
Love & Whiskey by Fawn Weaver

In *Bibb Country*, O'Neal shares historical contributions from Black Americans that have been erased or forgotten, including the relationship between Nearest Green and Jack Daniel. If you wanted to know more about that story, you're in luck. *Love & Whiskey* dives into the life and legacy of Nearest Green, the history of his family, and the pivotal role he played in the creation of what we know today as Jack Daniel's Whiskey.

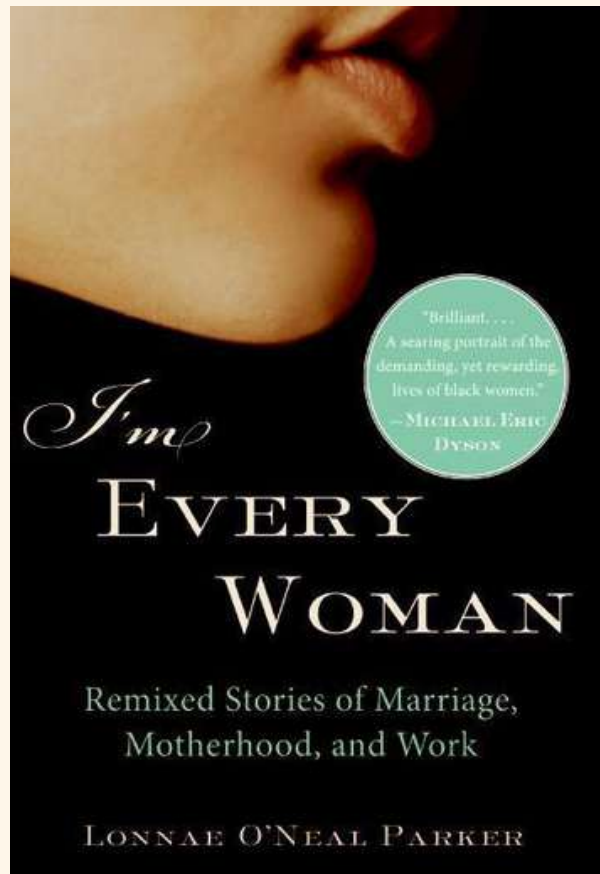


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lonnae O'Neal is a senior writer for Andscape. Prior to that, she was a *Washington Post* reporter and columnist for more than two decades. She is the author of *I'm Every Woman: Remixed Stories of Marriage, Motherhood, and Work*.

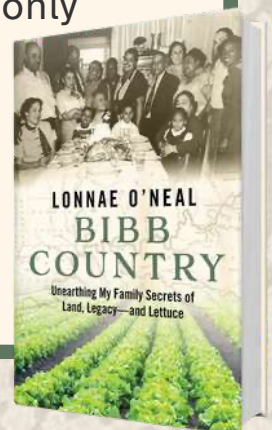


MORE FROM LONNAE O'NEAL



Black women have been balancing the competing demands of work and home since before women even won the right to vote. But Black voices are barely acknowledged in the mainstream "mommy wars" dialogue.

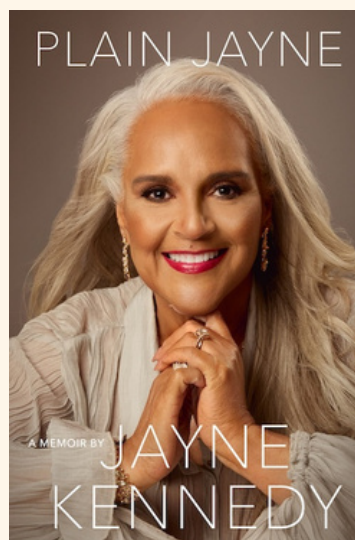
Lonnae O'Neal is determined to change that, in this uncommonly smart, highly acclaimed, and often witty examination—part memoir, part reportage—of how today's Black women meet the challenges of marriage, motherhood, and work.



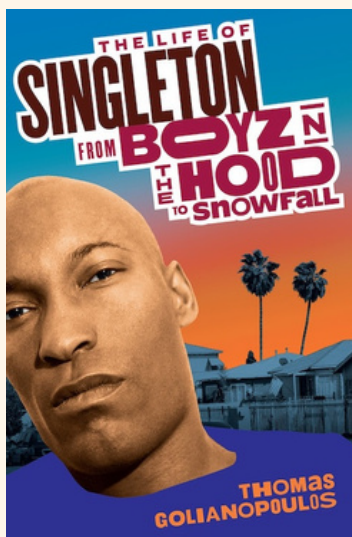
MORE FROM ANDSCAPE BOOKS



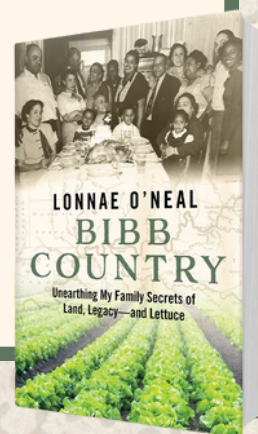
On sale:
July 15



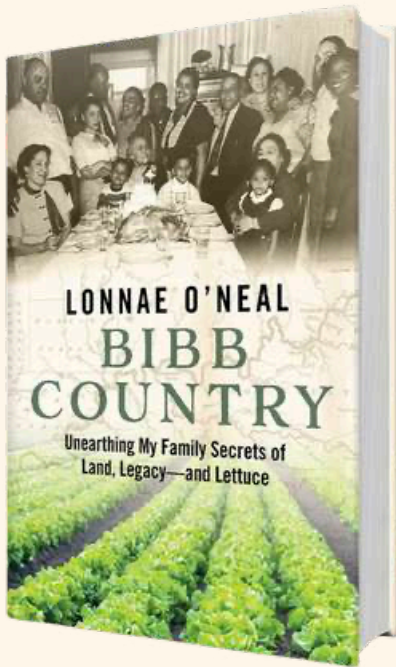
On sale:
September 2



On sale:
October 14



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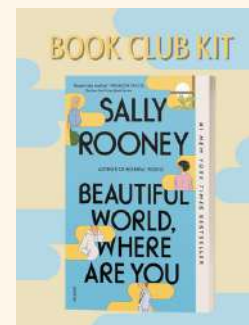
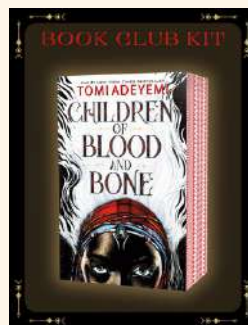
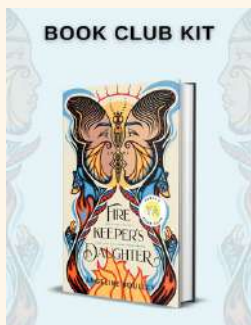
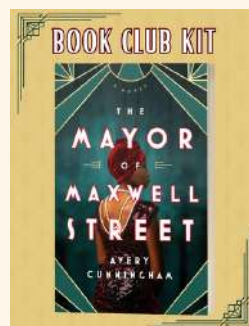


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netgalley.com/pub/wearebookish



ALL OF
THESE
AND
MORE!