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# Booker Prize winner Bernardine Evaristo prefers poetry to plot

By **Amy Sutherland** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 6, 2020, [2 hours ago](#)



British author Bernardine Evaristo. JENNIE SCOTT

The 2019 Booker Prize made history when Bernardine Evaristo's "Girl, Woman, Other" was named a winner. The British author is the first Black woman to win the prestigious award. Evaristo's novel mixes prose and poetry to follow the lives of a dozen Black British

women. In another first for the Booker Prize, it was given to two writers. Evaristo shared

WHICH. IN ANOTHER INST FOR THE BOOKER PRIZE, IT WAS GIVEN TO TWO WINNERS. EVARISTO SHARED the award with Margaret Atwood's "The Testaments."

**BOOKS:** What are you reading?

**EVARISTO:** I just started "The Water Dancer" by Ta-Nehisi Coates. It's very intense and impressionistic. But most of my reading is for work, between teaching and reviewing. I miss the sheer pleasure of reading a book that I've chosen.

**BOOKS:** What are you reading in your class this term?

**EVARISTO:** "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" by Junot Diaz, which is my students' most favorite. We are also reading "Venus as a Boy" by Luke Sutherland, a British writer, and "Ordinary People" by Diana Evans, who is a Black British writer. That's a novel that explores Black people just leading normal lives without the drama of race.

**BOOKS:** How would you describe your taste as a reader?

**EVARISTO:** I like literary fiction. I'm interested in writers who are sensitive to the possibility of language. I'm less interested in plot-driven books unless they are written with imaginative prose. I like experimental fiction. I love poetry.

**BOOKS:** Which poets have you been reading recently?

**EVARISTO:** Roger Robinson, who is Trinidadian-British. His latest book is "A Portable Paradise," which just won the T.S. Eliot prize. It has poems about the Grenfell Tower fire and some poems about his premature son. Another collection I've loved recently is "Surge" by Jay Bernard. The poems are about the New Cross Fire of 1981, during which a group of young Black people burnt to death at a house party.

**BOOKS:** Who were some of the first Black authors you read?

**EVARISTO:** In the '80s I read a lot of African-Americans because they were the only

**EVARISTO:** In the 80s I read a lot of African Americans because they were the only Black writers publishing in any sort of number. There was little African fiction being published and almost nothing in Britain. Us Black British writers turned to America and discovered Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, who we found hugely inspiring.

**BOOKS:** Who was one of the first Black African writers you discovered?

**EVARISTO:** Buchi Emecheta, who was Nigerian. This was probably in 1979. She wrote “Second Class Citizen,” which was a semi-autobiographical novel about coming to Britain with her husband and having five children. I enjoyed it but didn’t feel her prose matched the African-American writers. I revisited her later and realized what a great writer she was.

**BOOKS:** Is there a book that you like that would surprise people?

**EVARISTO:** “Independent People” by the Noble laureate Halldór Laxness. In the ‘80s I wasn’t reading books by white men, and then in the ‘90s I began reading books by anyone and discovered this gem, which is such a wonderful character portrait of this Icelandic farmer. Does it matter that you’re reading something by a white man or a Black woman? In some cases yes, but what’s important is to be nourished by all the different kinds of stories.

**BOOKS:** How have you changed as a reader?

**EVARISTO:** I’ve become a more sophisticated reader of poetry. My first love was Dylan Thomas. Then in my twenties I read women poets like Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, but I really didn’t understand their writing. My favorite poet now is Derek Walcott, whose work is very rich and full of allusions. I’m also a more critical reader now, having reviewed books for 20 years. The books I really enjoy are the ones I lose myself in.

**BOOKS:** What was the last book that you lost yourself in?

**EVARISTO:** “Black Rain Falling” by Jacob Ross which comes out this March. This is a

**EVARISTO:** *Black Rain Falling* by Jacob Ross, which comes out this March. This is a detective story set in the Caribbean islands. It's exquisitely written but he's also exploring what makes a society tick.

**BOOKS:** What are you reading next?

**EVARISTO:** I've got to get a few books out of the way for work and then I'm hoping to spend the next year reading only what I want. I'm going on sabbatical and am not going to review or judge. I want to reconnect to reading for pleasure. I still haven't read Margaret Atwood's "The Testaments." That is first on my list.

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