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13 QUESTIONS WITH KAITLYN GREENIDGE

hoopla

digital: *Libertie* was inspired by the life of one of the first Black female doctors in the United States. Did you know of her legacy prior to writing the novel? Did her life inspire you to write this book, or was her story woven into larger themes that may have inspired your writing of *Libertie* first?

Kaitlyn Greenidge:

I worked for many years at the Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn, a site dedicated to the legacy of Weeksville, a free Black community founded in Central Brooklyn in 1838. One of my jobs there was to work on their oral history program, and so I did an oral history with one of the doctor's descendants, who told me the story of this marriage. I changed a lot in the novel draft, but the main idea came from there.

hd: Discuss your research for this book. What were some sources in your research that were impactful in creating the story? We were particularly fascinated by your extensive writing in homeopathic medicine. Did you already have a base knowledge of that medicinal practice, or was quite a bit of research necessary to prepare?

KG: I read a lot about the history of medicine and healing, and how it intersects with the history of Black people and the creation of race as a category in the US. I read a lot about Haitian history, specifically 19th century Haiti a generation after revolution, a time period we don't often talk about in the US.

hd: The rich history in the book provides a strong backdrop for the story of *Libertie Sampson*. Was there something about the Reconstruction era that compelled you to base *Libertie's* coming-of-age story then?

KG: Other people much smarter than me have pointed out that Reconstruction—with its intense outpouring of Black achievement on one hand and vicious, anti-Black violence by white people on the other, mirrors our own political and national climate to an eerie degree. I was interested in exploring that reflection.

hd: When fictionalizing historical events, how do you go about balancing fact versus fiction?

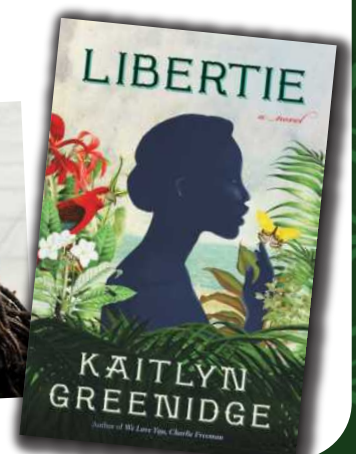
KG: I think figuring out what best serves the interests of the story is key. The research should be in service of the story and what you hope a reader feels about a character.

hd: What and who are your biggest influences in writing? Do you have favorite authors that you would recommend to our readers?

KG: I'm influenced by so many wonderful writers—Toni Morrison, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Cade Bambara, Lucille Clifton, Gloria Naylor, and so many more.

hd: The family theme, especially the mother and daughter relationship, is so strong in this novel. Was there an event or a relationship in your own life that inspired some of that in the novel?

KG: Not really. I'm just interested in the dynamic of that relationship that is so complicated and foundational for so many of us and that can have so many different interpretations in literature. I think so much written about motherhood is focused on the extremes—the super wonderful mother or the villain. I like exploring the human dimensions of that dynamic.





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hd: What made you choose to focus the story on *Libertie* and not the mother, since the historical piece and inspiration seemingly transpired from the mother and her groundbreaking medical practice as one of the first Black female doctors in the 1860s?

KG: Often times, when you talk to people who were the first Black person or first Black woman to do something, they don't want to talk about the emotional toll of it. It's too painful. I wanted to explore that reticence and the incredible emotional damage that comes from trying to make a name for yourself in a space that was specifically built to exclude and dehumanize you. That psychic toll is real and deep, and often overlooked when celebrating so-called trailblazers.

hd: Is there any scene in the book that was more difficult to write than others? On the flip side of that, what part of this book was most enjoyable to write?

KG: None were particularly emotionally difficult. I had a lot of fun writing the party and celebration scenes—the scenes around Pinkster, kind of the New York Dutch version of Carnival, and the scenes describing Fete Ged in Haiti.

hd: Do you see yourself in any of the characters in the book, or have you had any experiences that helped you relate and write *Libertie*?

KG: No, not really. I really like fiction in that it's removed from the self and I resist the desire to find autobiography in fiction. I write a lot of nonfiction, as well, which leaves space to explore my particular experiences that fiction does not.

hd: If you could pose a question for book clubs to discuss in relation to *Libertie*, what would it be?

KG: What does your definition of freedom look like? Can you think of freedom without thinking of trying to dominate another person or physical space?

hd: There are so many important themes in this beautiful novel! What do you hope readers take away with them the most?

KG: I hope they think about how they wish to define freedom for themselves and that when they hear someone using the word freedom, specifically for political or social gain, they stop and interrogate what that person is actually describing, whether they are describing true freedom.

hd: *Libertie* consumed us; we couldn't stop reading! What are you reading now that you're excited about? Is there anything you've read recently that's helped challenge you?

KG: I really love Sarah Schulman's *Let the Record Show*, Anthony So's *Afterparties*, and Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby*.

hd: Your debut novel, *We Love You, Charlie Freeman*, was a great success, and we especially loved *Libertie*, as do libraries—it's a March LibraryReads Selection! What can we look forward to next from you?

KG: I'm not sure yet! I'm still consumed with book tour and day job responsibilities so haven't had the chance to write as much. I have a short story coming out with Scribd soon—a story about being the oldest woman at a sex party. It's a love letter to pandemic-era New York City and was a lot of fun to write.

Ready to discuss *Libertie* with your book club? Find hoopla's exclusive discussion guide and meeting planner at theclub.hoopladigital.com. Then, let us know what you think on social using @hoopladigital and #hooplabookclub!

