

Yaa Gyasi

cape coast castle
GHANA

The novel's opening chapters depict Cape Coast Castle, one of sixty so-called "slave castles" pressed along a 300-mile stretch of the Gold Coast. The portal visible in the center of the photograph is the "door of no return," through which enslaved people passed as they were forced from the holding cells under the castle into the ships that would transport them across the Atlantic Ocean.

Over more than three centuries of the transatlantic trade, an estimated 12 million people were taken from Africa and enslaved across the Americas. At the start of the Civil War in 1861, almost 4 million enslaved people lived in the United States.

Homegoing

HOTCHKISS ALL-SCHOOL READ 2022



about the AUTHOR

- Born in Mampong, Ghana in 1989
- Moved to the U.S. in 1991, where she lived with her family in Ohio, Tennessee, Indiana, and Alabama.
- Completed her B.A. at Stanford and her M.F.A. at the Iowa Writers Workshop
- *Homegoing* was her debut novel. She has since published *Transcendent Kingdom*.
- Her first name is pronounced *yah* and her surname is pronounced *jah-see*

a note on CONTENT

Homegoing traces two branches of a Ghanaian family across nine generations, confronting the lasting influence of enslavement and colonialism on both Ghana and the United States. Gyasi's retelling of that history includes stark depictions of racism, including racial slurs, as well as instances of racialized and sexual violence.

Why do you think Gyasi chooses to relate these incidents or to use this language? What position did it put you in as a reader? Do you notice any patterns that repeat or that change in the depiction of racism and violence over the course of the text?

When we return to campus in the fall, these questions will necessarily be a part of how we come together to navigate this text. As Mr. Frankenbach put it in his email about summer reading, the time you have spent on this book will prepare you for “a shared communal inquiry” within the Hotchkiss community across the entire year.



Image: Eleanor Taylor

Further Reading

Here are some helpful links if you'd like to take a deeper dive into *Homegoing*:

- Listen to an [interview with Gyasi](#) on NPR's *Weekend Edition*
- Read a *New York Times* [review of *Homegoing*](#) by Isabel Wilkerson, the author of *Caste*
- Check out Gyasi's [critical piece](#) in *The Guardian* on the rising popularity of Black authors
- See images and read information about the Ghanaian sites of the slave trade [400 years on](#)
- Examine large-scale works by African-American artist Kara Walker [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). What might Walker's silhouettes have in common with Gyasi's storytelling?
- Read poetry by Ghanaian-born writers, like [Kwame Dawes](#) and [Kofi Awoonor](#)
- Read [this poem](#) by Kiki Petrosino. How might Monticello resonate with Cape Coast Castle?

Food in *Homegoing*

Food traces a connective thread across Gyasi's novel, beginning with the joy and abundance of village celebrations to the importance of agriculture within the larger economy of the Gold Coast. As the story continues, food telegraphs the privations of enslaved life in America as well as the bonds and traditions of family life on two continents.

To the right are images of *eto*, a Ghanaian mashed yam dish, as well as a group of yam traders in a [market in present-day Accra](#), where the rising cost of living is placing a strain on these sellers and their communities. To learn more about food traditions in the African diaspora, read [this piece](#) by Diane Spivey or check out Bryant Terry's [new cookbook](#), *Black Food*.

If you're interested in the role of food in *Homegoing*, look no further than Hotchkiss this year for:

- a dining hall meal inspired by Ghanaian cuisine
- a cooking workshop open to all members of the community
- a new H&SS course, taught by Dr. Norman, entitled "Foodways and Colonization"



up for DISCUSSION

Here are just a handful of quotations from *Homegoing* that we think will generate great discussions:

- "You want to know what weakness is? Weakness is treating someone as though they belong to you. Strength is knowing that everyone belongs to themselves" (44).
- "Look at the baby. Born to his mother, he learns how to eat from her, how to walk, talk, hunt, run. He does not invent new ways. He just continues with the old. This is how we all come to the world, James. Weak and needy, desperate to learn how to be a person...But if we do not like the person we have learned to be, should we just sit in front of our *fufu*, doing nothing? I think, James, that maybe it is possible to make a new way" (116).
- "We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history, you must ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there you get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture" (239).
- "How could he explain to Marjorie that what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that she, and he, and everyone else, existed in it—not apart from it, but inside it" (295).