

★ **Frying Plantain****Zalika Reid-Benta**

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Internal culture clashes are at the center of the twelve intersecting parts that make up *Frying Plantain*, in which a girl grows from a timid, eager-to-belong child into a confident young adult and discovers what it means to break away from the crowd and to hold what's important close.

Taking off at a sprint, the novel begins with Kara—a ten-year-old, second-generation Canadian—visiting her relatives in Jamaica. She seeks acceptance as a Jamaican, but is denied, as her cousins find her reluctant to join in on their everyday games. Kara also proves to have a weak stomach when it comes to sourcing meat for mealtimes. Her struggles to fit in continue as she grows. Dangerous cruelties from close friends force her to stand up for herself among her peers.

Within the novel, Kara's mother is a mystery: a volatile combination of need, pride, secrecy, and strength. Kara is frightened and awestruck by the vim with which her mother and grandmother battle each other. Unable to choose sides, she remains a silent witness, and her silence prolongs the ephemeral periods of peace.

Void of distractions, the book is easy and interesting to follow. The text is fluid and immersive, with developed characters and tension that pulses from the pages. Though most of the book's parts could stand alone, the meanings of some are culled from the surrounding material: "Frying Plantain" hearkens back to a previous tale in order to fill in the blanks of Kara and her mother's nail-biting experiences with moving back in with her grandmother. Everyday disappointments are a constant, from Kara feeling always watched while shopping to her being unable to find enough variety among brown foundations and always being asked to explain hair topics.

Frying Plantain is a novel focused on cultural identities and family ties; it brims with wit and compassion.

TANISHA RULE (January / February 2020)

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