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In The Bush Tea Murder, Ashley-Ruth Bernier Turns Virgin Islands Culture, Food and Memory Into Mystery

Ahead of Tuesday's release, the St. Thomian author said her first full-length novel grew from Naomi Sinclair short stories, her grandmother Ruth Moolenaar's cultural legacy, and a desire to place Black Virgin Islanders "front and center."

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For many readers, [The Bush Tea Murder](#) will arrive as a beach-season mystery novel. For Virgin Islanders, however, Ashley-Ruth Bernier's debut full-length book carries another layer: a story shaped by the pull between home and opportunity abroad, by deep ties to Virgin Islands culture, and by a determination to place Black Virgin Islanders at the center of the narrative. Ahead of the book's release, Bernier spoke with Consortium journalists about how a short-story character grew into a novel, how her grandmother's legacy helped shape the book's title and spirit, and why

writing fiction has become both an act of cultural preservation and personal escape.

Bernier, a native St. Thomian already established as a short story writer, said *The Bush Tea Murder* grew naturally out of earlier work. “It started off as just short stories,” she said. After finishing the first one, “I knew I wanted to write more stories about Naomi, and about our food, about our culture, and it just kind of snowballed from there.”

She submitted one of the Naomi Sinclair stories to a prestigious mystery magazine. “It was something that was kind of beyond my wildest dreams...I sent it to them expecting to get a rejection, and when it was published that really threw me for a loop,” Bernier said.

A second Naomi Sinclair mystery was later published by a literary magazine, and Bernier said readers began asking whether more stories were coming. “I kept getting asked, are you writing more?” she recalled. So she did.

“I wrote several short stories with her, each one featuring a local food.” Over time, that produced a collection of mysteries centered on culinary journalist Naomi Sinclair. Bernier said her editor at Crooked Lane Books encouraged her to rework the stories into a novel by connecting them through one larger plot.

“By that point, I knew the characters so well, and I knew the arc and the stories..” Bernier said. “Filling in that larger story was almost like a fun puzzle that didn’t take that long to put together.”

Naomi Sinclair’s fictional life also reflects part of Bernier’s own experience, particularly the tension between mainland career growth and ties to home. “Every day I feel that pull,” she said.

The novel is dedicated to Ruth Moolenaar, the educator and ethnographer whose influence Bernier said runs through both the book and her life. Bernier said she inherited her grandmother’s love of writing, her respect for Virgin Islands culture and tradition, and much of her personal library.

“I wasn’t allowed to touch it growing up,” Bernier joked, “but after she passed away....I was able to go through...some of the books.”

Among the books were cookbooks dating back roughly 70 years, documenting Virgin Islands culinary history. Bernier said that legacy is still alive in the recipes she makes today, and in those made by Naomi Sinclair in the novel.

Her grandmother, she said, was especially known for her johnny cakes. “Hers were just perfect,” Bernier said, while judging her own attempts as not quite equal. One of the mysteries in the novel centers on that Virgin Islands staple.

The book’s title is also a tribute to Moolenaar. “She had a big bush outside on the porch,” Bernier recalled. “And on Sunday mornings after church, she’d send me and my cousin outside to pick the bush, and she’d come in and make a big, big pot [of tea].”

Bernier said her grandmother also passed down a love of teaching. She now works as an educator herself, having first taught elementary school on St. Thomas and now in North Carolina.

She described mystery and crime writing as a way to reclaim a different side of herself after a workday spent with children. “I think that’s why I enjoy writing crime and mysteries so much...I need a little bit of an escape,” Bernier said. “It’s kind of like therapy, you know, after all day of loose teeth and Bluey and video games...It’s really nice to be able to escape into a world that isn’t

that.”

She also reflected on her nine years teaching at Gladys Abraham Elementary on St. Thomas. “Maria, unfortunately, stole that fantastic school from the children of St. Thomas,” she said.

Bernier said the Naomi stories help her maintain a connection to the Virgin Islands she remembers from childhood and early adulthood. Though Naomi’s life includes the fictional demands of repeatedly solving mysteries, Bernier said the emotional center of the stories is familiar to many Virgin Islanders trying to balance career and economic opportunity with longing for home.

“I wanted to put Virgin Islanders front and center,” she said.

She said too many narratives reduce Black characters to stereotypical side roles, while Virgin Islanders are largely absent from mainstream culture. In *The Bush Tea Murder*, nearly the entire cast is made up of Black Virgin Islanders.

“We are the main characters. We are the villains. We are the side characters. That’s what I hope to accomplish with the book.”

The Bush Tea Murder will be released Tuesday in stores and on major online platforms.

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