DIANE MARIE BROWN

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with

BLACK CANDLE WOMEN

GRAYDON

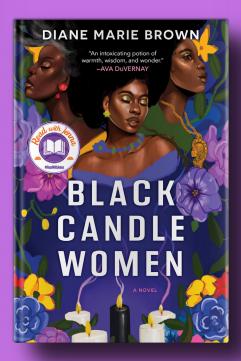
Black Candle Women

Practical Magic meets The Secret Lives of Church Ladies and The Mothers in this warm and wry family drama with a magical twist about four generations of Black women living under one roof and the family curse–any person they fall in love with dies–that stems back to a Voodoo shop in 1950s New Orleans's French Quarter.

Generations of Montrose women–Augusta, Victoria, Willow–have lived together in their quaint two-story bungalow in California for years. They keep to themselves, never venture far from home, and their collection of tinctures and spells is an unspoken bond between them.

But when seventeen-year-old Nickie Montrose brings home a boy for the first time, their quiet lives are thrown into disarray. For the other women have been withholding a secret from Nickie that will end her relationship before it's even begun: the decades-old family curse that any person they fall in love with dies.

Their surprise guest forces each woman to reckon with her own past choices and mistakes. And as new truths about the curse emerge, the family is set on a collision course dating back to a Voodoo shop in 1950s New Orleans's French Quarter–where a hidden story in a mysterious book may just hold the answers they seek in life and in love...



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DIANE MARIE BROWN

DIANE MARIE BROWN is a professor at Orange Coast College and a public health professional for the Long Beach Health Department. She has a BA and MPH from UCLA and a degree in fiction from USC's Master of Professional Writing Program. She grew up in Stockton and now lives in Long Beach, California, with her husband, their four daughters, and their dog, Brownie. *Black Candle Women* is her debut novel.



Praise for **Black Candle Women**

"Propulsive and poignant, *Black Candle Women* concocts an intoxicating potion of warmth, wisdom, and wonder. This gorgeous debut novel is a sweepingly fashioned love story where romance and rebellion intertwine with fear and family. And the stakes are epic. I was completely and gladly under Ms. Brown's spell."

-Ava DuVernay

"Richly imagined and elegantly told, with plenty of satisfying secrets, heartaches, and twists. *Black Candle Women* is a promising debut."

-Sadeqa Johnson, New York Times bestselling author of Reese's Book Club Pick, The House of Eve

The praise continues...

"Black Candle Women is a bold and tender story about three generations of women each attempting to find their way amidst the gifts and curses they've inherited. This novel is a wondrous celebration of womanhood."

-Cleyvis Natera, author of Neruda on the Park

"A spellbinding romp. This book will have you asking yourself, who amongst us isn't cursed? More importantly, how far would you go for a chance at love?"

-Carolyn Huynh, author of GMA Book Club Pick The Fortunes of Jaded Women

"A big-hearted debut, with complex, flawed, and compelling characters I was rooting for every step of the way. Diane Marie Brown compassionately depicts how mothers try to protect their daughters from the threats and disappointments of the world."

-E.M. Tran, author of Daughters of the New Year

"Written with warmth and an eye for detail, Diane Marie Brown's Black Candle Women explores the bonds of family and the magical power of belief to transform our lives."

> -Shaunna J. Edwards and Alyson Richman, authors of *The Thread Collectors*

"Black Candle Women is a compassionate novel about motherhood, sisterhood, independence, and the reflection and forgiveness required to break generational curses. Diane Marie Brown's prose, as well as her fascinating main characters, will win you over immediately."

-De'Shawn Charles Winslow,

winner of the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize and author of Decent People

"Brown deftly portrays an insular family of women in all of its complicated glory...The spiritual angle gives this powerful family drama a magical twist that will delight readers."

-Booklist, starred review

"For fans of intergenerational family dramas, this magical twist on the genre will prove refreshing."

-Publishers Weekly

"A gripping Black family drama...Brown's debut tackles generational trauma in an engaging and heartfelt way." *–Library Journal*

The story behind **Black Candle Women**

Black Candle Women began as an exercise in reminiscing about the summers I spent at my uncle's house in New Orleans. My mother taught elementary school and had the summers off, and since she didn't fly, we always traveled from northern California to Louisiana by train. The journeys by train were just as exciting for me as our destinations. During my many trips, I met my pen pal for life, Christina, and had my first kiss.

My mother started sharing fascinating information about our family tree, including my parents' own journey from Louisiana to the Central Valley in California decades before. At the time, I'd been writing snippets of this story in my creative writing program at USC and getting nowhere, and the more I learned about my own family history-including my mother's petitions to Catholic saints-the more excited I became about my own storytelling. Soon, the Montrose women were born.

But as I continued writing the novel, trying to work out more of the Montrose women's story, it felt like something was missing. I found the inspiration I needed while visiting my parents over the holidays. One afternoon, I pulled out a bunch of cookbooks in search of a recipe for the Okinawan doughnuts I used to make as a kid (in addition to visits to my uncle's, I regularly attended a Japanese cultural camp in Stockton that, one year, distributed a cookbook of all the dishes we made). To this day, I still can't find the recipe, but I did come across a tattered folder holding all sorts of pages–a Cajun/Creole catalog from the New Orleans School of Cooking, recipe cards written in my mother's school teacher script, cooking tips torn out from old magazines and newspapers, along with notes here and there from my mom–to herself, and to her only child–me. The collection of papers was such a beautiful documentation of her life, one I could share with my own daughters, and I thought I could use a book in a similar way to connect the women in the novel.

While *Black Candle Women* has evolved over the years, I feel great joy that my mom read an early version—one with the book—before she passed away a few years ago. Hopefully, it transported her back to our summers in New Orleans and warmed her with those nostalgic, irreplaceable memories of family, food, and home, as writing it did for me. And I hope the story of these women warms you, reader, as well.

Black Candle Women Playlist

"Controlla" • Drake "All This Love" • DeBarge "Love's Train" • Con Funk Shun "The Power of Love" • Huey Lewis & the News "Shame" • Evelyn "Champagne" King "Poison" • Bell Biv DeVoe "B.U.D.D.Y." • Musiq Soulchild "Just Like a Star" • Corinne Bailey Rae "Give Me the Night" • George Benson "Anotherloverholenyohead" • Prince "Black Magic Woman" • Santana "You Make Me Wanna..." • Usher "Some Kind Of Lover" • Jody Watley "A Night to Remember" • Shalamar "Meeting In the Ladies Room" • Klymaxx "Boo'd Up" • Ella Mai "I'm Every Woman" • Whitney Houston/Chaka Khan "Murder She Wrote" • Chaka Demus & Pliers "The Payback" • James Brown

> Find it on Spotify: https://tinyurl.com/bdemdtm5

An excerpt from **Black Candle Women**

Prologue Augusta

The flight attendant told Augusta Montrose that she would have to remove her purse from her lap and put it on the floor before the plane took off. She realized the man wasn't joking when he stood in the aisle waiting, moving on only when her granddaughter grabbed the bag and shoved it under the seat in front of her-no place for a purse. She'd wanted to explain that it was her first time on a plane, that she was petrified. Not about the flight itself but the eventual arrival at their destination. When she'd left New Orleans all those decades ago, she'd vowed never to return.

She should have known she'd be called back one day, that the city would never let her rest, even thousands of miles away. She'd learned early on about a certain unfairness in life. Some folks struggled disproportionately, carrying things that others couldn't even lift. The Montrose women had taken on an overbalance of grief, but the way Augusta saw it, they'd been given what they were owed. And they were strong enough to endure it.

The women in her family lived solitary lives, generations of them under one roof, adapting to their isolated ways, doing fine, they all believed. They were a private kind of people, had to keep others out to keep the secrets in.

But recent events had changed them, shaking up the house, rattling the women within. And it was all because of her great-granddaughter. She didn't know yet for sure, but she sensed love was the cause of the girl's recent behavior. This, Augusta understood. She'd swapped one life for another because of love. Because of what had happened all those decades ago in New Orleans. It's what Montrose women did. And love was why she'd had to tell them her story...all of it, from the beginning. She'd held on to these words for years, stuck in her head, unsure how to share them, and now, she'd finally set them free.

PART I August 1 Victoria

In her mellower days, Victoria Montrose sometimes ate two shrimp po'boys just as a snack. Good ones were hard to find near home, but lately, when she got her hands on one, it took only three bites before her stomach convulsed in protest. Hot links, the same. Crawfish étouffée, the same. In cases where she had to pause a therapy session to dash to the restroom, she blamed irritable bowel syndrome. Sometimes diverticulitis. Pain was often how her body spoke to her. A cramp or an abrupt pang forewarned of troubles to come.

But in most cases, an upset stomach simply meant that she'd overindulged. Her body wasn't as forgiving as it once was. Yet today, she'd ordered one of everything greasy and fried at the most authentic New Orleans restaurant in Long Beach. Her daughter, Nickie, had been born seventeen years ago, and an overdone meal was required. Victoria had kept careful track of the years, but the number still stunned her when the woman at the bakery asked how many candles she wanted.

"I'm sorry, seventeen? Or seven?" The woman's brow lifted as she eyed the half-sheet cake decorated with a miniature Black Barbie figurine. She had ordered it without thinking-it seemed Nickie had been seven just days go-but luckily her daughter was not hard to please.

It took Victoria four trips to bring the cake and all the food into the house. The moment she no longer needed help, her sister, Willow, joined her in the kitchen, the scent of grease filling the space as Willow took out containers from the bags, opening them as if each needed to breathe, and rating Victoria's choices. B+ for the sweet potatoes, C- for fried okra.

"You get Nanagusta's turtle soup?"

Victoria pointed to a cardboard cylinder with the letter *T* written on the lid.

"Should I wake her?"

"No. Let her sleep until we cut the cake." Their grandmother could reheat her soup, but she'd throw a book at them if they let her miss Nickie blowing out her candles.

From her purse, Victoria removed a small white box, a purple ribbon wrapped tightly around and tied into a bow. She shook it near Willow's ear, a faint jangle coming from inside. "You'll never guess what I got Nickie."

Willow withdrew a finger from her mouth, a yellow bit of macaroni and cheese on her knuckle. She closed an eye, pushed her lips to one side, and let her face harden, feigning contemplation. "Let me see... Oh!" She snapped her fingers. "A necklace with a painted gold talisman for Ayida Wedo."

Victoria slapped her sister's shoulder with the box. "I knew someone opened my stuff. I was going to call UPS and com¬plain." After snooping, Willow evidently had taken the care to match the same tape that had been ripped off the original box and place the package back on the front porch, but she'd done a half-assed job of it. "Why, what'd you get her?"

"What did I get a teenage girl for her birthday? Money. It's the only right answer to that question," Willow bragged. Then she stopped to consider something, her lips twisting into a smile. "Does this mean you'll be teaching Nickie about the loa? Otherwise, she's just going to think you got her some charm from Claire's at the Lakewood Mall."

Victoria ignored Willow's dig and searched the bags for the blackened chicken salad, wanting to protect it from the warm summer air that had swept into the kitchen. Victoria knew Nickie was capable of simply appreciating the beauty of the necklace, but Willow was right. Victoria hadn't done her duty to explain things. Over the years, she'd intimated at her reverence of the loa, burning through dozens of candles and keep¬ing vigil for hours on All Saints' Day, but never had she spoken the words to Nickie: *I practice Voodoo*. She'd never admitted this directly to anyone, not even the woman who'd first taught her about the loa, her grandmother, though the woman well knew. But she could take some baby steps with Nickie tonight.

Before she could give Willow a good shove, Nickie came into the kitchen, a breeze to her walk. She noticed her daughter's lips, shiny with a

hint of plum. And her eyelids dusted with a shimmery shadow. How sweet that Nickie wanted to look nice for her birthday dinner, even one spent in the company of the women with whom she dined every night.

Willow lifted her plate of carbohydrates, spilling rice on the floor as she opened her arms to invite Nickie in for a hug. "Happy Birthday, Nick. Come over here. I can't believe you're seventeen." Nickie folded herself into Willow's embrace, the two of them the same height.

The sight made Victoria's heart leap. Victoria had lived a disciplined life, a consistent life to get Nickie where she was, a straight-A student with a promising future ahead of her. One day, she would even please the loa, be blessed by their ancestor Lanora, and continue the family tradition of performing beautiful deeds for those in need.

"Nickie, we've got all your favorites here. And we're eating in the dining room," she told her daughter, still overcome with pride. "Real plates. No paper tonight."

Willow sputtered out a laugh. "Real plates? Oh, it's about to be a party up in here, I see. Your mama knows how to get things wild, Nick."



It had been years since she'd eaten fried catfish, and the nuggets on her plate were so richly seasoned, drenched, and crisp that they didn't need hot sauce. Still, Victoria sprinkled a few dashes before each bite in keeping the celebratory vibe of the afternoon. She'd been so taken by the food that she hadn't paid much attention to the conversation, tuning out once Nickie and Willow started in on some HBO show that Nanagusta had convinced them to binge. Victoria didn't watch popular shows or have a hobby that might be interesting to discuss. But it was Nickie's birthday, and for that she had to try harder.

"Nickie," she said, picking up the small, ribboned gift from its perch on the cake box. A swift pang set in, jabbing her just beneath her ribs, and she took in a breath to clear it away. The food was worth the pain. "I am so proud of you. You never ask for anything, and you work so hard in school. You do your chores." She paused. She hated that she always came across as serious, but acting any other way felt awkward to her. "And you're seventeen now." Before she could hand her the box, Nickie squealed, and a new joy overcame Victoria. Could she already feel the energy from the amulet inside? Perhaps. She had anointed it with a mixture of coconut oil, myrrh, a pinch of sugar, and lemongrass.

"Mom, did you get me a car?"

Victoria gripped the box. "A car?" Then she realized what her daughter assumed was inside. What Nickie probably heard as an embarrassed bit of laughter was actually incredulity. The girl thought she was getting a car? "No, not a car."

"Oh, that's fine. That's..." Nickie tapped her fork on the edge of her plate.

Inside, Willow was certainly laughing at her, the scene at the table part of a reality show expressly piloted for her entertainment. She fanned herself with a short pile of napkins as she watched the interaction with those resplendent hazel eyes she'd gotten from her father, a different father than Victoria's. He'd given Willow everything beautiful about him. All the superficial things Victoria had wanted growing up, and even still.

"We can do gifts later, after Nanagusta comes down," Victoria relented, unable to stand the silence. Hopefully by then, Nickie would forget all about the car.

Victoria assumed her sister would start in on another topic, but her mouth was full of food. To stall, she'd reached for the iced tea when the doorbell rang, the surprise of the chimes causing her to spill everywhere.

"I'll get it," Nickie said, pushing back her chair.

Victoria sighed, looking around for something to sop up the mess. Willow handed her the napkins she'd been using to fan herself.

"Ayida Wedo giving you the shakes, Vic?" She'd bitten off a big piece of monkey bread and nearly choked to get the words out.

"Ha ha." Victoria bent down, getting in between her toes as best she could with the napkins.

Victoria had figured someone was dropping off a package or a neighborhood kid was selling candy, but when Nickie returned to the dining room, she had someone with her. A young man. Tall, not much meat on his frame, hair cut so low you couldn't tell the kink of it. "Mom, Auntie, this is my friend Felix. I hope you don't mind, I invited him to my dinner. He said he hadn't eaten Southern food before."

"Good Southern food," the boy said, chuckling.

Victoria squinted, unable to process the scene playing out before her. Nickie had never had a friend over before, let alone a boy. She knew it wasn't okay to invite someone, especially without first asking.

"Well, welcome, Felix. Have a seat. I see you know how to get a party started," Willow said, pointing to the bottle of wine he clutched.

Felix laughed. "Are you Ms. Montrose?"

"We both are," Victoria said, folding her arms over her chest.

Nickie gestured to Willow. "Felix, this is my Aunt Willow."

She waved to him with her fork. "Nice to meet you, young man. Nickie told you I drink Moscato?"

"And this is my mom, Victoria. Or Ms. Montrose."

"It's nice to meet you, Ms. Montrose. Both of you."

He and Nickie got themselves seated. Nickie explained she'd met Felix in her summer photography class. Victoria had encouraged Nickie to find a hobby, wanting to squeeze some of the sulk out of her when summer began, hoping to get her from under the covers and away from the all videos she watched online. She'd purchased a swell little camera and then suggested the class at the rec center. Nickie hadn't seemed very interested in photography initially but, since the start of the session, had spent her days hanging out at the park, taking pictures, and editing them in the center's computer lab.

Now Victoria understood why. Her insides heated up, a sparkling sensation flying down her neck and arms. Nickie. And a boy. In their house.

"Nickie is the best model in the class. Her face is so...shapely. It, like, curves and goes places you wouldn't think." Nickie bent her lips into her mouth, put her hands over her cheeks as she rested her elbows on the table, covering the blemishes on her skin.

Victoria believed him, believed he saw what others so far had not, though really it was all the wonderful things about Nickie she always hoped no one would notice. She shouldn't have bought that camera. She should have let the girl stay in bed, moping. Her skin prickled. "She's modeling for you? I thought you guys just took pictures of trees and buildings and shit."

The boy turned to Willow. "That's mostly what we do. But I pretty much mastered the basic stuff the first session."

"Oh. Cocky motherfucker, aren't you?"

Nickie's hands still covered her cheeks. "My Aunt Willow has a potty mouth."

"I was an English *major*. Can't help it," she said, flippant.

In other company and if she weren't so filled with emotion, Victoria would have pointed out how astute Willow had been with her word choice. How she'd said she was an English major, leaving out the absence of a *degree*. Willow had also been a theater major and premed a few years back at Long Beach City College and considered careers in environmental law and voice acting.

Victoria stewed as the three chatted on. By the time she heard her name, she felt like she'd been trapped inside a pressure cooker. She leveled her voice. "I'm sorry, can you repeat that?"

"Owning your own business. It's gotta be tough. My mom's cousin owned a restaurant in North Long Beach, but it closed after two years."

Victoria managed a short response. "I've heard that restaurants are tough. But I do pretty well." Felix waited for her to go on, but that was all he'd get.

He broke his gaze and sat up straight, focusing on Willow. "And do you enjoy being your sister's assistant?"

"Assistant? That's not my title. Nickie, you told him I was your mom's assistant?"

Nickie stiffened her shoulders. "I mean...aren't you?"

"Hell, no. I'm just as much an owner of this business as your mother. We built it together. Maybe I don't have all those letters after my name, but the people that come through that door everyday are our clients. Mine just as much as hers."

Victoria splayed her hands on the table, feeling the woodsy ridges, and held back from correcting her sister. It didn't matter what Felix thought, anyway. He wouldn't be at their home for another dinner. Her sister seemed to realize that she'd gotten herself worked up. "We've been sitting here talking, and you haven't eaten any food yet, Felix," Willow said. "I hope you got a big appetite. Ms. Montrose over there bought enough food to feed us until winter."

Nickie and the boy went into the kitchen, and Victoria could finally breathe again. Willow leaned over the table, wiggling her fingers to get Victoria's attention. "You better rethink that fertility amulet, Vic. I know you want Nickie to follow in your footsteps, but probably not the teen-mom part."

Felix and Nickie talked as they served themselves. Victoria couldn't help but note how blissful Nickie appeared-despite not getting a car-her smile staying put as she made recommendations on what Felix should try. Victoria tossed the crumpled napkins onto her plate, along with her utensils, and slid her glass close to her.

"You packing up to leave or something?"

"Mmm-hmm. Soon as they get back."

"Don't tell me you're tripping about Nickie having a boy over to the house."

"I'm not tripping about anything. I'm just not feeling well. I'm going upstairs to lie down."

"And what about the cake?" Willow asked. "We need to sing Happy Birthday."

Before going upstairs, she would toss the Barbie figurine, hope the bright pink frosting wouldn't bother Nickie. Victoria shook her head. "Just do it without me. Nickie won't care. She doesn't even like cake. It's more for you and Nana."

"Now, that's a lie. If it was for me, you wouldn't have gotten chocolate."

A lie indeed, but she wouldn't admit it, just as she couldn't stick around to watch Nickie as they sang, the boy joining in as if family. She'd probably make a wish that would involve Felix. But that couldn't be a reality for Nickie. There were details of their family's history Victoria had kept from her. A critical fact that all the women had withheld.

When Nickie and the boy returned, Victoria explained as confidently as she could that she needed to go to her bedroom, using her bellyache as an excuse. "Hopefully it will go away if I rest a bit, but if I'm not back down soon, go ahead and do the cake without me." Nickie lost her smile. "Are you sure? We can do it whenever."

"No, no. You all go on, especially if Nana comes down. You know that woman loves cake." She fixed her eyes on Felix, who had a smear of sauce at the corner of his lips. "It was nice to meet you, Felix." She stopped short of adding a polite *See you again soon*.

* * * * *

Victoria flipped the switch in her closet, sharp light finding the carpet between boxes and bags. In the corner sat a small table that maintained the only order in the space, a placemat on top with a few glass vials and a metal jewelry box. And candles, a hefty black one in the middle, blessed with holy water from St. Louis Cathedral. Though it served as the centerpiece to her altar, the black candle stayed preserved, used only in

centerpiece to her altar, the black candle stayed preserved, used only in the most extreme of situations, like when her grandmother had suffered two strokes within a week's time. Even just standing there unlit, it held power. The black candle was Victoria's go-to stress reliever, the thing she'd clutch during severe weather or when earthquakes rattled her bed, asking the loa to intercede for her, to implore God for protection. She had the ear of many of the loa, and the hearts of a key few. They kept her from drowning, steadied her footing. She thanked them as often and as graciously as she could.

Before coming upstairs, she'd thrown a sampling of items on a new plate: a hot wing, a small filet of catfish, and a couple spoons of bread pudding. Her favorite loa had a taste for the kind of food her mother cooked back in New Orleans. She sat the plate in front of the candle and fished out a pair of scissors from a nearby basket to trim the wick as short as possible, an effort to keep the flame low and help it burn longer. Soon, the space yellowed, casting staticky shadows against the walls and clothes. She kneeled, the spiral binding of a notebook digging into one of her calves, and checked the time-4:22.

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty. Creator of Heaven and earth," she began, following the creed with the Lord's Prayer. Both of these she would say again in exactly seven hours, then lift words to Cosmos and Damien, known in the Voodoo world as Marassa, the divine twins. As with other Voodoo loa, the Marassa twins intervened for humankind in matters of love, prosperity, power. After the seventh hour, she'd snuff the flame, and by then, the young man would lose any affections he held for Nickie and with them would go Victoria's anxiety. It was a ritual of protection. For her daughter and for them all. Quashing things between Nickie and this Felix kid wasn't something she'd take pride in, even if it were just a temporary fix until she could explain the way of their world. Victoria had been in denial all these years, not fully convinced that she'd ever have to share their family secret. But her daughter had gotten older, had become a young woman. Which meant soon, she'd have to tell her about the curse, put into place by a bitter woman named Bela Nova-the curse that left dead any person with whom a Montrose woman fell in love.

But how would she ever explain to her daughter that, as a Montrose woman, she didn't get to fall in love?

As she sat at the altar, her belly knotted, a sharp tightening rushed her breath. She closed her eyes and exhaled, pushing the air from her abdomen the way the woman on her fitness app had instructed. Hopefully, her family didn't eat all the catfish nuggets. She knew now they weren't the cause of her bellyache. It was the boy.



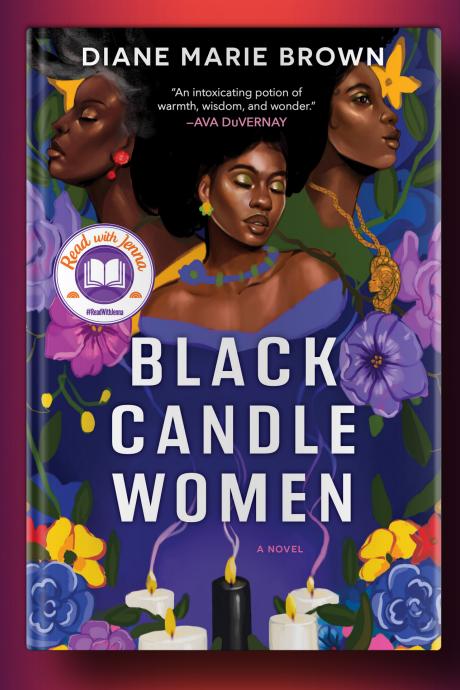
Black Candle Women Discussion questions

- 1. Victoria has structured her life in a way that supports her and her family's isolation. Did you understand why she chose to live that kind of life? If the household hadn't been shaken up by Nickie's interest in Felix, Madelyn's arrival, and Willow's relationship with January, do you think Victoria would have been able to maintain this way of living forever? Why or why not?
- 2. Although Willow doesn't believe in the curse, she has still kept herself from being in a relationship, at least until she meets January. Why do you think she behaves this way? Why does she change her behavior when January comes into her life?
- 3. After learning about Victoria's relationship with Jimmie, Augusta doesn't intervene. How would you have acted if you'd been in Augusta's position?
- 4. Like Augusta's mother, Victoria envisions a certain future for her daughter and tries to control her. What other patterns are passed on among the generations? Discuss how traditions and behaviors, both useful and harmful, can continue within families.
- 5. At several points in the story, there are four generations of Montrose women living in the same household. What impact does this living arrangement have on their lifestyles? Is it more of a hindrance or a help to have so many generations under one roof?
- 6. Why do you think *Black Candle Women* was selected as the title for this book? How are the Montroses black candle women? Is Bela Nova also a black candle woman?
- 7. Which Montrose woman was your favorite? Why?
- 8. Discuss the family curse. Do you think Bela Nova was justified in cursing generations of Montrose women? Does your family have any superstitions?
- 9. The Montrose family documented much of their history in the book that originally belonged to Delilah. Why was Augusta willing to return it to Bela Nova with so much of their story inside? Is there an item that your own family passes down between generations? How does your family share and celebrate its history?



Black Candle Women

Don't miss this warm and wry family drama with a magical twist about four generations of Black women, a family curse, and one very complicated year of heartache, miscommunication, and learning to let go!



On sale February 28

