

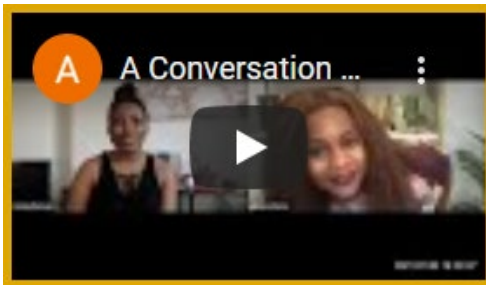
AUNT CHLOE

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“And They Were There”: A Conversation with the Author of The Gilded Ones

“They were magical. They were magnificent. And they were there.”

Recorded Interview can be found on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/Fxm9aBM3LnE>



— Namina Forna

The above affirmations summarize, succinctly and eloquently, the sentiments and histories at the heart of Namina Forna’s *The Gilded Ones*. The “they” to whom Forna refers here, like the characters and monsters in her gripping novel, can be understood as taking many forms. The pre-colonial civilizations, and the people of legendary myths like the ones Forna’s father used to tell her, were there—they were, and are, very real, if sometimes obscured by those in control of history. The Black women—those at the head of these tribes and those in present times—guiding younger girls towards confidence, self-acceptance, and pride, are certainly a “they” that occupies a similar liminal space, being at once ethereal and simply real.

Within these confluences lies the brilliance of *The Gilded Ones*, a novel set in a world where women and girls are systematically subjugated, forced to wear masks and subject themselves to “purity tests” not unlike those still prevalent in many parts of the world, including Forna’s birthplace and home, Sierra Leone. Forna deftly weaves concerns of past and present, rebuilding African-inspired worlds that have been both literally and figuratively erased, exploring questions of agency, religious dogma, tradition, and cultural legacy that are unavoidable when discussing Blackness, and doing it all through the eyes of Deka, the protagonist who ultimately learns to embrace herself, her body, and her true identity. Her journey parallels, with eerie accuracy, the experiences of so many young Black girls across the diaspora. *The Gilded Ones* is a mirror held up to readers, simultaneously exposing the ugliness of certain histories and the beauty of Black girlhood. It was an honor to discuss the novel with Forna, and to gain more insight about how the world she built on the page reflects the one she has navigated all her life.

— Ariana Benson

In the interview, Forna refers to “ADW,” a class at Spelman College entitled “African Diaspora and the World.” The course, which is taken by all first-year students, explores Black history, starting with pre-colonial African civilizations and moving through time to end at the Civil Rights Movement.

Namina Forna is a young-adult novelist based in Los Angeles. Originally from Sierra Leone, West Africa, she moved to the United States when she was nine and has been traveling back and forth ever since. Namina, who loves telling stories with fierce female leads and also works as a screenwriter, is author of *The New York Times* best-selling epic fantasy novel, *The Gilded Ones*, and the forthcoming sequel, *The Merciless Ones*.