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# V.I. author Tiphonie Yanique explores history, family relationships in new book

By LORI ABBOTTS Daily News Staff  
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Highly anticipated by publications such as the New York Times and the Boston Globe, Virgin Islander Tiphonie Yanique's latest novel, "Monster in the Middle," a multi-generational love story that explores how history and family origins affect love and relationships, is being released today.

You might say books are in Yanique's blood. Raised in the Hospital Ground area on St. Thomas, her grandmother was the children's librarian at the Enid Baa Library. Her mother was a librarian at Addelita Cancryn Junior High School, and worked as a librarian stateside for many years.

"I grew up in a house with books. There were books everywhere and there was storytelling everywhere," she told The Daily News. "Also, I spent the summers at my grandfather's [the late Dr. Andre Galiber] house on St. Croix — who actually had a library in his house. I would go there for summers and I would just sit in his house, reading things I was probably way too young to read."

By age of 14, Yanique had already decided she was going to be the one and only poet and novelist in the family. That notion was upended one day while looking for some old poems she had written. She came upon a box of poems and letters to publishers she didn't remember writing. In it was a picture of her in her Catholic confirmation dress, but she hadn't yet made confirmation. Confused, she approached her grandmother and discovered those poems were written by her mother — the girl in the picture.

"I thought this dream of being a writer was mine and mine alone, but it's not. It never was," said Yanique. "We were raised by the same woman. The same grandparents that raised me were her parents. I found out we lived in the same exact bedroom. Is it in the blood or is it how we were raised? The sunlight came through the window the exact same way as it did when she woke up. It was the same roosters when we woke up. We just led very similar lives."

Yanique graduated from All Saints Cathedral School in 1996. In 2000, she earned her undergraduate degree from Tufts University in Massachusetts. She was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in English literature and creative writing at the University of the West Indies. Next, she earned a master's degree in creative writing and women's studies in 2006 at the University of Houston, where she held a Cambor Fellowship. She also served as the Writer-in-Residence/Parks Fellow at Rice University, teaching creative writing, fiction and nonfiction.

Yanique was also an assistant professor of creative writing and Caribbean literature at Drew University, and has served as acting director of writing and curriculum at the Virgin Islands Summer Writers Program. She also was an assistant professor of writing at The New School,

where she taught undergraduate and graduate students, and was later the director of the creative writing program at Wesleyan University. She is now an associate professor at Emory University in Atlanta.

Her debut collection, “How to Escape from a Leper Colony,” was published by Graywolf Press in 2010, and she has been included in a number of journals and anthologies. Her children’s picture book, “I am the Virgin Islands,” came out in 2012, commissioned by first lady Cecile DeJongh as a gift to Virgin Islands children.

Yanique’s debut novel, “Land of Love and Drowning,” published in 2014, took the skills she had developed while writing “Leper Colony” and combined them into a single project. The novel won the 2014 Flaherty–Dunnaw First Novel Award from the Center for Fiction, the Phillis Wheatley Award for Pan–African Literature and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Family Foundation Award.

At the core of “Land of Love and Drowning” is the exploration of what it means to be a Virgin Islander. “It brings the story from 1917 when we became the Virgin Islands up to the 1970s, when Virgin Islanders started to have access to and from the United States.

In “Monster in the Middle,” Yanique takes that concept of belonging to the next level. One character in the book is rooted in the American South, while the other is rooted in the Virgin Islands.

“In this book, I really wanted to think about what it means to be an American,” she said. “When you are a Virgin Islander, you come to the states and feel like an immigrant in your own country. ... The way the book is structured, the central metaphor is the labyrinth, a journey that is very winding and complex, and at the middle is the monster. It is a book about American-ness, but also a book about American history. The histories that we live, our personal histories, the histories of our family, the histories of our nation, of our culture and of our world really impact us on infinite levels. We think that we are living lives that are ours and ours alone, and then we realize we’ve been living in our mother’s bedroom our whole lives.”

Yanique will be in the Virgin Islands for book signings on Wednesday, Oct. 27, at 81C and at 340 Bookstore on St. Thomas; at Bajo el Sol Gallery on St. John on Thursday, Oct. 28, and at Undercover Books on St. Croix on Friday, Oct. 29.