

## Interview with Abi Daré.mp3

[00:00:08] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. And today I'm talking to Abi Daré, the author of *THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE*, which is out now from Dutton.

[00:00:25] **Kendra** So when I first heard about this book, it was on Instagram, and I saw that it was chosen as a #ReadwithJenna pick. Since then, I've seen it on so many different Instagram feeds like Spines & Vines. And I just knew I had to pick up a copy and check it out myself. So this book is about a young girl named Adunni who is basically sold by her father into a marriage when she is fourteen, and she really just wants to get an education. And so since her mother has died and her dad has forced her to marry this man and become this man's third wife, she feels like that education is going to be out of her grasp. But in a series of events, she ends up working as a maid in Lagos. The novel unravels from there.

[00:01:11] **Kendra** So a little bit about the author before we jump into my conversation with Abi today.... Abi Daré grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, and has lived in the UK for eighteen years. She has studied law and has a degree in international project management from Glasgow Caledonian University. It's pretty cool. She also has an MA in creative writing at Birkbeck, University of London. *THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE* is her first novel and actually won the Bath Novel Award for unpublished manuscripts back in 2018 and was also selected as a finalist in the 2018 Literary Consultancy Pen Factor competition. So it did pretty well for itself.

[00:01:51] **Kendra** So I'm so glad we now have it here on this side of the pond, and we all have the opportunity to read it. Abi now lives in Essex with her husband and her two daughters, both of whom inspired her to write this novel. So I am very thrilled to bring to you today my conversation with Abi Daré.

[00:02:13] **Kendra** Well, welcome to the podcast, Abi. I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:02:18] **Abi** Thank you for having me.

[00:02:19] **Kendra** I have in my hands your gorgeous book, *THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE*, and it's been published in several countries at this point. What are that experience been like to see your story all over the world?

[00:02:31] **Abi** Incredible. I sometimes I pinch myself still, but the book is out there. I worked on that book for about three years before it was published, and I didn't think it would be published, and so seeing it being received and read is incredible. I'm very grateful.

[00:02:50] **Kendra** So this is your first book. What was that publishing journey like? Or is there anything that surprised you about it?

[00:02:57] **Abi** It was very exciting. I mean, I've been writing on my own for years just trying to navigate, to tell my stories. But I decided to do a master's degree in 2016, so about four years ago, in creative writing. And that because I felt that I needed to sit with people like myself, like minds who had an interest in writing. I wanted to do something serious with it. So that's where I started my publishing journey from.

[00:03:23] **Abi** So the book was part of my thesis, or my dissertation, for my creative writing master's degree. And then from there I won a Bath Novel Award, a competition in London. And it was judged anonymously, which was the only reason why I entered for that because I thought. . . . I wanted . . . because I was writing in nonstandard English, and I wanted to see whether anyone would even understand the story or whether to connect or resonate with anyone. I was hoping for at least a commendation from the judges. But to have won, that was just amazing.

[00:03:53] **Abi** And from there, I got an agent, and the book was ready to be submitted to publishers and went through an auction process. So more than one publisher was interested, and that was just exciting. I think the most surprising part for me has been the reception and just how much I need to talk about my book and sort of engage readers because you're so used to being in your own little corner for years writing. You don't realize that once the book is out there, you do need to talk and engage. And it's been exciting, which is quite surprising. But I've loved every moment of it.

[00:04:29] **Kendra** And how many countries has it been published in up to this point? I've seen several different beautiful covers.

[00:04:33] **Abi** So it's the Commonwealth, which is . . . I'm not sure how many countries that is . . . the UK, Australia, Ghana, Nigeria, a few other countries, quite a lot of countries. It will be coming out in Italian, I believe, and Spanish, I think. And then in the US and Canada and those regions as well. So which is just incredible.

[00:04:55] **Kendra** And you mentioned the book is written in nonstandard English. For listeners who might not know what that is, what does that mean for the storytelling in your book and how that plays out? And what is your strategy for that?

[00:05:06] **Abi** So, it means . . . it's something I came up with in terms of nonstandard English because there's something called broken English, and there's something called pidgin English, which some people are familiar with. But Adunni doing doesn't speak either. She really invents some of her words, and she borrows from pidgin English and borrows from broken English to create this, what I call nonstandard English. So it's basically a way of speaking English in Adunni's way.

[00:05:27] **Abi** So she navigates the language in her own way and uses words that she feels that she's comfortable with and understands. And these are words that are not necessarily familiar with people that speak everyday standard English. Writing that was quite interesting for me. I knew that, I mean, growing up in Nigeria, in Lagos, I grew up in a neighborhood where we had a lot of housemaids. My family also had housemaids. And many of the maids that we had did not speak standard English. They navigated their way around the language. There was no two housemaids that spoke the same way. Depending on where they came from, what country or what states or what part of Nigeria they came from, they had different words.

[00:06:04] **Abi** And so I wanted Adunni to reflect that, to show that she was different, but she could articulate herself in her own way. But I also wanted to show that the fact that a person or a character doesn't speak standard English, as we all know, it doesn't mean they're not intelligent, that English is not a measure of how smart you are or how funny you are, intelligent you are. I also wanted to show that as well.

[00:06:27] **Abi** It was quite challenging at first, but as I got into a flow of it from the cadence, and I think from chapter four, I started to get quite . . . it started to get quite easy and fun, actually. I began to enjoy looking for words and inventing things. And I had a two-year-old daughter then. She's five now. But she was also navigating her way. She was born in England, probably had been to Nigeria when she was a baby. But she was also navigating the English language of herself and trying to make up words. And she'd say some interesting and funny things. And I'd run to write here in the glossary I had for Adunni. And I'll use that and sort of create and make it more Nigerian, so to speak, and then just put that in the book. And I really took a little risks because I was writing, thinking, well, no one's going to read this, so I might as well have fun and enjoy it. But yeah, people are reading it now. So. I'm having to answer this question a lot.

[00:07:15] **Kendra** Well, the audio is a very interesting experience because the narrator does voice that. I mean, it's a first-person story. And so they're reading this book. And at first, it kind of takes you a moment to get into the rhythm of things. But then once you understand how Adunni expresses herself, you're like, Okay. It's like your mind clicks, almost like when you watch a Shakespeare play, and your mind has to adjust to the language. It is a really interesting experience.

[00:07:43] **Abi** That's wonderful.

[00:07:45] **Kendra** And we'll be back with more from this episode of Reading Women after a word from our sponsor.

[00:08:47] **Kendra** You mentioned your daughters. I saw in another interview that this book is partially inspired by your daughters. Could you talk a little bit about that and how they inspired you to write the story?

[00:08:58] **Abi** So I have two daughters. One was eight when I started writing. She's eleven now. And the other was two. So they both have inspired in different ways, one from a language point of view, the younger one.

[00:09:08] **Abi** But The eight-year-old, we had a conversation. I was in the kitchen and I asked her to help with offloading the dishwasher. And her reaction, as they do react, was one of moans and "I really don't want to do this. I'm really tired. And it's so frustrating having to help you out." So I said to her in that conversation, I said to have her, "Do you know that there are young girls like you, who are probably working for families like ours in Nigeria?" And she said, "Well, that's really cool, Mom. Do they get paid? Can I get paid for what I'm doing?".

[00:09:38] **Abi** I had to sort of break it down and say to her, no, I don't mean the kind of job Mommy does in terms of working in office. I mean, I'm talking chores. I'm talking hard work. I'm talking about young girls who might not have what you have. So some of them that I knew growing up were not privileged to be educated or watch TV with the families they lived with or even eat at the dining table with the families. Many of them were not well treated.

[00:10:03] **Abi** And she was kind of shocked. But she asked me, she said, "Mom, why would anyone put their child into that? Why would a young girl go and work for a family?" And I wondered, you know, to myself. I knew it was poverty. But I wondered if there was more to that story, if I could tell the story. And so I think that night I couldn't sleep, actually. I began to think back to growing up in Nigeria, about the maids we had. I spent nearly

twenty years there. So I know this quite well. It's very, very common to have housemaids, and it was not uncommon to have them as young as eight sometimes.

[00:10:34] **Abi** So I began to think about that and began to go through my research. I went online, and I began to read articles. There was one I came across that evening about thirteen-year-old girl who had been scalded with boiling hot water by the woman that employed her. And in this article, this girl's face was blurred out. It was a way to protect identity. But I was asking questions. I was asking, who is this girl? What is her story? Surely she has dreams. What are her dreams? And so I wrote the book in trying to make the girl the center of the story. I didn't want it to just be a story about slavery, about modern-day slavery or about a housemaid. I wanted it to be about Adunni. I wanted it to be everything about her. What makes her happy? What makes her sad? Her entire journey. And so that only came about because of the conversation I had with my eight year old.

[00:11:23] **Kendra** The story is very complex and intricate in all of the different things that you tackle. And the title of the book is THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE. I feel like there's a lot of symbolism in that title, and I don't want to give any spoilers, so I might dance around this a little bit. But what is it about that title and what does it symbolize for Adunni and how the book plays out?

[00:11:46] **Abi** I think that Adunni was born into a culture and into a rural part of Nigeria. So that, I mean, Nigeria is vast. It's huge. And there's extreme poverty, but there's also a lot of wealth. And she was born, unfortunately, in the part where there's poverty. And she was born in a part where a girl child is not seen as valuable. And she was seen as someone that should be silenced. Right? That's (1.).

[00:12:10] **Abi** (2.) Her education was not that important to her father. But her mother really valued this. Her mother didn't have an education, and she wanted her daughter to have one. And so her mother says to her that your education will give you a voice. But Adunni says, I don't just want that. I want to have a louding voice. And so to her, that means to be able to (1.) to be educated because she wants to become a teacher. (2.) It also means to be able to create a legacy.

[00:12:33] **Abi** So she doesn't want to help herself alone. Adunni wants to help other girls like her in her village, in villages like hers, in rural areas, and all the parts of the world who have been marginalized, who've been silenced, and who've been forced into child marriages and domestic servitude. She wants to fight for them. She wants to fulfill her dreams and become everything she can become. So it's really about, you know, becoming yourself, expressing yourself, and feeling your dreams. Speaking up, refusing to be silenced, having the louding voice. She wants it to continue forever and ever, even after she's no longer here on earth. So that's what she wants. And it's a bold dream to have. And that's what she sets to try to achieve in the story.

[00:13:12] **Kendra** There's a scholarship program that she applies to in the book. And as you were doing your research, did you discover scholarship programs like that that might have inspire that part of the story? Was there anything like that in her area of the world?

[00:13:25] **Abi** I found quite a few, but they weren't geared towards domestic workers. So that was kind of created in the story. And they weren't geared towards domestic workers, towards young girls. But they're different scholarship schemes that are run by . . . because Nigeria is an oil-producing nation. And so there are quite a few that are run by oil

companies and even various different organizations across the country. But the one in the story was fiction, fictional. I just invented it based on what I'd seen.

[00:13:55] **Kendra** So you mentioned some of the research that you've done on domestic workers and different part of girls' education. What other things did you research for this book? Because you cover so many things, I imagine it was quite the task.

[00:14:10] **Abi** It was. But I enjoyed every moment of it. And I sort of researched moment by moment because I kind of planned the book. But when I started writing, like, okay, I'll think, oh, child marriage. Let me read about this. One of the research I did was just ensuring that the facts I put in the book is from half of the book to the end, middle half to the end, I started to pull facts into each of the chapters. And so the facts I did the research on just to try and make sure that I was saying the truth. And that it was an actual fact. It wasn't just hearsay. But also reading articles and just checking the the law on child marriages for different states because Nigeria has interstate laws. They also have federal laws. And sometimes—even though federal law, the law of the entire country, governs all the states—but sometimes some states can get away with it, so to speak. So you find that in the states where child marriage is legal, it's the girls there are bound to suffer more than girls that are born in another state where there's education on this progress. So it was interesting trying to research that.

[00:15:16] **Abi** You know, I did a lot of research online, to be honest, in terms of reading the articles, understand the case law, speaking to some of my friends who were lawyers. I have a friend who's a human rights lawyer and just hearing from her own experience, her own stories and advice. But I enjoyed, like I said, I enjoyed every moment and research in that and state putting that out there.

[00:15:37] **Kendra** As her story progresses, she has a lot of people who are not very kind to her, but she also has several figures in her life that really encourage her. There is someone who encourages her to apply to the scholarship scheme. There's Ms. Tia who is one of my favorite characters, who encourages her to trust that she's been given all the talents that she needs and encourages her in that way. And I really appreciate how you also had a commentary on how the community needs to support these girls. They shouldn't be left on their own to try to figure things out. And that was such a beautiful part of the book as I was reading it.

[00:16:16] **Abi** Thank you.

[00:16:16] **Kendra** When you were writing all of these different characters, I imagine, you know, with the plot, you didn't want someone just to come in and fix everything for her. But she also does need support in her life. How did these characters come onto the scene in her story and was that something that you had planned all along? Or did they just appear and decide, you know, kind of how characters do decide to just do their own thing in the story?

[00:16:42] **Abi** A lot of them actually just turned up. But Tia, I planned from day one because I really believe in the value of mentorship and female empowerment. And that was something—and female friendships, when it goes well—that was something I really wanted to point out from the start of the story. I knew that I was going to write a story about this.

[00:17:01] **Abi** I wanted to have a woman who would empower a young girl because I believe that we can empower young girls without even stepping out of your homes by just putting a post on social media. You might be empowering somebody anywhere in the world. And so I wanted to show that.

[00:17:16] **Abi** And obviously, because as the story progresses, without giving any spoilers, Tia doesn't really have to do much to actually change Adunni's life. She turns up and helps, but really the little time that she puts into this young girl's life was enough to change her life and a generation. And I wanted to show the power in kindness, in female mentorship, in putting your own voice out there. So somebody I always say that really inspires me is Michelle Obama. I've never met her, but she's inspired me greatly by just writing a book and speaking up for female education, for girl education. So I think she was planned.

[00:17:55] **Abi** But the other really interesting characters like Big Daddy, he just turned up into that scene in the living room. He just turned up. And I was like, Okay, well, let's have him here. And Kofi, whose the cook, he turned up. And I thought, Nice, let's have him here. And he's not Nigerian. He's Ghanaian. And I also did that because I wanted to show that Africa is made up of many countries just like Europe is, and that having a Ghanaian on the scene would show that again. Ghana is very close to Nigeria. It's a thirty-minute flight. But they're two different countries. I just wanted to show that. So he turned up, and I said, Oh, I like you; I'll keep you on.

[00:18:29] **Abi** And so many, many of the characters turned up to help to carry Adunni's journey forward. She needed to keep going. And so many of them just turned up along the journey to help her through. One of the characters actually also surprised me who I loved. It was Khadija, who turned up quite early in the story. And I liked her, and I thought, Well, this is nice. Let's keep you in here. But maybe not for too long. So, yes. So quite a few surprises for me. And I love surprises in my writing. It's when it's really fun.

[00:18:58] **Kendra** And we'll be back with more from this episode of Reading Women after a word from our sponsor.

[00:19:51] **Kendra** I really loved all the different supportive characters in the protagonist's life, and it just felt like I could feel that they were a bastion of comfort for her and reassurance in her life, which is very tumultuous, full of so many changes so quickly. And these women are a great support to her. I really appreciate all those feminist themes of women supporting women. And it just meant, I think, so much to hearing that in that kind of story.

[00:20:20] **Kendra** One of the things that I really appreciate the way you covered is fertility and infertility and how that's seen or perceived in the book.

[00:20:29] **Abi** As a woman's problem.

[00:20:30] **Kendra** Yes. And how there's still so much stigma around women being childless and how that's not normalized. And so there's this scene in the book. I mean, it's a really—I don't want to give any spoilers—but it's a very difficult scene to read. And there's so much stigma for that character who experiences that, kind of, ritual to try to cure her infertility. Did you do any research on that? And what was your process for including that part of the book and different things like that.

[00:21:00] **Abi** So that I knew. It happened to somebody I know. So it wasn't . . . um . . . it was kind of based on real life. But obviously I massaged is a little bit to show, but it's not uncommon. It's not uncommon. Where I'm from all over the world to find that, you know, anything to do with fertility is the woman's problem. If she chooses not to have children, it's her problem. And it's a "problem." I put that in quotation. And I wanted to sort of show that, you know, why. And in terms of the rituals, parts of Nigeria and certain states, the Yoruba culture—where I'm from—we can be quite superstitious and believe in certain rituals and believe in curing things in different ways.

[00:21:45] **Abi** And so because somebody I knew that this had happened, who gave me permission to share that story, I knew this had happened. I wanted to show that. But even within a community of educated, wealthy women. So this wasn't Adunni in the rural village, not educated. This was educated women. This was 2015, I think, it was when this happened in the story. I want to show that it's, you know, it's something that I've seen happen. And it was ridiculous. And so I wanted to show that out there. I think I was quite upset when I was writing that scene as well, because it really quite affected me quite deeply in trying to show that scene and that piece of story.

[00:22:28] **Kendra** Yeah, and there's this line that Adunni says. It's something about just because you're rich and you live in a nice house or something doesn't mean you have no problems. And I think that moment for her as this is, you know, like a coming-of-age story, she realizes that sexism touches every woman around her.

[00:22:50] **Abi** Absolutely.

[00:22:50] **Kendra** It was such a important moment, especially with her relationship with that woman that experienced that as well.

[00:22:58] **Abi** Yes, absolutely. And she realizes that, you know, she comes out of poverty, hoping to get educated and into money, hopefully make some money. But she's still a woman. She will be a woman. She's still a girl. She's going to have to fight some of the battles that she's seen Big Madam fight. She's seen the woman who is her friend fight. She's seen these things. And she's thinking, Wow, what's in store for me? What do I have to battle as a woman in this world? It's not just Nigeria—in the world. We women have a lot to fight. And I just wanted to show that in one way from the eyes of a young girl who might be naive, looking out there and saying, Wow, this is happening. Even with your wealth and your education, this can still happen to you.

[00:23:45] **Kendra** There's something really beautiful about the solidarity that they find with each other and that these different women's experiences. So. Well, I could talk to you about this book for several more hours, I'm sure. But to close out the interview before I let you go, I always like to ask authors books that they would recommend who are written by women. And since this book is set in Nigeria, I thought you might have some Nigerian women writers that you might want to recommend to our listeners.

[00:24:13] **Abi** Sure. Ayobami Adebayo, the author of STAY WITH ME, is the book. STAY WITH ME is one I'd love for people to read. It's a great book that explores the dynamics of a marriage, of a woman struggling with fertility, and some of the obstacles she'd try to overcome, and the dynamics of their relationship. It's a beautiful book. I think it came out two or three years ago. Very well received. Fantastic story. If anyone wants to look at that again, something similar to THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE, but from a different,

different set of characters, both educated, very, very lovely, wonderful book. The closest to my heart is that book at the moment.

[00:24:52] **Abi** The other one is not a Nigerian writers. Khaled Hosseini's A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS is my favorite book of all time. Again, another book that looks at the woman and a woman trying to rise above the obstacles and the limitations of culture, tradition in a country that is not familiar to me. But he paints such a beautiful picture of Afghanistan in terms of the challenges and the beauty of the landscape. A beautiful story that made me cry a lot and just really tugged on my heartstrings. And that's another one I always recommend alongside STAY WITH ME.

[00:25:26] **Kendra** It is a beautiful story. So right now, you're still doing a lot of media and promotion for THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE. But what's next on your agenda? Do you have any projects on the horizon that you'd like to tell our listeners about?

[00:25:38] **Abi** I'm always thinking about what could be. But it changes every day, so if you ask me about this tomorrow, I'll tell you something else. But I know that I'm interested in women, in the stories of women, about women. I love exploring the human condition. I love looking at tradition and culture and the positives and the negatives and trying to put that into a story that can shed light in a way that is nuanced and balanced. So I know that whatever I'm working on next is going to be something along those lines, going to be about women. It's going to look at culture and tradition. Nigeria, maybe the UK, and yeah, and just see how my characters navigate that.

[00:26:20] **Kendra** Well, we will keep our eyes peeled for it. And thank you so much for coming on the podcast and chatting with me.

[00:26:26] **Abi** Thank you for having me.

[00:26:27] **Kendra** Really appreciate it.

[00:26:28] **Abi** Thank you so much.

[00:26:36] **Kendra** I'd like to thank Abi Daré for talking with me about THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE. You can find Abi on social media (@abiDaré\_author). And of course, all of that information, including a link to the publisher's website, will be linked in our show notes.

[00:26:51] **Kendra** I'd like to say a special thank you to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. You can find Reading Women over at [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com)—where there's also a full transcript of this episode—and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). You can find me (@kdwinchester). And thanks so much to all of you for listening to Reading Women.