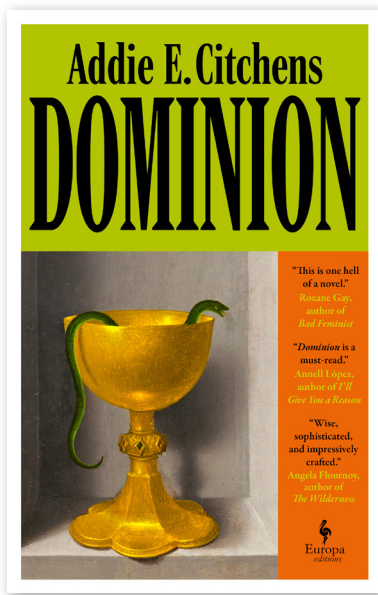


Dominion

by Addie E. Citchens



PLOT SUMMARY

In the town of Dominion, Mississippi, the Reverend Sabre Winfrey, Jr. is more than a preacher. From his pulpit at the Seven Seals Baptist Church to the airwaves of his local radio station, he exerts influence over every aspect of society. By his side is his wife Priscilla, who types up his sermons and raises their five sons, favouring the youngest, Wonderboy.

Handsome and adored, Wonderboy is destined to carry on his father's legacy. But, after a violent altercation with a stranger, Wonderboy's actions send shockwaves through the community. Told through the perspectives of the women who love these two men, their perspectives illuminate the pervasive sins of the patriarchy, and the bargains women strike to survive them.

A vivid and unforgettable story that exalts the beauty and strength of Black womanhood, *Dominion* is the incandescent debut from one of America's most exciting writers.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

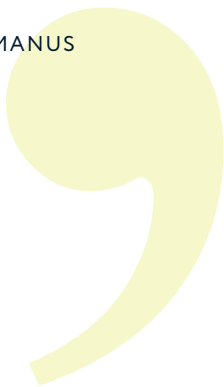
Citchens' ingenious use of Reverend Sabre Winfrey's sermon notes at the beginning of Chapters 1–7 are an effective framing device for the themes of the novel; namely, how the damaging patriarchal messages disseminated in Sabre's sermons support and encourage the abusive treatment of women in the town of Dominion.

Sabre's sermon notes highlight his own hypocrisy, often criticising the sin of lust, despite the reverend being a well-known adulterer. In his notes at the beginning of Chapter 3, it reads: "You Can Put a Pig in a Wig, But It's Still a Pig". This offensive, misogynistic phrase references the scriptural background for his sermon on the biblical Whore of Babylon: a symbol of an actively sexual and sovereign woman, which, in his mind and in the tradition of the Church, is an abomination.

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“I loved the strength of voice [and] the impressive craft in the plotting... deft and chilling.”

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To Sabre and the Church, women are the greater sinners, for being the source of temptation, rather than men, for whatever their crimes – in the case of Sabre, an adulterer, and in the case of his son, Wonderboy, a rapist and murderer. After Wonderboy is accused of raping Caticia, other sermon notes reference the sins of Eve as the original temptress.

Interestingly, Chapters 8 to 10 don't begin with Sabre's sermon notes, indicating perhaps how his power and influence wanes towards the end of the novel. These are chapters told only by Priscilla and Diamond, the women who have had to endure abuse at the hands of Manny and Sabre.

With her inclusion of Sabre's sermon notes, Citchens shows the reader the theological underpinning of misogyny in *Dominion*, and the dangers that exist for women wherever this narrative exists today.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Priscilla has spent her life obeying the laws of her society, being what a good wife and mother should be – she supports her husband Sabre in public, even though everyone knows that the Reverend has many affairs. She accepts the fact that her husband is physically abusive to her, and she even tolerates being around the women in the church community that she knows he has slept with. The reason for her acceptance might well be that she has never had a chance to question the misogyny of the church: she says, 'To woman he gave a womb, and to man he gave dominion – that's what I teach my boys because that's what the living word say.'

To cope with it all, Priscilla drinks and takes drugs, numbing herself to the truth she can't afford to look at.

Priscilla also turns a blind eye to her suspicions about her son, Wonderboy. She isn't the only one: when Wonderboy rapes Caticia, Caticia's own father initially believes him over his daughter when he denies it, because Wonderboy is a football star and the son of the Reverend. Yet, later, Priscilla regrets her actions:

'I was the one that had ushered the Wootens out of the house, knowing good and well that boy could have done, likely had done, what they said. Ushered them out with prayer, no less. I had run from the situation in order to run from the guilt.'

Is Priscilla a good mother? Is she at all responsible for what Wonderboy does, or are the other influences on his life too big for her to correct on her own? She says, 'Mothers were always receptacles, always supplicants.' Is this true? When Priscilla begins to turn her life around, is it too late for her sons?



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QUESTIONS

How does Citchens represent fatherhood in *Dominion*? Who is the better father – Reverend Sabre Winfrey or Jimmy Wooten? Are either of them redeemable? Why?

What did you think of the female characters in the book? Is Citchens critical of the women of *Dominion*? Why, or why not?

How do you think the moment with Wonderboy, Sabre and the dead dog affected Wonderboy in later life? Were you surprised by this moment?

The focus of media coverage about young men accused of rape often focuses on the ruining of those boys' prospects and careers, rather than their crimes and the effect on the victims. What impact does this have on how we think about victims and truth?

NEXT STEPS

Write a childhood diary entry from the point of view of one of Wonderboy's brothers – perhaps a memory of being in church, a happy day together or a terrible moment when Reverend Sabre Winfrey is violent. What does that brother feel about the event he remembers? How has it shaped him as the man he is today?

Alternatively, write about Diamond's story when she leaves *Dominion* at the end of the book. What might she do and how will her life look, now that she is free? What does she do the day after Wonderboy's funeral? What has she learned from her experiences? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Addie E. Citchens was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and lives in New Orleans. A graduate of Jackson State University, she studied in the Florida State University Creative Writing Programme. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review*. She was the inaugural recipient of the Farrar, Straus and Giroux Writer's Fellowship, and her short story 'That Girl' won the O. Henry Prize. *Dominion* is her first novel.



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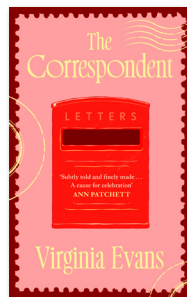
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