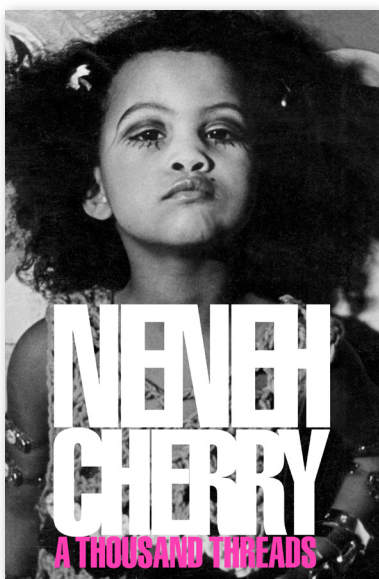


A Thousand Threads

by Neneh Cherry



PLOT SUMMARY

A seed is sown. A story is born. One thread, one needle: the story is sewn.

Top of the Pops, December 1988. The world sat up as a young woman made her debut: gold bra, gold bomber jacket, and proudly seven months pregnant. This was no ordinary artist. This was Neneh Cherry.

But navigating fame and family wasn't always simple. In this beautiful and deeply personal memoir, Cherry remembers the collaborations, the highs and lows, the friendships and loves, and the addictions and traumas that have shaped her as a woman and an artist. At the heart of it, always, is family: the extraordinary three generations of artists and musicians that are her inheritance and legacy.

Musician. Songwriter. Collaborator. Activist. Mother. Daughter. Lover. Friend. Icon. This is her story.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

At one point in her book, Cherry discusses the African tradition of the griot – 'poets, musicians and storytellers, the custodians of a community's history', and reflects on the emerging hip-hop scene in New York in 1980 where people were 'telling their stories, creating seamless collages with the music... mouth-to-mouth truth-telling, oral culture with bite'. Later, she looks at the music scene in the UK – particularly Reggae – providing strength to the black community: 'All over London and in other big cities like Bristol and Birmingham, young Black British kids were holding their heads up high'.

Cherry's own storytelling mimics the griot, in the sense that she is the custodian of her own history but also that of the culture around her, much of which could be said to be ignored in official narratives of modern history. How much do we hear about what it was like to be a woman of colour in the music industry in the 1980s? How much do we know about reggae and Black music culture in Britain in the 1970s

“A story of a remarkable life and the many threads that made it. This is a book about belonging, family, how we find our place in society and, of course, music.”

KAVITA PURI,
2025 CHAIR OF JUDGES


Shortlist
2025

and 1980s? Cherry provides a valuable insight into this and the life of her own stepfather, Don, an esteemed jazz musician who, nonetheless, experienced racism throughout his life.

Cherry's collage takes her from her early days in Sweden, cutting out pictures of homewares from her mother's old catalogues, to assembling the collage of her own life in a memoir full of vibrant moments and meaningful, interlinked memories. In this way, *A Thousand Threads* is a personal assemblage in the way that a woman's life is a collage of experiences, as well as an important historical document.

DISCUSSION POINTS

A Thousand Threads is a memoir comprising many themes, woven together in the blanket of Cherry's life and journey. Yet, perhaps one of the most prominent threads in her story is that of female friendship, and the empowerment Cherry finds through her relationships with the fierce, powerful and loving women in her life.

From her seamstress and artist mother Moki – a powerhouse of creativity and self-expression – to her friendships with The Slits vocalist Ari Up and Andi Oliver, as well as Cherry's children and extended family, there have been a wealth of women present in Cherry's life to inspire, motivate, accompany and love her through her successes and traumas.

On her trip to Africa with her biological father Ahmadu, Cherry reflects on the matriarchal culture of Gbinti:

'At ground level in this society, everything was run by women... there was such a sense of cooperation and sisterhood and it became an important inspiration for me. After I'd been to Africa, I felt complete. I found myself filled up inside my body. I started to live differently, move differently... I felt proud to be a woman.'

How important do you think female friendship is for protecting and nurturing women's mental health – and how have the women in Cherry's life been there for her? How have they helped her heal, process and celebrate life?

QUESTIONS

What did you think about Moki and Don's approach to parenting? If you are a parent, how did it compare to your own experience, and how did it make you feel?

Cherry talks about her feelings of not fitting in in Sweden or the US as she becomes a teenager, finding a greater sense of belonging in London. Can you relate to her experiences? Did you ever feel like you didn't fit in, and why?

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

Cherry says, 'I think constantly about the parallels between my and my mother's life'. Do you relate to this, comparing your own life to that of your parent's? Is this something that you find yourself doing more as you get older?

At the end of her story about developing the song 'Seven Seconds Away' with Youssou N'Dour, Cherry says; 'If everything was amazing all the time, I think we'd all be speechless, and if you make that your starting point for creativity, you're going nowhere'. Do you agree with this? Does it reflect your own experiences?

NEXT STEPS

The book's title *A Thousand Threads* could be seen to reference Cherry's mother Moki and her dressmaking, as well as Cherry's clear love of fashion and interest in the changing culture around her. Write a fashion memoir of your own, a short piece about five memorable outfits from your life. When did you wear it? What happened? Why does the item of clothing have sentimental value?

Alternatively, collate your own list of women that have inspired you in life, as Cherry does in her memoir. Who would be on your list and why? Talk with your girlfriends about them over dinner, decide to make social media content about them or commemorate them in some other way that feels meaningful to you. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neneh Cherry is a Swedish singer-songwriter, rapper and producer who first achieved global success, in 1988, with 'Buffalo Stance'. She has released six critically acclaimed studio albums and won two Brit Awards, an MTV Europe Music Award and was nominated for the Grammy Award for Best New Artist. She has collaborated with artists including Gorillaz, Gang Starr, Michael Stipe, Cher and Four Tet. 'The Versions', an album consisting of reworked songs from her back catalogue by artists such as Sia and Robyn, was released in 2022. *A Thousand Threads* is her first book.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

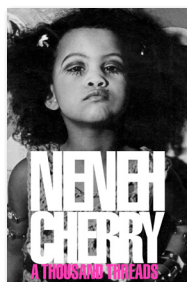
Clothes, Music, Boys by Viv Albertine tells the story of her time with The Slits and her own personal journey of awakening and becoming.

In *Supreme Sirens: Iconic Black Women Who Revolutionized Music*, Marcellas Reynolds explores the power, rebellion, and resilience held within the voices of trailblazing Black female musicians.

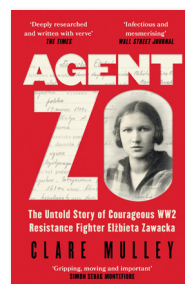
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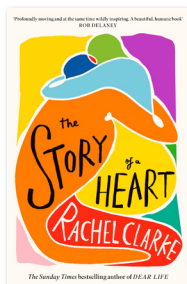
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A Thousand Threads
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by Rachel Clarke



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