

*#1 New York Times* bestselling author

Renée Watson



skin  
&  
bones

A Novel



skin  
&  
bones

**A Novel**

Renée Watson



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York | Boston | London



The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Copyright © 2024 by Renée Watson  
Cover design by Julianna Lee  
Cover painting by Oluwole Omofemi  
Cover copyright © 2024 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact [permissions@hbgusa.com](mailto:permissions@hbgusa.com). Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company  
Hachette Book Group  
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104  
[littlebrown.com](http://littlebrown.com)

First Edition: May 2024

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to [hachettespeakersbureau.com](http://hachettespeakersbureau.com) or call (866) 376-6591.

Print book interior design by Taylor Navis

ISBN 9780316570909

LCCN 2023949277

E3-20240329-JV-NF-ORI

# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[the weight i carry.](#)

[morbid](#)

[mississippi avenue](#)

[bridge city.](#)

[play another slow jam](#)

[baby\\_girl](#)

[age 8](#)

[age 12](#)

[age 13](#)

[age 16](#)

[age 39](#)

[whine & wine](#)

[69](#)

[black faith](#)

[starshine & clay.](#)

[books](#)

beatrice morrow cannady

date night

malcolm

happily ever after

baptism

sunday supper

vanport

ms. brown

williams avenue

searching, searching

marcus lopez

oregon, 1865

shopping while fat

sunday sermon

vintage

the bride, the groom

shock

cake

sunday.

monday.

tuesday.

wednesday.

thursday.

friday.

saturday.

the breakup

meant to be



[grief](#)

[strength](#)

[questions](#)

[magic & potions](#)

[july](#)

[august](#)

[black, black](#)

[messages](#)

[bryan](#)

[transitions](#)

[memories](#)

[macro microaggressions](#)

[belonging](#)

[jacob vanderpool](#)

[oregon, 1857](#)

[allen ervin flowers](#)

[as long as it takes](#)

[aunt aretha](#)

[grandma](#)

[hair](#)

[training wheels](#)

[slow](#)

[fat girl, dance](#)

[“how whiteness killed the body positive movement” by kelsey miller](#)

[debriefing](#)

[positivity](#)

[positive](#)

[body\\_positivity](#)

[consistency](#)

[the\\_parts\\_of\\_love](#)

[unsent\\_mail](#)

[celibacy](#)

[dreams](#)

[vulnerability](#)

[reply](#)

[homegoing](#)

[homecoming](#)

[march\\_6\\_1919](#)

[unthank\\_park](#)

[release](#)

[sunrise](#)

[retreat](#)

[the\\_agreement](#)

[compatible](#)

[reverse](#)

[inclusivity](#)

[not\\_that\\_fat](#)

[viral\\_visceral](#)

[constance](#)

[kendra](#)

[freshman\\_year\\_high\\_school](#)

[origin\\_story](#)

[betrayal](#)

[sunday\\_sermon](#)

[forgiving](#)

[back-to-school shopping](#)

[comfort food](#)

[turning ten](#)

[love, disguised](#)

[personal stylist](#)

[october](#)

[halloween](#)

[new beginnings](#)

[daily blend](#)

[angel](#)

[playdate](#)

[oregon, 1867](#)

[self-portrait](#)

[aaliyah](#)

[black girls](#)

[brown tourmaline](#)

[skin tones](#)

[another time](#)

[unexpected](#)

[chosen family.](#)

[father, dad](#)

[old-time religion](#)

[saved by grace](#)

[sunday sermon](#)

[middle class](#)

[coparenting](#)

celebrating

emergency.

overdose

waiting

update

critical

the village

questions

more questions

advocate

twelve hours

meditation

twenty-four hours

still waiting

heartbeat

hauntings

thirty-six hours

holding on

forty-eight hours

blame

what honey says

silence

mercy.

mandatory.

therapy, mandatory.

inheritance

knowing

monday.

tuesday

wednesday.

thursday.

friday.

therapy.

a cleansing

between night and morning

hypocrite?

hope, still

healing

lessons my mother taught me

how we heal

beauty's only skin deep

what i tell aaliyah

brown skin

elephants in the room

essence

joy to the world

january 1

spotlight

taking up space

bpp

[black] history.

to ban

bones

my funny valentine

[partnering](#)

[newcomers](#)

[neighbor\(hoods\)](#)

[the new black](#)

[oregon, 1953](#)

[urban renewal, negro removal](#)

[portland, 1990](#)

[dreaming](#)

[familiarity](#)

[boundaries](#)

[getting dressed](#)

[portland: black](#)

[joy, black](#)

[black](#)

[black spaces](#)

[remembering](#)

[my-te-fine](#)

[breaking news](#)

[hot off the press](#)

[wine & wine](#)

[to reconcile](#)

[risk](#)

[rebuild](#)

[change](#)

[first dates](#)

[good times](#)

[peach cobbler](#)

[mile high club](#)

[landing](#)

[vip](#)

[keynote](#)

[purpose](#)

[black, powerful](#)

[daddy, daughter](#)

[harvest](#)

[rare](#)

[port](#)

[age 41](#)

[sunday sermon](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Renée Watson](#)

*In Loving Memory of Char Hutson*  
*1971–2024*



**Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.**

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



**LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY**

Our lives are more than the days in them, our lives are our line  
and we go on.

—Lucille Clifton

## the weight i carry.

I don't want to die fat.

There would no doubt be whispers at the repast:

*It's too bad she didn't take better care of herself.*

They will speculate, assume.

*Diabetes?*

*Heart attack?*

If I die fat, I hope I die in a car accident or go missing and turn up bloated and bloodied in a river. No one will mention my weight then. I will die without conversation about the obesity epidemic and my family and friends can grieve without the added guilt from flashbacks of every time they wanted to say something about the pounds I was putting on and on but didn't.

Because here's the thing, I am not thick or big-boned or voluptuous.

I am fat.

Obese.

*Morbidly obese.*

That's what the nurse just typed into my chart. She is a wafer of a woman. The kind of woman who looks like she'll fall over should a big wind blow. This is the woman typing in the word *morbid* to describe this body.

Everything about me is big and Black. Big and majestic like the ocean. Every bit of me hard to contain. My belly spills over and so do my tears and so does my joy and every family recipe and every heartache and every weekend spent at Seaside Beach. It's all here with me. Heavy. It's all here sitting on this table, a layer of the thinnest tissue paper under me, holding all this Blackness, holding all this bigness. I feel the tissue paper rip under me. Wonder why they don't make it more sturdy.

I pull the too-small gown together as best I can. It is tight around my flabby arms and doesn't cover my breast or my stretch-marked stomach. I might as well be sitting here naked. You would think doctor's offices would have large robes for their patients. Don't patients come in all sizes?

The nurse doesn't realize that I can see what she's typed. She enters the words so matter-of-fact, and in the space for more notes, she types: *Morbidly obese but seems happy. Dressed well, good hygiene.*

I stare at the word *but*. Morbidly obese *but*..

She types again but I look away.

*Can I take the urine sample now? I really have to go. I've been holding it.*

*We'll get to that. Give me just a moment. First I need to take your blood pressure and temperature.* She wheels the mobile stand toward me and takes my temperature, then attempts to get the blood pressure cuff on my arm. *Hmm*, she says. Let me try this way instead. She switches positions, tries to get one side of the thick nylon material to connect to the other side. The Velcro won't connect. *You need a bigger one*, she says. *I'll be right back.* The nurse walks out of the room and returns with a larger cuff.

I want to ask her why both sizes aren't just available in each room. Wouldn't that be more efficient for the nurses and less embarrassing for the patients? But I don't say anything. She checks my pressure. My arm tightens to the point it feels like it's going to explode and then when she lets the air out, my arm relaxes. *Wow. Pretty great numbers*, she says. Like she is surprised, like she expected there to be an issue. *Okay, I'm going to get the doctor. Give her just a moment.*

While I wait, I fidget with the platinum miracle on my left hand. Two more weeks and I'll be Mrs. Lena Wilson, wife of Malcolm Wilson. *God, please let this bladder infection pass quickly.* I've got a honeymoon to Hawaii to be ready for. I twist the ring, trace the diamond with the tip of my finger. That skinny nurse didn't have a ring on. I hate that I just had this thought. I do not want to wear this engagement ring like an Olympic medal hard fought for, hard

won. But it does feel like an accomplishment. I did work for this, for us. After everything I went through with Bryan, the on-again, off-again, so much heartbreak, heart-healing. Finally, I am here. Malcolm is my prize and I am his.

I look down at my dangling feet, thinking about the words the nurse used to describe me.

*Morbidly obese but seems happy. Dressed well, good hygiene.*

Glad I got that pedicure yesterday. My toes are painted a bright cantaloupe color, my heels smooth and silky.

I always leave the house casket-ready.

I got that from Mom, who everyone calls Honey. Whenever I'd leave the house, she'd ask, *You got on clean clothes?* and I knew she was not talking about my shirt or jeans or socks. She was asking about my bra and panties.

*If you get in a car accident, you don't want to be unladylike when the paramedics come.*

Always a lesson from Honey and Grandma about taking care of myself, but never for myself. The house needed to be clean—not because that was a good discipline to learn for my own cleanliness, but just in case guests stopped by unexpectedly. Grandma always commented on my weight, occasionally mentioning my health, but mostly encouraging me to lose weight in order to become (even more) attractive, said I needed to lose this *baby fat* so a man would want me. And here I am, baby fat and then some—fourteen days from forty—and (finally) getting married. If Grandma was here, she'd be overjoyed, she'd be relieved that I found Malcolm, a man who loves me, loves all these pounds, loves my seven-year-old daughter, Aaliyah.

*Don't marry the man you can't live without. Marry the man you can live with.* Honey and Grandma said it all the time, that marriage is not about love only. *Love is a choice*, Honey always tells me. She never liked me with Bryan. This choice—me choosing Malcolm—she approves.

Just when I decide to find a cup and go to the bathroom, the doctor knocks, comes in. *And what brings you in today, Lena?* she asks, not looking at me. She scrolls through my file, reading while I

talk.

*I think I have a bladder infection. I get them often—since I was a child—so I kind of know the symptoms.*

*And your symptoms are?*

*Peeing every five minutes. And it hurts every time. Like it does when people have bladder infections.*

*Okay. I'd like to check your blood sugar too. Have you ever been tested for diabetes?*

*No, I haven't. But today... today I'm here for... I think I have a bladder infection. And, I, I came ready to do the urine sample, so if we can get that going, that would be... I uh, I have to go.*

*Yes, we will get to that. But I need to check a few other things first. A woman your size—we should, it could be something else. She says she needs to review my family history.*

Diabetes. High blood pressure. Stroke. Hypertension. Heart disease.

It all runs in my family.

Great-grands and grands. Uncles and aunties, cousins—firsts, seconds, thirds. The passing down of big-boned genes, the passing down of cooking and feeding the ones you love to celebrate, mourn, rage. Food as medicine.

But also, there's been the passing down of family sing-alongs, gathering around Grandma's raggedy (but better than nothing) piano. What's been passed down is preachers and teachers, generations and generations of artists, a singer here, a poet there.

I want to tell her what's not on that chart. She wants medical history. Physical ailments. But I think she should know it all.

The almost dead, the died-too-soons, the divorces and sage loves, the births, rebirths, stillbirths, the car accidents, graduations, holiday dinners, the first days of school, last days of childhood, every birthday, every happy hour, Fourth of July picnics at Blue Lake Park, baptisms, breakdowns, excruciating laughter, Electric Slides at up-all-night house parties.

What's been passed down is Aunt Aretha's recipe for lemon pound cake that must be made for every arrival and departure of breath.

She asked for my family history. I could tell her, but I know better.

A knock at the door, and then a new person enters. She is not a thin wafer, she is not *morbid*. The woman draws blood. A quick sting from a needle. I look away, not wanting to see myself leaving myself. She is finished with pricking and sticking me and now we wait.

*Am I going to give a urine sample? I think I have a bladder infection.*

*What are your symptoms?*

I repeat myself: *Peeing every five minutes. And it hurts every time. Like it does when people have bladder infections.*

The nonwafer, nonmorbid woman leaves, comes back with a plastic cup. Finally, the urine sample.

Then waiting and waiting, another knock and the words *bladder infection... antibiotics...*

*And the blood sugar?* I ask.

*Normal... but you need to be careful carrying all that weight. I recommend trying to lose at least five to ten percent of your body weight. And then we can reassess and put you on a weight loss plan.*

My doctor wants to put me on a weight loss plan even though my test results are normal.

Before she leaves the room, she offers an affirmation. *You know, she starts, you are a beautiful woman. I hope you know that. Your skin, your hair. Just gorgeous.*

I smile, kind of, I think. Yes, this is a smile, a thank-you. I open my mouth to say something. To correct her? Scold her? To ask why she felt the need to tell me that she thinks I am pretty.

But my words do not come. Only her words are here. They are hanging in the stale, sanitized room. When I leave, they come with me. Words are like that. They follow, linger, stay a while. Here I am, carrying what is not mine.

Heavy.