

The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears by Dinaw Mengestu. New York: Riverhead Press, 2007. 240pp. ISBN: 1594482853

After Dante's *Inferno*, from which the title *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* was taken, comes *Purgatory* and then *Paradise*. But the metaphysics of this novel stops at a cultural purgatory, despite protagonist Sepha Stephanos's final affirmation of having found a *place*, one that fills the hole left by his realisation that he may not find one in the figurative and cultural sense. Stephanos will never return to Ethiopia and is living in Washington D.C., a stone's-throw from monuments that testify to American promises and dreams that do not seem to materialise for him or for many other immigrants, black or otherwise. This fact is perhaps best embodied by Stephanos's always-on-the-verge romance with Judith, a former economics professor who moves in next door to him in Logan Circle. Their romance never really catches fire, as her house does, forcing her and her precocious biracial 11-year daughter Naomi to move away again and out of Stephanos's life. The gentrification and eventual anti-white violence in which it culminates mirrors the social and political turmoil that cost Stephanos his family. Owing to the impermanence of human relationships, Stephanos takes refuge in physical places that define his experience in America, that give it constancy and stability. The narrative is punctuated by vivid descriptions of places—behind the cash register in his store, the steps between his own house and Judith's, and the bench on Logan Square, among others.

After fleeing Ethiopia's Red Terror that claimed his father's life, Stephanos lives a plaintive, but not unsettled, life. He is convincingly self-aware and free of the vain self-deprecation of some exiles who make a fetish of their condition. Stephanos's consciousness has reached a clearing, one from which he beholds himself and his life from a distance, just as, at times, he watches his own store at a distance. His narrative is honest, perhaps too honest. It testifies to, and even celebrates, the immense isolation that an immigrant can feel, conveying the "beauty of living such a lonely and solitary life" (p. 192). He does not consort with other Ethiopians and in fact shuns those of his own generation in the United States. Nor is it entirely clear that Stephanos wholeheartedly embraces Joseph and Kenneth, a Congolese and a Kenyan respectively, though they are the closest of his friends. It is through his musings with these two characters that Stephanos is reminded not to idealise the dystopia that Africa has become, a continent plagued by tin-pot generals, dictators, coups, and more coups.

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears evades some of the clichés that often pervade literature about immigrants and immigration—dual identities, torn loyalties, and so on. But one of the novel's strengths resides in the fact that it does so without deliberation. The novel captures the most powerful effects of immigration and exile, especially loss and irreconcilable guilt, in the least calculated way. Nor does the novel appeal to metaphor; Stephanos's cautious and sometimes cynical candour seems to disperse the need for subtext. What he seeks, as he says, is pure "narrative."

The novel is in turn funny and incredibly bleak. Stephanos recounts how his father was ridiculed by young Ethiopian soldiers for not being able to stand up after being beaten to a pulp in front of his wife and two sons. In a final triumph of dignity, he insists that he *walk* out of his house and not be carried out. But the reader also encounters Naomi, Judith's 11-year old daughter, who reads *The Brothers Karamazov* and who "was convinced that American foreign policy in the Middle East was a failure, that a two-state solution in Israel was inevitable, and that enough wasn't being done about the global

AIDS crisis” (p. 29). It is into her that Stephanos pours his love, though he never calls it by that name.

Perhaps the most peculiar characteristic of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is the fact that while Stephanos wonders throughout his narrative, “How was I supposed to live in America when I had never really left Ethiopia?”(p. 140). But he is not really nostalgic. Nostalgia is inadequate, or rather, not fitting. Whatever Stephanos’s emotional scars might be, however strong his occasional need to escape solitude, they are thoroughly nursed by his poignant ability to commit his reality to “narrative,” by being engulfed by his present, being imprisoned by it, and being freed by it.

Reviewer

Emad Mirmotahari received his PhD in Comparative Literature at UCLA. His primary area of focus is the modern and contemporary African novel. He is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at Tulane University's Department of English, where he teaches African and postcolonial literatures.