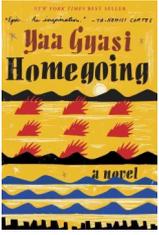


Homegoing



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A Ghana proverb says, "By going and coming, a bird weaves its nest." The title of this novel tells the story of many people from Ghana who were forcibly removed from their African home, yet centuries later, two descendants return to find their family.

If you liked Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, Yaa Gyasi's novel will make the perfect follow-up. Hard to believe that she started writing this in her early twenties and finished it by age twenty-six. It covers much more ground than Whitehead's historical novel: Africa and the U.S., and much more time, from the mid-seventeen hundreds to now.

At one point in the novel, a black history teacher describes history as storytelling. Gyasi presents many eloquent and heart-rending stories here. What ties them together is that all the characters belong to one extended family, who were once royalty in Ghana. They became both slave-sellers and slaves. Many came to America.

Gyasi follows two tracks of this family: one remained in Ghana, the other was forced into slavery in the U.S. It follows their descendants after the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the great migration north. Gyasi visited Africa as a student to do research on a book about mothers and daughters. But when she toured Ghana's Cape Coast Castle, something in the rooms, the cellar where slaves were chained and abused in dungeons called out to her. She immediately decided to focus on the African slave trade and its diaspora later in the U.S.

This makes it sound academic. Far from it. It breathes with richly described life. And with heartbreak. Yet, it is not a depressing book but one that shows the tenacity and perseverance of the African people. The first characters we meet are Effia and Esi's sisters although they did not know that. Because of her great beauty, Effia's mother arranged a marriage between her and an Englishman, a slave seller. Effia herself had wanted to marry the handsome African chief, who, too, was involved in the slave trade. Feuding tribes fought in her village so Esi and most of the population ran into the forest. She was cut down from a coconut tree after this raid, then imprisoned in chains in the dungeons of the Cape Coast Castle.

Esi brought a black stone to the dungeon, a gift from her mother. She buried it in one corner. This stone serves as a physical link in this book, passed down from generation to generation.

The book details many tragedies, children taken from their mothers, wives from husbands, great fires, wars, backbreaking coal mining, and drug-dealing but it's the love stories that resonant most. In one chapter an older, unmarried man falls in love with his house-girl, who brings him out by asking him questions about his life.

In another chapter two slaves fall in love and decide to risk escaping to freedom. Another offers the story of an ex-convict, jailed for running from slavery, then sentenced to unending labor in a coal mine. He asks a small boy to write a letter to his estranged wife to tell her that he is alive and living in Alabama. This novel's scope is amazing, especially for a first novel, but the heartfelt stories, the strongly imagined characters will draw you in and show you both the inhumanity and humanity of mankind.

Posted by Dory L. on April 25, 2017

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