

# The Literature of Exile...

by Cary Knapp



Set in Logan Circle, a shabby neighborhood in Washington, D.C. where the poor are being forced out to make way for the rich, the book introduces three characters bonding over their joint but different memories of another home, another sense of self, lost in the Africa they cannot return to. They are Joseph from the Congo, Kenneth from Kenya and Sepha from Ethiopia, who is the narrator and

core of the story. Seldom has a character emerged in a recent novel who is so compellingly dark but honest, hopeful but dismal, and able to turn his chronicle into a truly American tapestry--racially fraught, culturally limited, and haunted by a dream of itself.

Sepha has been in the U.S. for 17 years, fleeing Ethiopia to escape fallout from the military coup that ousted Haile Selassie in 1974 and thrust the Dergue--a junta that ruled the country until 1987--into power. Sepha's father--a prosperous lawyer in Ethiopia's capital--attracted the ire of a government determined to snuff out all so-called counter-revolutionaries. After witnessing his father's brutal murder at the hands of the Dergue's henchmen, Sepha acceded to his mother's wishes and left, eventually making his way to D.C., where he owns a failing convenience store. On Tuesday evenings he

meets regularly with his friends to drink, lament and discuss the revolutions of the old continent. In their own ways, Ken and Joe have come to terms with their exiled lives. Sepha, however, remains stuck between two worlds: "I did not come here to find a better life," he observes. "I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back. My goal since then has been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days."

Shattering this hermetic existence is the appearance of Judith, a white professor of American history who moves into the Circle. The illuminated windows of her expensively restored mansion exert an almost hypnotic power on Sepha. His tentative attempts to connect with his neighbor, and his intense relationship with her bi-racial precocious daughter Naomi, are played out with unbearably poignant understatement.

Naomi is the angel who saves Sepha. He reads to her from *The Brothers Karamazov* and their tender friendship is one of the book's strongest delights. The child is a symbol of hope, partly because she represents all the factions in the book--here, the idea the author seems to be suggesting is that we are all cultural mongrels, and the only chance we have is to accept that. There is of course no mistake in Naomi's choosing Dostoevsky for Sepha to read to her--no other Russian writer seems better suited in a novel about the struggle between the possibilities an adopted land offers and the tortured agony that an investment in the past demands.

Unfortunately, vandalism aimed at Logan Circle's new wealthy residents prompts Judith to leave the neighborhood. And so, while Sepha mulls over the events that vaporized his hopes for a more fulfilling life, he finds himself in a self-reflective purgatory, searching for a new dream. Indeed, the title of the novel comes from the last lines of Dante's *Inferno*, where the poet, emerging from hell, is granted a glimpse of heaven before he makes his way into purgatory.

The novel is a touching portrait of characters caught on the seams between two worlds--rich/poor, black/white, citizen/foreigner. But this is no simple coming-to-America fable. Mengestu constantly parallels Ethiopia's failed revolution with life in the U.S., and readers see in what happens in Logan Circle some proof that the alternative that America offers is failing and failing fast--what kind of paradise evicts its occupants on behalf of gentrification?

*Beautiful Things* is a layered and nuanced account of American life seen through the eyes of an immigrant who is grappling not just with longing for home but with the shock of living his life on the margins of American society, where race does indeed matter.

Speaking of literature, the Brunswick Library has several programs coming up that will appeal to book lovers. On Monday, April 21, at 1:00 p.m., hear the legendary Georgia writer Terry Kay (*The Year the Lights Came On, After Eli, To Dance with the White Dog, Dark Thirty, The Kidnapping of Aaron Greene, Taking Lottie Home, The Runaway, Special K, The Valley of Light, To Whom the Angels Spoke, Shadow Song, and The Book of Marie*). On Saturday, April 26, at 7:00 p.m., hear the award-winning poet Thomas Lux, director of Georgia Tech's Poetry@Tech. These programs are free and open to all. For additional information, please call the library at 912 267-1212.



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The global upheavals of today's world have helped to produce a special group of American voices in literature: the writer-immigrants who come here from Latin America, Africa, India, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. Their struggles for identity mark a new turn within the ranks of American writers. Caught between loyalties--to a home they are still linked to and involved in, and to the lives they are committed

to making here--they face a difficult negotiation, and yet they possess an amazing resource for works of exquisite frustration: hopeful, lonely, joyful and something else that cannot be named. Numerous authors have produced this literature of exile, but few have succeeded as powerfully as Dinaw Mengestu. This Ethiopian-born writer, a graduate of Columbia University's creative writing program, has written a quietly brilliant portrait of immigrant life in his novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Can Bear* (Riverhead, \$23.00).

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