



The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears Reader's Guide

BY DINAW MENGESTU

Category: Literary Fiction

READERS GUIDE

Questions and Topics for Discussion

INTRODUCTION

Seventeen years ago, Sepha Stephanos fled the Ethiopian Revolution for a new start in the United States. Now he finds himself running a failing grocery store in a poor African-American section of Washington, D.C., his only companions two fellow African immigrants who share his bitter nostalgia for his home continent. Years ago and worlds away Sepha could never have imagined a life of such isolation. As his environment begins to change, hope comes in the form of a friendship with new neighbors Judith and Naomi, a white woman and her bi-racial daughter.

ABOUT DINAW MENGESTU

Dinaw Mengestu was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1978. In 1980, he and his family came to the United States. A graduate of Georgetown University and Columbia University's MFA program in fiction, he lives in New York City.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Mengestu opens the novel with Sepha and his friends, Joseph and Kenneth, and the game that they play matching African coups with dictators and dates. The three

come from different parts of Africa, and have left different places and people to be in the US. Why do they play this game? How does it affect their relationships with each other? With the country they now call home? With the continent they left behind? Though they are close friends with a long history, why do you think that Joseph reacts the way that he does when Sepha appears at the restaurant? What about Kenneth's attempts to help Sepha figure out a way to keep from losing the store? How do their differences help or hinder the narrative?

- In recalling his uncle's questioning why he had "chosen to open a corner store in a poor black neighborhood," Sepha says that he had "never said it was because all I wanted...was to read quietly, and alone, for as much of the day as possible." Books play a huge role in Sepha's life as well as in the action of the Mengestu's story. Did you feel that a particular literary reference gave you a glimpse into Sepha's character that was unexpected or surprising? Which one and why? Or if not, why not?
- Gentrification, class struggle, and ideas of democracy reverberate as prevailing themes in the novel. How does Mengestu weave these themes into the Sepha's interactions with Judith and Naomi? The race/class based polarization of Logan Circle? Judith's career?
- As we learn in the novel, its title comes from a passage in Dante's *Inferno* that Joseph believes to be "the most perfect lines of poetry ever written." Why do you think Mengestu chose the title *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*? What parallels do you see between Sepha's story and Dante's?
- Speaking of books, reading *The Brothers Karamazov* together becomes a way for Naomi and Sepha to relate to each other, regardless of their age and implied class differences. Why do you think he highlighted his favorite passage (below) for Naomi, the one he memorized and "read out loud to the shelves and empty aisles," writing "Remember This" in the margins of his copy of the book?
People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may sometimes be the means of saving us.

Do you think it is an attempt on Sepha's part to tell her some of his own story through another's words? Why or why not?

- When he goes shopping for Christmas presents, Sepha strolls optimistically throughout the city, finally feeling he has "the beginnings of a life" in America. This optimism is shattered when he finds that Judith and Naomi have left the city for the holidays. Why do you think Sepha's optimism depends on having Judith and Naomi

close? Are they the source of his optimistic feeling? Why or why not? What about his thoughts that end the novel? Why, despite everything, does the store “look more perfect than ever”? How do you think his relationships with Judith and Naomi might have changed his outlook? How might they have changed his relationship to America?

- How does death affect the Birdswell family? How does Herbert’s death affect them? Roger’s death? The deaths of their childhood? Why do they continue to be haunted by the ghosts of their past? In what ways does each of these deaths change them?
 - Although Sepha has been in the U.S. for seventeen years, he still seems stuck between America and Ethiopia. Though he mentions going back to visit his mother and brother—even at one point thinking of abandoning everything in America to return—he asks himself towards the end of the novel, “How long did it take for me to understand that I was never going to return?” In an interview, Mengestu theorizes that Sepha will never return to Ethiopia despite his yearnings because “nostalgia and memory are all he has.” Do you agree? Why do you think he has stayed? Why has he never gone back?
 - Letters appear frequently in the novel: His uncle Berhane’s letters to various politicians, Sepha’s letter to Judith, Naomi’s letter to him. How does Mengestu use letters to further our understanding of those characters in the novel who write and receive them? Though we never meet him except through his letters, what do Berhane’s letters reveal that might not have been portrayed through a conversation or letter correspondence between Sepha and his uncle? How does Berhane contrast with the other African immigrants in the novel, namely Kenneth and Joseph? Why do you think that Sepha never wrote back to Naomi?
 - What is the significance of Mengestu’s choice to set the story in the nation’s capital, Washington, D.C.? Do you feel that the city is a character itself?
 - Were you surprised to find that the brick thrown through Judith’s windshield and at Sepha’s store, as well as the fire that destroyed her house, were the acts of one man as opposed to a group of angry citizens ignited by the evictions? How did you feel about the violence that was directed at Judith and Naomi? About her reaction? What do you think will happen to Logan Circle? To Sepha’s shop? To Sepha himself?
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