

READ GLOBAL BOOK DISCUSSION

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears

by Dinaw Mengistu

Questions

(Adapted from the publisher and the [NEA's Big Read](#))

1. How does Stephanos characterize his store? Does the store represent the American dream to Stephanos? Does he believe the American dream is attainable for him?
2. Mengestu has said that Stephanos, Joseph, and Kenneth “love and mourn” their countries and the African continent as a whole. How did they employ the African dictators game to this end?
3. How do different immigrants in this story navigate the American dream? For example, Uncle Berhane, Joseph, and Stephanos have seemingly different orientations to their new home. How would you characterize each man's attitude about making a new life in the United States?
4. Examine the role of beauty and beautiful things in this novel. How does Mengestu cast our eye, or ask us to reexamine what we consider “beautiful?”
5. 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 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?
6. Stephanos's trauma—watching his father captured and taken by a group of boy soldiers—is one of the most haunting moments in the novel. How does Stephanos remember his father? What do you make of Stephanos's final words to his father at the end of the novel?
7. 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?
8. Were you surprised to find that the brick thrown through Judith's windshield and at Sepha's store, as well as the fire were the acts of one man as opposed to a group of angry neighbors? How did you feel about the violence that was directed at Judith and Naomi? About her reaction?
9. The prose in this novel is unsentimental and sparse. How does the language contribute to the overall tone in the narrative? How does it provide insight into the characters' consciousness and internal experiences?

Bonus stuff

Gentrification: The more things change, the more they stay the same

Lang, Melissa J. (26 April 2019) [Gentrification in D.C. means widespread displacement, study finds.](#) *The Washington Post*.

Izadi, Elaine. (17 June, 2011). [Logan Circle to Get More Gentrified?](#). WAMU's DC Centric Blog.

An Ethiopian-American Viewpoint

Barnabas, Rajesh. (January 2007). Mediocrity's Cookbook: A review of Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. *The Ethiopian American*.

From majestic auspices a middle aged Ethiopian-American shopkeeper negotiates his own desires against the envisioned hopes of his family ancestry or more accurately – his interpretation of their hopes. Sepha Stephanos lives in DC. He moved out of his uncle's apartment, estranged from the only relative he has in America. His mother and brother still live in Ethiopia. Instruments used to measure the significance of his life are found in the casual acquaintances of Logan Circle and his meditative walks around the Capitol. The setting's resemblance to Addis sparks a flickering recollection of violent events that tore apart his family and destroyed the kingdom of Ethiopia.

Among many themes gently crammed into the short novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, a sense of a lost glory recovered or in the least resuscitated, persists. At times wistful, other times with begrudging sarcasm, author Dinaw Mengestu's characters explore the emotions of first-generation immigrants and their reticence to the motherland and any attempt at recreating that world among transplants in America. All three friends – Ken from Kenya, Joe from the Congo, and Sepha from Ethiopia pride themselves in keeping at arm's length their own countrymen and customs.

Weary of aged emperors, disgusted by pubescent revolutionaries, the thirty-something Sepha consoles his expired ambition with incremental progress. Business at the corner store is okay. "Never good. Never Bad. Simply okay. Could be better. Grateful it's not worse." And when Sepha opens his shop on Christmas day, because he has no family near to celebrate with, the silence comforts him.

"There were no cars. There were no people on the sidewalk or in the circle. It felt as if the world had been abandoned by the people who had been busy making it and destroying it, and now the only ones left were timid shopkeepers like myself. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth, if not for eternity, then at least for a few hours once a year."

Sepha has already seen during childhood the damage that misguided ambition can bring. Not everyone wants to be king or the inventor of Microsoft Windows, yet Sepha's meditations are of a different micro-cosm, spoken in a softer language, and through a window of his own making. With Taoist temper, the character meanders through the middle of class, ethnicity, and generations attempting to do no more harm, trying to tell his story without being noticed. Sepha's long introspective walks full of social commentary are reminiscent of the nameless narrator's in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

The plot of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* wanders along stealthily building momentum and only contemplates sprinting. In this, Mengestu has a knack for the non-event, of anticipations, at describing the inner workings of inaction. Stephanos romance with the only white woman on the block is used for symbolism as much as suspense. With characters drawn so engagingly, I caught myself once nervously looking up from the book to see if Judith was around. This is quite a feat-- to make the reader vigilant of their surroundings.

Mengestu's first novel is not a page-turner. It's a book you have to put down and think about – a window into our own life and the world around. What are we doing? Where is this going?

Where are we from? Who cares? Thirty years from now what stories will we look back on?
Who will we remember? What does it all matter?

However dirty and shattered the window seems sometimes, it's all we have. *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* debates whether we should be okay with that.

www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library



Fairfax County Public Library
12000 Government Center Parkway
Suite 324
Fairfax, VA 22035



A Fairfax County, Va.
publication



To request reasonable ADA accommodations,
call 703-324-8380 or TTY 703-324-8365.

April 2021