

Reviews

LJ Reviews 2009 January #1 Book clubs in search of the next *Kite Runner* need look no further than this astonishing, flawless novel about what happens when ordinary, mundane Western lives are thrown into stark contrast against the terrifying realities of war-torn Africa. Their marriage in crisis, Andrew and Sarah O'Rourke impulsively accept a junket to a Nigerian beach resort as a last-ditch attempt to reconcile. When machete-wielding soldiers appear out of the jungle and force them to determine the fate of two African girls, everyone's lives are irrevocably shattered. Two years later in a London suburb, one of the girls, now a refugee, reconnects with Sarah. Together they face wrenching tests of a friendship forged under extreme duress. Best-selling author Cleave (*Incendiary*) effortlessly moves between alternating viewpoints with lucid, poignant prose and the occasional lighter note. A tension-filled dramatic ending and plenty of moral dilemmas add up to a satisfying, emotional read. Highly recommended for all libraries and book clubs. *Copyright 2008 Reed Business Information.*

BookPage Reviews 2010 March Cleave's much-praised second novel has an unforgettable central character—a 16-year-old Nigerian orphan named Little Bee. After escaping from a mass slaughter in her village, Little Bee encounters a married couple on the beach, a crossing of paths that changes the lives of everyone involved. The couple, Andrew and Sarah, are journalists from England who are trying to rekindle their marriage with a holiday. What transpires between them and Little Bee on the beach is one of the novel's many horrifying yet oddly transportive events. When Little Bee enters England covertly, she ends up in an immigration center but soon runs away, pinning her hopes on tracking down Andrew and Sarah. And find them she does, in the suburbs of London, where a new chapter in Little Bee's life soon unfolds—one that draws upon the horrible events back home even as it offers strange possibilities for the future. Courageous, resourceful and smart, Little Bee makes for a first-class narrator. Her impressions of European culture bring humor to a novel of many moods. Cleave, who writes for the *Guardian*, clearly has a broad understanding of international politics and a deep sympathy for immigrants and exiles, both of which he brings to bear on this compelling narrative. His skills as a novelist have earned him comparisons to master storytellers such as Ian McEwan and John Banville, and Little Bee makes it easy to see why.

Kirkus Reviews 2008 November #2 Cleave follows up his outstanding debut (*Incendiary*, 2005) with a psychologically charged story of grief, globalization and an unlikely friendship. The story opens in a refugee detention center outside of London. As the Nigerian narrator who got her nickname "Little Bee" as a child prepares to leave the center, she thinks of her homeland and recalls a horrific memory. "In the immigration detention center, they told us we must be disciplined," she says. "This is the discipline I learned: whenever I go into a new place, I work out how I would kill myself there. In case the men come suddenly, I make sure I am ready." After Little Bee's release, the first-person narration switches to Sarah, a magazine editor in London struggling to come to terms with her husband Andrew's recent suicide, as well as the stubborn behavior of her four-year-old son, Charlie, who refuses to take off his Batman costume. While negotiating her family troubles, Sarah reflects on "the long summer when Little Bee came to live with us." Cleave alternates the viewpoints of the two women, patiently revealing the connection between them. A few years prior, Sarah and Andrew took a vacation to the Nigerian coast, not realizing the full extent to which the oil craze had torn the country apart. One night they stumble upon Little Bee and her sister, who are fleeing a group of rapacious soldiers prowling the beach. The frightening confrontation proves life-changing for everyone involved, though in ways they couldn't have imagined. A few years later Sarah and Little Bee come together again in the suburbs of London, and their friendship in addition to that between Little Bee and Charlie provides some salvation for each woman. Though less piercing and urgent than his debut, Cleave's narrative pulses with portentous, nearly spectral energy, and the author maintains a well-modulated balance between the two narrators. A solid sophomore effort, and hopefully a sign of even better things to come. *Copyright Kirkus 2008 Kirkus/BPI Communications. All rights reserved.*

Author Biography

“A nightmare” is not how most authors would describe the publication of their first novel, but then Chris Cleave’s experience was unique. His debut *Incendiary*, with its central plotline of a terrorist attack on London, came out on 7th July 2005—the day 56 people died in the London bombings. All advertising was pulled and the book was withdrawn from sale by many retailers. However, *Incendiary* went on to garner critical acclaim, win the 2006 Somerset Maugham Award, and is due to be released as a film starring Michelle Williams and Ewan McGregor later this year.

His second novel, *The Other Hand* (here on referred to by the American title *Little Bee*) (Sceptre, h/b, £12.99), will be published in August, and it tells the story of two very different women: Little Bee, a young African village girl, and Sarah O’Rourke, a British magazine editor in her 30s, who first meet on a Nigerian beach in the novel’s pivotal scene. When Little Bee makes the journey to England following their encounter, she intends to track Sarah down, but finds herself in an immigration removal centre—an environment the author had come across years before.

When Cleave was 22 and “taking any job in the [university] holidays to pay my way”, he recalls sitting on a minibus with other casual labourers, being driven through a series of perimeter fences. “There were these thin, frightened-looking people, banging on the windows of our van. We had no idea what was happening.”

It turned out Cleave was there to serve food in the canteen; the catering staff had walked out in protest at conditions. He was shocked: “It was the first time I had an inkling that there was such a thing as an asylum-seeker and that they were kept in concentration camps. It’s the textbook definition of one: you concentrate people together behind barbed wire and then deport them to places where they are mostly going to die.”

The experience stayed with him: “I thought these people are just human beings. There’s no way this should be happening in this country that I’m proud to be a citizen of.”

As with *Incendiary*, Cleave is not afraid of writing about issues he sees as central to the world we live in now, but notes wryly: “When you say immigration, people’s eyes just glaze over.” So he’s keen to stress that *Little Bee* isn’t a campaigning or political novel: “I’m just a writer trying to find a story. It’s the duty of a novelist first of all to entertain readers. If readers learn something, then that’s great, but it’s their choice.”

Reflecting, he observes: “The book is not really about immigration, it’s about love and identity, how people discover who they are and which layers of identity they are prepared to give up.” It has a strand of humour, mainly drawn from Sarah’s four-year-old boy Charlie (who refuses to remove his Batman costume).

Little Bee also grips like a thriller. The story is narrated in alternate chapters by Little Bee and Sarah. The challenge of writing from the female point of view was one Cleave relished. “I like to write in the first person, and I didn’t find it any more difficult than writing any human being. What really defines someone is their voice and their speech pattern, the language they use and the way they express themselves.” As part of his extensive research, he interviewed refugees, asylum charities and those running the immigration system.

“I was struck by the number of stories which started: ‘The men came and they . . .’ Peace-loving villagers would have these groups of itinerant men descend upon them and cause chaos. The only non-combatants are women, so structurally it had to be a woman’s voice—hence *Little Bee*. And when she comes over to the UK, she’s most likely to befriend another woman—hence Sarah.”

On graduating from Oxford, Cleave undertook a variety of casual jobs, including delivering yachts. One memorable trip was with “an Israeli guy, who was about 70, who hired me to sail his boat from Marseille to

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Tel Aviv . . . he would sit drinking beer and tell these amazing stories”.

After a spell in Australia working as a barman, Cleave returned to the UK to work on the Daily Telegraph’s fledgling internet site, then with a staff of two and a single Mac. This was followed by Lastminute.com, which Cleave quit in 2003 in order to write full-time. “I saved up some money and gave myself 18 months to get published. I scraped in at 17 months—I had £222 left in my bank account when the first cheque came through for Incendiary.”

Leaving a job in order to throw yourself into writing is a risk. And after the saga of Incendiary’s publication, Cleave felt he needed to throw the dice again, changing his agent (from Laetitia Rutherford to Peter Straus) and publisher (from Random House to Hodder). But the signs this time are promising: the first set of proofs for Little Bee were snapped up so quickly that Hodder had to reprint.

He, however, is just delighted to be able to write. “I’ve always been between three days and 18 months of having to stop and get a proper job. I love writing, but I don’t do it to change the world, I do it to entertain people. But I don’t see why I shouldn’t write about something that moves me at the same time.”

Source: “Shock and Awe.” by Alice O’Keeffe for the Bookseller.com 23 Oct 2008 <<http://www.thebookseller.com/books/author-profiles/59535-shock-and-awe.html>>.

Discussion Questions

1. "Sad words are just another beauty. A sad story means, this storyteller is alive" (p. 9). For Little Bee and other asylum seekers, the story of their life thus far is often all they have. What happens to the characters that carry their stories with them, both physically and mentally? What happens when we try to forget our past? How much control over their own stories do the characters in the book seem to have?
2. Little Bee tells the reader, "We must see all scars as beauty. Okay? This will be our secret. Because take it from me, a scar does not form on the dying. A scar means, I survived" (p. 9). Which characters in the story are left with physical scars? Emotional scars? Do they embrace them as beautiful? Do you have any scars you've come to embrace? Did you feel more connected to Little Bee as a narrator after this pact?
3. Little Bee strives to learn the Queen's English in order to survive in the detention center. How does her grasp of the language compare with Charlie's? How does the way each of these two characters handle the English language help to characterize them?
4. How did it affect your reading experience to have two narrators? Did you trust one woman more than the other? Did you prefer the voice of one above the other?
5. Little Bee credits a small bottle of nail polish for "saving her life" while she was in the detention center (p. 7). Is there any object or act that helps you feel alive and beautiful, even when everything else seems to be falling apart?
6. Of the English language Little Bee says, "Every word can defend itself. Just when you go to grab it, it can split into two separate meanings so the understanding closes on empty air" (p. 12). What do you think she means by this? Can you think of any examples of English words that defend themselves? Why is language so important to Little Bee?
7. Little Bee says of horror films, "Horror in your country is something you take a dose of to remind yourself that you are not suffering from it" (p. 45). Do you agree? Was reading this novel in any way a dose of horror for you? How did it help you reflect on the presence or lack of horror in your own life?
8. Little Bee figures out the best way to kill herself in any given situation, just in case "the men come suddenly." How do these plans help Little Bee reclaim some power? Were you disturbed by this, or were you able to find the humor in some of the scenarios she imagines?
9. What does Udo changing her name to Little Bee symbolize for you? How does her new name offer her protection? Do you think the name suits her?
10. "To have an affair, I began to realize, was a relatively minor transgression. But to really escape from Andrew, to really become myself, I had to go the whole way and fall in love" (p. 161-162). Do you agree with Sarah that an affair is a minor transgression? How did falling in love with someone else help Sarah become herself? What role did Andrew play in perpetuating Sarah's extramarital affair?
11. When Little Bee finds that Andrew has hanged himself she thinks, "Of course I must save him, whatever it costs me, because he is a human being." And then she thinks, "Of course I must save myself, because I am a human being too" (p. 194). How do the characters in the story decide when to put themselves first and when to offer charity? Is one human life ever more valuable than another? What if one of the lives in question is your own?

Source: "Little Bee" by Chris Cleave. Reading Group Guides the Online Community for Reading Groups. Copyright 2001-2010. ReadingGroupGuides.com, Web. 16 Sept 2010. <http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_L/little_bee1.asp>.