



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears

by Dinaw Mengestu



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Preface

🔊 Indicates interviews with the author and experts on this book. Internet access is required for this content.

In a review of Dinaw Mengestu's first novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, the *New York Times* called it "a great African novel, a great Washington novel and a great American novel." Sepha Stephanos narrates his experiences across these worlds as an Ethiopian immigrant shopkeeper in a predominantly poor African-American neighborhood in Washington, DC. Blending humor with sadness and layering the present with images from the past, Mengestu charts Stephanos's heartbreaking loneliness, his companionship with two fellow African immigrants who mourn and love their countries, and his budding friendship with a young girl and her mother who recently moved into the gentrifying neighborhood. This is a subtly rendered novel, combining despair with hints of the beautiful things in life.

🔊 Listen to Willing Davidson, a fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, talk about this debut novel.

"The stories he invented himself he told with particular delight. They all began in the same way, with the same lighthearted tone, with a small wave of the hand, as if the world were being brushed to the side..."

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

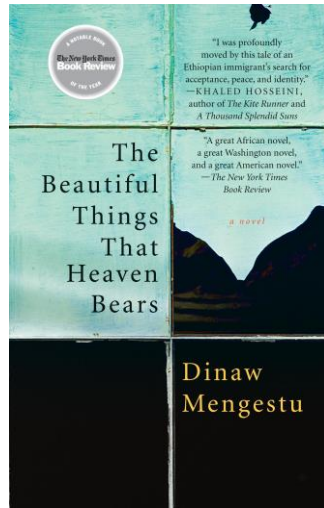
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Novel

In this novel, Dinaw Mengestu describes the pain of exile, when one is violently uprooted from his or her homeland. Having fled the Ethiopian Red Terror of the late 1970s to live and work in Washington, DC, Sepha Stephanos is acutely aware of the loneliness, sadness, and dislocation that accompany his pursuit to find a quiet refuge from the ghosts of his old life. Seventeen years have passed since Stephanos immigrated to Washington, where he began working as a hotel valet and met his two companions, also African immigrants, "Joe from the Congo" and "Ken the Kenyan."



Logan Circle, tensions arise, and Stephanos's relationships with both Judith and Naomi become precarious.

Alternating from past to present, the novel poses questions not only about the immigrant experience in America and the fraught nature of attaining the American dream, but also about the complex nature of various displacements: from one's country, one's past, one's prior ambitions, and one's lost loves.



Dinaw Mengestu and his sister, Bezawit (Courtesy of the Mengestu family)

Meeting weekly in Stephanos's neighborhood grocery to reminisce about their pasts, they play a bitterly absurd game matching African dictators with countries and coups. Their friendship is a way to navigate living in between two worlds: the Africa they left behind in the midst of war, and the America they never feel at home in. Stephanos meets Judith, an American history professor, and her biracial daughter Naomi, when they move in next door. As Judith renovates the four-story brick mansion, Stephanos builds a friendship with Naomi, who visits his failing shop and transforms the quiet, somber space to a haven of imaginative storytelling and reading Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* aloud. However, as Judith becomes part of the gentrification process that displaces longtime residents of DC's decaying

Major Characters in the Novel

Sepha Stephanos

After he watches his father beaten and kidnapped by soldiers, Stephanos flees Ethiopia to the United States. He opens a shabby local grocery in Logan Circle and lives a very quiet and lonely life, haunted by his past.

 Listen to Dinaw Mengestu talk about Sepha Stephanos.

Kenneth

“Ken the Kenyan” is a smartly dressed engineer and one of Stephanos's two close friends. He encourages Stephanos to be ambitious in his new country.


Joseph

“Joe from the Congo” is a waiter at an expensive restaurant, aptly called The Colonial Grill. His real passion is studying literature. Even though he relinquished his dream of getting his PhD, he's kept all his college books and quotes poetry to illustrate a point.

 Listen to Willing Davidson, a fiction editor at The New Yorker, talk about Stephanos's African friends.

Judith

A professor of nineteenth century American history, recently separated from her husband, she moves to Logan Circle with her daughter Naomi. Intent on creating a home for Naomi, Judith meticulously restores a four-story brick mansion while finding comfort and companionship with Stephanos.

 Listen to Willing Davidson, a fiction editor at The New Yorker, talk about Judith moving to Logan Circle.


Naomi

“Stubbornly independent,” and taking pride in being able to chastise the world's shortcomings, Judith's eleven-year-old biracial daughter develops a special friendship with Stephanos.

 Listen to Willing Davidson, a fiction editor at The New Yorker, talk about Stephanos's friendship with Naomi.

Mrs. Davis

An elderly African-American woman, she is a longtime resident of Logan Circle and is Stephanos's neighbor. She represents the sizeable community concerned about recent evictions due to rapid gentrification.

 Listen to Urban Institute researcher Peter Tatian talk about the dramatic changes Logan Circle has seen in recent years.

Uncle Berhane

Stephanos's "uncle" is a family friend and the only connection Stephanos has to his family back home. He too fled Ethiopia, leaving behind a more prosperous life, and now lives in a small apartment in a densely populated Ethiopian enclave in suburban DC.

About the Author

Dinaw Mengestu (b. 1978)

"Some children dream of being in a band," Mengestu has said, "I had my dream of being on a list." In 2010 his dream came true as he made *The New Yorker's* "20 under 40" list of fiction writers to watch. Mengestu was born in 1978 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and didn't return there until 2006. He left with his mother and sister for the United States when he was two years old—reuniting with his father who fled during the communist revolution.




Dinaw Mengestu. Copyright Matthieu Zazzo.

 [Listen to Dinaw Mengestu talk about the Red Terror.](#)

The novel won him many accolades, chief among them a fellowship at the Lannan Foundation, *The New Yorker's* list of "20 under 40," the National Book Award's 5 under 35 award, and a MacArthur Foundation "genius" fellowship in 2012. He followed the success of his first novel, now translated into more than a dozen languages, with two other award-winning novels: *How to Read the Air* (2010) and *All Our Names* (2014). In addition to these three novels, Mengestu has written widely about recent geopolitical upheaval on the African continent—most notably on the violence in Darfur for *Rolling Stone*. Like Saul Bellow and James Baldwin, Mengestu avidly self-identifies solely as an *American* writer, refusing to add adjectives such as "immigrant," "African," or "African American" to qualify his experience or works.

Mengestu serves as the Lannan Chair of Poetics at Georgetown University, his alma mater.

 [Listen to Dinaw Mengestu talk about why his family left Ethiopia, and how America's perception of Ethiopia contrasted with his own.](#)



Mengestu family photo (Courtesy of the Mengestu family)

Mengestu primarily grew up in the Midwest—in Peoria and Oak Park, Illinois, where he experienced the "indelible mark" of racism, marginalization, and outsider status. "Not African American or black enough for some" but called a "n--to his face" by white students, Mengestu experienced isolation and bigotry. Books became a way to escape and make sense of the world he

lived in. Reading *On the Road* and *The Catcher in the Rye* as a teenager, he recalls learning that he "could be very happy completely alone for a long period of time if I had enough books with me."

Always knowing he wanted to write, even though he told his parents he was going "to be a doctor then a lawyer," Mengestu worked on *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* for close to four years, as he moved from job to job.

An Interview with Dinaw Mengestu

On February 7, 2014, Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Dinaw Mengestu. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

 [Listen to the full interview with Dinaw Mengestu.](#)

Josephine Reed: What inspired this book?

Dinaw Mengestu: This book [was] inspired by...a series of different narratives in my own life.... [T]he story of Sepha Stephanos became the story of my family, became the character through which I could talk about the death of my uncle. He was the character through which I could talk about the [im]migrant experience in America, and then also at the same time there is a lot of my own history inside of Washington, DC.

JR: His friendships with Kenneth and Joseph, both of whom have come from Africa, were very compelling.

DM: The dynamics between Sepha, Joseph, and Kenneth [are] born out of a strange empty space to some degree. All three characters have lost their homes, are sort of isolated, lonely men, and yet together the three of them manage to again create the sort of surrogate little family around Sepha's store, and it's probably the only community that any of them have. And yet at the same time you can get a sense

within that community that not only are they supporting each other, but they're also constantly performing for each other.

JR: Naomi is an odd little girl. She's very, very independent. Why don't you describe her?

DM: Naomi's a very precocious child. She walks into Sepha's store one day and by doing so kind of automatically claims him as hers, and their relationship really unfolds from there. She's a child and yet she's also the one I think who dictates how their relationship is performed. And for Sepha there's a great relief in that, because finally here is someone that he can fully be himself with. Their relationship unfolds over these evenings and afternoons spent reading stories and sharing stories, and it's really through Naomi that Sepha begins to come alive and Naomi symbolically to some degree; not to talk about your characters as symbols, but she does represent the sort of duality of the novel. She is both—she has an African father and an American mother, and to some degree I think Sepha's able to attach himself to her because a lot of the anxieties of race are diminished in someone like her.

JR: Did your parents strive to create an Ethiopian household in Peoria?

DM: [M]y parents didn't strive to create an Ethiopian household in the States because I think they were too busy trying just to create a house.... There weren't other Ethiopian families that we could spend time with and I think there was also a concern about becoming American, not for themselves but really for us. My parents wanted to make sure that we had the fluency of language, that we had the sort of cultural knowledge that we would need, and so growing up our childhoods were sort of strangely Ethiopian in the house and yet at the same time completely American outside of it.

JR: And was it when you came to Georgetown that you were able to “assert” or figure out what it meant to be an American with Ethiopian lineage?

DM: There was the battle of whether or not you were going to be African American or just American, and your name was strange and people didn't know how to pronounce it, and so I always struggled with the sense of not knowing exactly who I was or what I was supposed to say when people asked me where I was from. And I would say some of that began to resolve itself in college but really I think it was the act of writing that gave me the ability to say, “I'm both completely American and I'm Ethiopian as well.” You begin to write your way into the world.... [I] think I've come to believe that one of the more remarkable things about America is that it allows for that duality. You don't actually

have to choose sides; there are no sides to be chosen. America is a country sort of comprised of multiple narratives and that's part of its beauty and its grace, and so for me to say I'm American doesn't exclude my Ethiopian background and heritage by any means.

JR: You're also known for your nonfiction writing. You've written journalistic pieces for *Harper's*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Wall Street Journal*, mostly about Africa. How did that door open up for you?

DM: In the novel, Joseph, Kenneth, and Sepha spend part of their evenings playing a game around the dictators and coups throughout Africa's history, and part of the reason why they play that game is because [I] used to spend a lot of time in college researching the different histories of African coups and African dictatorships. And while doing so I became incredibly frustrated with not only the number of coups that had happened in Africa since the end of the colonial era but about our perception and understanding of them. We tend not to realize that these events are really the products of individual men who have chosen to make politics into something else, who have chosen a path of violence rather than democracy.... [S]o I was speaking with an editor at *Rolling Stone* about the situation in Sudan and Darfur at that time and expressing my general frustration that this very complicated political story has basically been cast in the Western media as the story of hell, that Darfur was a hellish place and people were sort of fighting this ethnic conflict and battle. I thought the story was much more complicated than that. I'm always interested in trying to find who the characters are behind these conflicts as a way of exposing not just the men responsible for them but as a way of saying, “We can understand these narratives, right. They're not so distinct or separate from our own political histories.”

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Dinaw Mengestu

1970s

- 1973-74: Estimated 200,000 people die in Wollo province in northeast Ethiopia due to famine.
- 1974: Led by major Haile Mariam Mengistu, the Derg (a group of army officers) gain power by military coup and depose Emperor Haile Selassie.
- 1977-79: Mengistu's regime kills thousands of government "opponents" in Red Terror campaign. Dinaw Mengestu's uncle, a lawyer in Addis Ababa, is arrested and dies during this campaign.
- 1978: Dinaw Mengestu born in Addis Ababa.

1980s

- 1980: Flees Ethiopia with mother and sister to reunite with father who had already escaped, first seeking asylum in Italy, then moving to Peoria, Illinois, where his father works for Caterpillar, Inc.
- 1984-85: Famines in Ethiopia continue. Many thousands forcibly relocated to neighboring Eritrea.

1990s

- 1996: Graduates from Fenwick High School in Oak Park, Illinois.
- 1998-99: Ethiopian and Eritrean conflict over border leads to war. Thousands displaced to bordering countries.

2000s

- 2000: Graduates with BA from Georgetown University.
- 2005: Completes MFA in fiction at Columbia University.
- 2006: Returns to Ethiopia on assignment for *Rolling Stone*; visits a refugee camp on the Chad-Sudan border.
- 2006: Haile Mariam Mengistu is convicted in absentia for role in Red Terror. Darfur peace agreement signed in Abuja, Nigeria.
- 2007: *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* published to great acclaim.


2010s

- 2010: Publishes his second novel *How to Read the Air*, which makes the *New York Times* "100 Notable Books of the Year." *The New Yorker* names him as one of the "20 under 40" fiction writers to watch.
- 2012: Receives MacArthur "genius" fellowship. Publishes "Not a Click Away: Joseph Kony in the Real World" regarding the dangers of expecting an easy solution in response to Kony Activism in *Warscapes*.
- 2014: Publishes third novel, *All Our Names*, a love story between an African man and American woman.

African Immigrants to the U.S. and the Emigré Experience

Washington, DC, and the surrounding metropolitan area are home to the largest community of Ethiopians outside of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Since the 1960s, according to the Migration Policy Institute, most of the 460,000 Ethiopians who fled their country relocated to the United States, with approximately 350,000 emigrating to Washington, 96,000 to Los Angeles, and 10,000 to New York.


The term *diaspora* originates from the word “dispersion,” and has come to define groups of people who have been dispersed or scattered from their original geographic homeland. While historically associated with the Jewish population, the conditions of diaspora in the twentieth century have become common among many groups ranging from the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The African diaspora in the twentieth century is one marked by a wave of decolonization and shifting regimes of power. In the 1950s, six African countries gained independence from colonial rule, while in the year 1960 alone, seventeen countries gained independence, with fifteen other countries following in the rest of the decade. Although this post-colonial era was a time of possibility and opportunity, it also ushered in dictatorships, civil wars, and genocides, which were rooted in the long history of European colonial rule. Many Africans across the continent became refugees, were forcibly displaced, or came to the West seeking better lives. In the mid-1960s in the United States, there were approximately 64,000 African immigrants. Today there are more than 1.5 million, and the populations of African immigrants, particularly from West and East Africa, continue to grow.

 Listen to Dinaw Mengestu talk with the NEA's Josephine Reed about the distinction between immigrating and being in exile.

Ethiopian migration is largely a byproduct of the geopolitical upheavals that accompanied decolonization across the African continent in the latter half of the twentieth century. Ethiopians immigrated to the United States in phases, with the initial surge occurring during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie and consisting mostly of the relatively privileged and elite. Overthrown in 1974, Selassie was replaced by Haile Mengistu whose “Red Terror” campaign killed thousands or even millions. After the fall of the Mengistu regime in 1991 and the civil war in 1999, many more Ethiopians fled due to persecution, violence, and repression.

These migration patterns are also due to the changes in United States immigration policies, particularly the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965 (which abolished the national origins quota system, replacing it with a preference system that prioritized immigrants' skills or family relationships), and the State Department's granting of asylum visas in the 1980s and 1990s.

As they relocated to places like DC, many of these immigrants and refugees attempted to recreate fragments of their old lives in their new home, enacting what Salman Rushdie describes as the rich fabric of many diasporic populations: “immigrant homelands.” In “Little Ethiopia” in DC, U Street is lined with shops, grocery stores, and restaurants displaying signs with Amharic lettering. The community is so large it even has its own 1,000-page telephone book. But as they've settled in traditionally African-American areas like the Shaw neighborhood—the home of historically black college Howard University—Ethiopian immigrants have had to wrestle with their role in the gentrification process that evicts longtime African-American residents. While both are racially black, the histories of African-American communities and African immigrants are vastly different and complex in their own right. Part of the challenges and possibilities present in these neighborhoods is how these communities can at once maintain their own cultural identities while respecting the structures of those that already exist.

 Listen to Urban Institute researcher Peter Tatian discuss changing demographics in Washington.

Other Works/Adaptations

Mengestu and His Other Works


While he's best known for his fiction, Mengestu is also an avid journalist, particularly concerned with depicting the plight of refugees and casualties of war in the region dubbed the "Horn of Africa." Mengestu strives to create more complex and nuanced visions of what is occurring in war-ravaged places like Darfur. In this way, his journalism (like his fiction) attempts to dismantle the patronizing views that depict "sentimental and infantilizing" versions of Africa.

 Listen to Dinaw Mengestu discuss the origins of his journalism writing.

Before the 2007 debut of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Mengestu visited the Chad-Sudan border to conduct interviews at a refugee camp in Farchana, Chad. Published in *Rolling Stone*, "Back to the Tragedy of Darfur" (2006) charted the ongoing crisis in Darfur and the stories of individuals affected by the genocide. In spring 2011, *Granta* published a similar piece, "They Always Come in the Night," relaying the conflict in Eastern Uganda.


Mengestu's interest in the upheavals and dislocations in regions of Africa have ebbed into his fictional works. His second novel, *How to Read the Air* (2010), borrows from his own family's journey to the Midwest. A child of Ethiopian immigrants, protagonist 30-something Jonas Woldemariam travels from New York City to Peoria to follow the route his parents took 30 years earlier from the Midwest to the South on their honeymoon. As he narrates between past and present, Jonas recounts his parents' relationship, marred by trauma and hostility, and weighs it against his own failed marriage.

His third novel, *All Our Names* (2014), is perhaps the most obvious blend of the political and personal. This novel imagines what it meant to come of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, during the immediate aftermath of post-colonialism in recently independent African countries. The promises of a more egalitarian society give way to myriad dictatorships, geopolitical upheavals, and civil wars. Like his two other novels, which alternate from past to present, this third and perhaps most ambitious work features two narrators: Isaac and Helen. Isaac leaves Ethiopia to attend college in Uganda, and Helen is a white social worker in the Midwest. They meet and fall in love when Isaac moves to her small town.

 Listen to Willing Davidson, a fiction editor at The New Yorker, talk about Mengestu's writing.

His family's exile from Ethiopia, the trauma of war, and his uncle's death during the Red Terror haunt all Mengestu's writing in some way. Yet, his novels are also far from simple recreations of his family's experience. In fact, Mengestu says

that "we had no memories in our house.... We were never allowed to, we never spent time talking about it...it's the absence that creates a concern for it." Subtly linking the personal and the political in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Mengestu says that the novel is "definitely a blend of fact and fiction" that incorporates his uncle's story, though little is known about the details of his death. For Mengestu, this is where fiction comes in: "It allows you to create the details that can bring a story to life." Mengestu loves fiction because it demands that the reader take extraordinary, sometimes surprising, leaps: "It asks for an emotional and intellectual commitment to a world that you know does not exist outside of the novel or short story in front of you."

 Listen to Dinaw Mengestu talk about what inspired this novel.

Selected Works by Dinaw Mengestu

Novels

- *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, 2007
- *How to Read the Air*, 2010
- *All Our Names*, 2014

Nonfiction articles

- "Not a Click Away: Joseph Kony in the Real World." *Warscapes* 12 March 2012.
- "They Always Come in the Night." *Granta* 114 Spring 2011.
- "Back to the Tragedy of Darfur." *Rolling Stone* 7 Sept. 2006.

Discussion Questions

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? How does the game and their discussions become a way to reconcile their bitterness and longing?
3. Discuss the significance of Uncle Berhane's letters to U.S. presidents regarding the conflict in Ethiopia. What do they reveal about his character and how he locates himself as an immigrant in the U.S.?
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. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?

Additional Resources

Books that Influenced Mengestu:

- James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955
- Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, 1964
- Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, 1971
- Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*, 2003
- James Joyce's *Ulysses*, 1922
- V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, 1979
- Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, 1980
- J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951

Books Similar to *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*:

- Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, 2013
- Teju Cole's *Open City*, 2011
- Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*, 2008
- Oscar Hijuelos's *Our House in the Last World*, 1983
- Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, 1999
- Hisham Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, 2011
- Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*, 2008

Credits

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Mengestu, second from the left, in Forest Park, IL (Courtesy of the Mengestu family)

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Acknowledgments

Audio contributors:

Willing Davidson is a fiction editor at *The New Yorker*. Among other accomplishments, he edited Henry Roth's novel, *An American Type*, published in 2010, fifteen years after Roth's death.

Peter Tatian is a researcher at the Urban Institute's Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center and an expert in housing policy, neighborhood indicators, and community development.

Writer: Leah Mirakhor

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