

Ethiopian-American Novelist, Dinaw Mengestu

To See Again The Stars

Helen Fallon

Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* skilfully blends historical fact and fiction in a story that unfolds in alternating chapters set in the past and in the present.

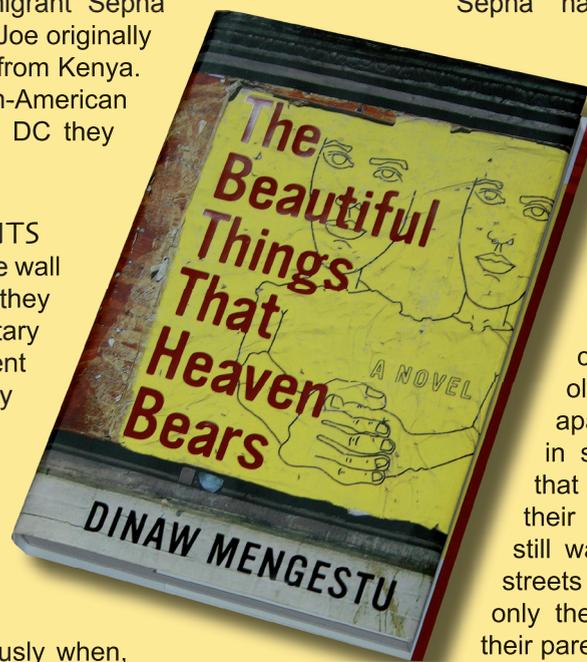
Every Tuesday evening Ethiopian emigrant Sepha Stephanos is visited by his two friends, Joe originally from the Congo and Kenneth originally from Kenya. In his small store in the rundown African-American suburb of Logan Circle in Washington DC they drink away their loneliness.

DREAMS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS
Sepha keeps a map of Africa taped to the wall and together they play a game where they compete with each other to match military coups to dictators in the fragile continent they cannot return to but from which they cannot escape. "Our memories," Joe says, during a lull in the game, "are like a river cut off from the ocean. With time they will slowly dry out in the sun, and so we drink and drink and drink and we can never have our fill."

The three met seventeen years previously when, as newly arrived emigrants, they worked as valets at the Capitol Hotel. In those days they were filled with dreams of the new life that was opening up to them in the country they saw as a Promised Land. Kenneth talked of returning home after completing a master's degree in Engineering. "I will go to Nairobi in the finest suit and everyone will say, 'Look at him. That is someone important. That is someone special.' I'll build them buildings that will blow them away. No one will have seen anything like them."

Sepha too dreams of a college degree. When that doesn't work out he opens a small store; his dream of a restaurant gradually reduced to a deli-counter, which

unfortunately gathers dust as Sepha tries to come to grips with being away from his home country and with the execution of his father in the aftermath of the overthrow of Ethiopian ruler Haile Selassie in 1974.



Sepha has chosen to leave the apartment block where he lived with his uncle for his first two years in the United States. "Within this building there is an entire world made up of old lives and relationships transported perfectly intact from Ethiopia... The hallway on every floor smells of wat, coffee and incense. The older women still travel from apartment to apartment dressed in slippers and white blankets that they keep wrapped around their heads, just as if they were still walking through the crowded streets of Addis. The children keep only the friendships sanctioned by their parents... There is a beauty and a terror to these floors."

NO HOME FROM HOME

While wanting to escape from this small Ethiopian enclave, Sepha, once established in Logan Circle, feels a tremendous sense of alienation. "As it was, I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back."

The house next door to Sepha's shop, a "beautiful tragic wreck", becomes home to Judith, a white university lecturer, and her daughter Naomi, the child of Judith's severed marriage to a Mauritanian economist. Judith

Dinaw Mengestu was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1978. A graduate of Georgetown University and of Columbia University's MFA programme in fiction, he was the recipient of a 2006 fellowship in fiction from the New York Foundation for the Arts.

His first novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, was published in 2006. He has reported on the tragedy in Darfur, Sudan for Rolling Stone magazine.

(Photo: Blair Fethers)



returns the old house to its former glory and her life begins to intersect with that of Sepha. For a while he dares to hope that he can once again experience the sense of belonging that has evaded him since he left his mother and brother in Ethiopia.

The eleven-year old Naomi and Sepha both love reading and get into the habit of reading aloud together, an experience that means a great deal to both of them. "Sometimes while I read, Naomi would lay her head against my arm or in my lap and rest there, wide awake and attentive, until forced to move. It was just enough to make me see how one could want so much more out of life." But the neighbourhood revitalisation sparks serious racial tensions which put severe pressure on Sepha's tentative relationship with Judith.

IN SEARCH OF ONESELF

Dinaw Mengestu, author of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, was born in Ethiopia. When he was just two years old he emigrated with his mother and sister to the United States. His father was already there, having had to flee Ethiopia in 1977, shortly before his wife gave birth to Dinaw. Initially the family lived in Illinois. Dinaw studied at Georgetown University.

Asked why he began to write, Mengestu explained in an interview how he wanted a sense of his own identity and started to read everything about Ethiopia that he could get his hands on. At university he began taping interviews with family members.

He got his father to talk about his brother, Mengestu's uncle, who was violently seized from the office where he worked. A week later his father got word to come

and collect the tortured body. "My father would speak about his brother every once in a while, just really quietly. He would whisper his name when he was driving. Sometimes he would just suddenly shake his head in sadness."

Mengestu explains "I was born in Ethiopia but I've grown up entirely in the United States...I've held on deliberately, at times fiercely, to a country that I hadn't seen in twenty-five years... In Sepha's case, Ethiopia has been physically left behind and he lives with that absence and refuses to let it go because nostalgia and memory are all he has."

BRIGHT NEW TOMORROW

The Beautiful things that Heaven Bears explores the meaning of nationality, home and family, isolation, exile and loneliness, race relations between whites and blacks and African immigrants and African Americans, and what it means to try to leave the past behind in search of a future.

The title of the novel comes from Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. The poet emerges from Hell and "through a round opening / I saw some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears; / And then we issued forth to see again the stars."

Dinaw Mengestu lives in the United States. This is his first novel. ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is published by Riverhead Books.