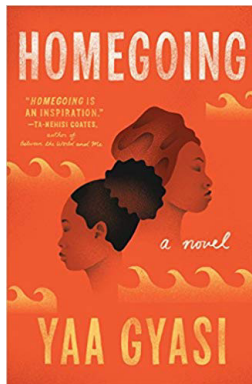


## BOOK REVIEW

*Homegoing*

Author: Yaa Gyasi

Publisher: Alfred A. Knopp

Year of Publication: © 2017 (paperback)

ISBN 978-110-197-106-2

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In Yaa Gyasi's debut novel *Homegoing*, two sisters separated by circumstance are born in 18th-century Ghana not far from the Cape Coast Castle. One sister, Effia, marries a white officer employed at the Castle and lives a comfortable life there with her husband and son. The other sister, Esi, is captured during a raid on her village, marched to the Castle, and held in appalling conditions in its dungeons. They reside in the castle together, yet without knowledge of the other's presence or situation. The two sisters' stories diverge when Esi is shipped to the southern plantations of the United States as part of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The rest of the novel follows the two branches of the family through seven generations in portrait-like chapters that alternate between describing the descendants of Effia and those of Esi. Not only does the story illustrate how the legacy of slavery impacts the two lineages generations after emancipation, but it describes an expansive scope of Black history and the relations between Africans and African-Americans through personal narrative.

What is impressive about the tale is that it utilizes thorough and complex character development to move forward the histories of two nations over the span of 300 years. Though each character only has a chapter dedicated to their story, the reader is submersed in their world and grasps each characters' motivations, burdens, desires, and heartbreaks in just 20 pages. James Collins, a son of an important Fante family, falls in love with a daughter of an Asante farmer while Kojo Freeman, a shipyard worker in Baltimore, suffers a heartbreaking loss of his wife. Willie Black aspires to become a jazz singer in Harlem clubs while Akua Collins struggles with nightmares of her past and her missionary upbringing in Edweso, Ghana. The complicated multitude of perspectives covered over

such a large span of time is simply extraordinary. The constantly changing eras and personalities keep the stories fresh and dynamic.

The shortness of each characters' individual story builds the intensity of each chapter packing every paragraph with emotion. Yet, the brevity of the stories leaves the reader craving more, wondering what happens after the snapshot of the characters' life we are given. The following chapters sometimes satisfy this craving, as the characters reappear as mothers, fathers, grandmothers, or grandfathers. Other times the threads of their stories are lost due to a slaver's kidnapping, a purposeful cutting of family ties, or an untimely death. However, this loss of storylines is not necessarily a weakness in the plot. It forces the reader to deal with the disconnection that the characters feel. Our lack of knowledge of the story mirrors the characters loss of family history.

What does sometimes feel contrived, however, is that each generation often only has one child or if there are multiple children, some of them are pushed aside or die in order to give way to a single heir to the next chapter. Of course, this is a practical decision on the part of Yaa Gyasi allowing readers to easily keep track of all the characters, whose relationships to each other are conveniently recorded in a family tree at the beginning of the book. The fixed nature of the family relationships and pattern of the generational chapters provides a grounding structure to the emotional rollercoaster of the plot. Yet, one still wonders what the narratives of the other siblings are. How would the story have changed had a different sibling been given the limelight?

Understandably, Gyasi focuses on one character per chapter given the limited space that the structure provides, though understanding the interactions between

the siblings would have been intriguing.

Characters take center stage in *Homegoing*, though Gyasi takes care to drop hints about the timeline throughout the chapters to ground the stories in historical eras. In Esi's branch of the family we're taken from the U.S.'s southern plantations to Baltimore where anxieties abound surrounding the Fugitive Slave Act (1850)— a law that required escaped slaves to be returned to their masters upon capture even if they resided in a free state. Kojo's family has to deal with the constant fear that this legislation brings, having escaped slavery to Baltimore. Premonitions of the civil war follow and the story jumps to Part II leaving a convenient break in the middle of the book representing the American Civil War and splitting the book into two halves — pre-Civil War and post-Civil war. The plot then flows into the post-War Reconstruction Era, through the Great Migration represented by Willie moving from the U.S. to the North to seek employment, and then to Harlem where Carson joins the NAACP clearly placing him in the civil rights era. Finally, the book concludes with Marcus, a student at Stanford University, closing in modern times. Amazing, for those who know the arc of American history, simply by mentioning the Fugitive Slave Act or the NAACP readers can place the individual characters' stories in a broader historical context. In a story that could have easily been overwhelmed by too many historical facts, the hints of history provide a perfect balance between providing some historical context but not making the stories completely ahistorical. This model of storytelling allows the personal stories to echo the cultural and political movements of each era.

However, if hints to history are the grounding points for the timeline, one may wonder if this makes the story inaccessible to those who may not know the details of American history. Yet, the stories of Effia's branch of the family take place almost entirely in Ghana — a place whose history many also may not know the details of. Despite this lack of knowledge, the story is still emotionally powerful and easy to follow. Gyasi continues to drop her historical hints. In the story of third generation of Effia's branch, Gyasi writes, "The Asantes had Governor Charles MacCarthy's head. They were keeping it on a stick outside the Asante king's palace as a warning to the British: this is what happens to those who defy us" (Gyasi, 2017, 88). This documents the first Asante-British War that lasted from 1823-1831 and the Asante nation's fight against British presence in Ghana, which James, our character becomes wrapped up in. In the following chapter, the rise of Christian missionaries proselytizing becomes evident when Abena speaks to

one in the street in Kumasi. War between the British and Asante continue in the following generation — Akua's young children sing "Creator God, defeat the troops" and her husband is sent to fight the British along with the rest of the young men. News arrives in the village that Asante King Prempeh I has been exiled and the British Governor Frederick Hodgson demands the Golden Stool — a physical representation of the Asante nation's leadership, power, and spirit. The last two chapters of Effia's branch contemplate the movement of African's immigration to the U.S. as well as their routine trips back to Africa to visit family. The historical notes do not confuse a reader who does not know Ghana's history, but instead educate the reader on important events. Because the historical context is woven into personal narratives of the characters, it is easy to follow the history as daily happenings in the characters lives. Likely, those who may not know the details of American history, will also be able to follow the story line easily and learn something about American history from the U.S.-based chapters.

By covering so many eras in one narrative, Gyasi strategically ties the legacy of slavery to modern problems that Africans and African-Americans face. Despite overcoming many obstacles and disadvantages, the characters must constantly fight for their humanity, their freedom, and their rights. In the U.S., even after Kojo escapes slavery with the help of his parents, he must constantly be on guard once the Fugitive Slave Act is passed. For H, after emancipation, he is quickly arrested on the grounds of looking at a white woman the wrong way. For this, he is forced to work in a coal mine alongside other convicts for 8 years under brutal conditions. The managers have no qualms with killing convicts for something as small as not mining enough coal each day. Gyasi illustrates that even after the abolishment of slavery, the criminal justice system becomes an extension of slavery. Though both white and Black convicts work in the mine together, the white convicts have been sentenced for much more severe offenses like murder, demonstrating that the system is clearly racist. This reflects modern day issues the U.S. faces such as police brutality, unequal sentencing, and the prison-industrial complex.

Marcus, the character in the final chapter and a student at Stanford University, embodies the frustration of American youth, especially youth of color, allowing the text to resonate with a young audience. He seeks to write a research paper about his great-grandfather H who worked in the coal mines but realizes his H's life connects with many other stories. "The deeper he did the research, the bigger the project got. How could he talk about Great-

Grandpa H's story without also talking about his grandma Willie and the millions of other black people who had migrated north, fleeing Jim Crow? And if he mentioned the Great Migration, he'd have to talk about the cities that took that flock in. He'd have to talk about Harlem. And how could he talk about Harlem without mentioning his father's heroin addiction — the stints in prison, the criminal record?" (Gyasi, 2017, 289). Thinking about all the injustices his family has had to bear makes Marcus so angry that he wants to "slam the research book on the table of the beautiful but deadly silent Lane Reading Room of Green Library of Stanford University ... then everyone in the room would stare and all they would see would be his skin and his anger, and they'd think they knew something about him, and it would be the same something that had justified putting his great-grandpa H in prison, only it would be different too, less obvious than it once was (Gyasi, 2017, 289). This passage speaks to the racist systems that Black people in America face and how trauma is passed down generationally.

Marcus's internal monologue also speaks to Gyasi's reasons for writing *Homegoing*. Gyasi, born in Ghana and raised in Huntsville, Alabama, also attended Stanford University. With this knowledge, Marcus's story reads like an autobiography and his struggles with writing a research paper on Black history whose scope continues to expand perhaps reflects Gyasi's own writing frustrations and journey. Understanding Gyasi's deep personal connection to the story makes it clear why Gyasi was able to depict each character with such nuanced detail. She is telling a fictionalized version of her own family history, based off of her experience straddling Ghana's and America's two histories. *Homegoing* feels like a direct answer to Marcus. It holds the interconnected Black family history of several eras and generations together in a way that would be virtually impossible to do in a single research paper. While research requires a linear analysis of facts and data, the narrative structure allows for compassionate interpretation that can easily loop back to important places and themes. From just the title, we know the composition will circle us back toward home.

*Homegoing* is an emotionally exhausting but rewarding read. After understanding the hardships the two branches of the family have endured, the conclusion weaves the two stories together in a satisfying ending. Though some may find the ending cliché, the celebratory closing is well-deserved after such trauma. The book celebrates knowing one's history. This theme manifests in the imagery of two sparkling black and gold stone pendants that Effia and Esi's mother gives them. Esi's

is quickly lost when she is ordered to board a slave ship to the U.S., but Effia's is handed down through the generations. The physical passing down of a family heirloom symbolizes the passing down of experience, knowledge, and stories of ancestors — an homage to African griotic traditions. Though some stories are lost just like Esi's stone, the *Homegoing* illustrates that beginning the process of learning about oneself through family history can start at any time — there is still time to return home. This inspiring message makes one want to delve into one's own family history, to visit the places where ancestors have lived, to know the events and people who have made you.

## REFERENCE:

Gyasi, Y. (2017). *Homegoing*. New York: Alfred A. Knopp