

Alpha: Abidjan to Paris

Bessora

Barroux, Illustrator

Sarah Ardizzone, Translator

Bellevue Literary Press (May 1, 2018)

Hardcover \$24.99 (128pp)

978-1-942658-40-5

Inspired by the stories of refugees, *Alpha* is a moving and important account of the risks and hardships braved by illegal immigrants seeking a better life. A man's extraordinary efforts to reunite with his family are the basis of Bessora and Barroux's graphic novel.

Alpha Coulibaly is living in Abidjan, a major city of Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) in Africa. He longs to reunite with his wife, Patience, and their young son, Badian, who have gone ahead to Paris, where Patience's sister runs a hair salon. The thin hope of a better life in Europe is enough for many immigrants, including Alpha, to brave the daunting legal and physical obstacles that stand in the way.

Working whatever jobs he can find, saving money for months before he can afford the next leg of the trip, Alpha travels through Mali, to Algeria, to Morocco, and finally to Europe.

The tale is intimately told from Alpha's point of view, but he also tells the stories of many of the people he meets along the way, including a small boy traveling alone, Augustin. Alpha has an engaging sense of humor and a positive outlook throughout, as when he wonders about the term "illegal immigrant":

Illegal? What does that even mean? For me, we're adventurers. Indiana Jones would have died eight times over if he'd had to endure what we experience every day.

Indeed, Alpha and his companions are faced with a steady stream of life-or-death decisions: Which smuggler to trust? Which route to take? How to avoid being deported?

Barroux's art is a fine-tip pen wash—one or two simple but affecting images to a page, masterfully composed.

While immigration may be a contentious political issue, *Alpha* reminds us of the people behind the headlines: those who inhabit the smugglers' compartments in rickety trucks, pay for fake passports, and trust their lives to boats that are barely seaworthy, all in search of a better future for themselves and their families.

PETER DABBENE (May/June 2018)

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