

Beyond the Sahara

Agbor Emmanuel

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This is remarkable work that makes an indelible mark upon perceptions of modern Africa.

Agbor Emmanuel's *Beyond the Sahara* is an on-the-road adventure set in contemporary Africa that entertains, informs, and forces the rethinking of stereotypes.

Joe—young, irrepressibly optimistic, and with a talent for soccer—is determined to seek his fame and fortune on the soccer pitches of Europe. To get there, he must travel from Cameroon to the northern coast of Africa, a journey of over two thousand miles through the Sahara, on foot or in overcrowded, dangerous vehicles. Joe hopes to cross to Spain as a stowaway and begin the new life he dreams of. Joining Joe are his best friend, Samson, and an assemblage of like-minded refugees they meet along the way.

This is a contemporary African story. Boko Haram commits depredations; a mass diaspora is underway. This is also Africa as seen through African eyes rather than through the eyes of Western expats or descendants of white colonists. The wide array of characters represent many different countries, languages, and cultures, yet each character emerges as an individual rather than as a cultural stereotype. The cast includes villains as well as heroes, vividly drawn and achingly human. Optimism, patience, and the ability to improvise emerge as common traits, and the book moves along swiftly as Joe and his friends overcome one difficulty after another.

The tone throughout the book is light and humorous, as seen in the spirited group quarrels that erupt when buses break down or border guards demand too much in bribes, or when the narrator says of a desert village without running water, "In terms of infrastructure, Agadès was nothing to write home about." Through such descriptions and many conversations, the writing captures the lightness and musicality of African speech patterns. Tucked into the conversations are debates about everything from soccer to postcolonialism and geopolitics, and these exchanges are always enlightening and entertaining.

Despite the humor, tension heightens as Joe, Samson, and their entourage enter the most difficult stages of their journey. Few who enter the Sahara emerge alive, and those lucky enough to make it to the coast still face a perilous sea journey before reaching Europe. The narrative does not promise that all will end well, and survival is ever uncertain.

Beyond the Sahara is remarkable and deserves a wide readership, especially among Westerners and anyone interested in today's Africa. Anyone who makes the journey with Joe and his friends will never look at Africa in quite the same way again.

SUSAN WAGGONER (August 9, 2016)

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