

★ Castles from Cobwebs

J. A. Mensah

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J. A. Mensah's *Castles from Cobwebs* is a haunting coming-of-age tale.

Imani is a Ghanaian orphan who was left on a castle incline in Northumbria. Picked up by the reverend mother of a convent, Imani is raised there, experiencing estrangement and racism. At nineteen, a phone call about her mother's funeral takes her to Ghana to discover her roots and background. Later, she ends up in Rochester, New York, for a study abroad year.

The novel is divided into three sections, each spotlighting its colorful setting. The racism that Imani faces growing up in an all-white convent is juxtaposed with African folk tales. But in Ghana, she still feels displaced: it seems like she does not belong to any one place.

Imani's spiritual companion, Amarie, is part shadow and part ghost, and disappears when Imani is in Ghana. Through this device, the novel plumbs the lines between faith and reality, good and evil. While the narrative doesn't resolve who Amarie is, or why she comes and goes, these elisions mirror Imani's cobwebbed origin story, which is impossible to complete once her biological mother dies.

Mensah's prose is gorgeous and lyrical, conjuring crystalline images of Northumbria, Accra, and a Ghanaian village, all while showing how fractured and untethered Imani feels without clear biological and geographical ties. Strong women abound, playing the roles of an adopted mother, a biological mother, an aunt, and an elder. They are flawed role models from whom Imani learns fragments of her biological mother's story, as well as about the nature of friendship and love between women.

When Imani returns to Northumbria, a reckoning imbued with nostalgia allows her to deal with abandonment, and to gain a redemptive sense of home and belonging. Mensah's storytelling skills make for an atmospheric, poignant, and bold novel that explores uncharted territory.

ELAINE CHIEW (May / June 2022)

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