

News From Home

Sefi Atta

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These days, it's easier than ever to know what's happening in another country. News travels fast; most people have immediate access to the tragedies, the glories, and the daily trivia of lives lived on the other side of the earth.

As much reportage as we have access to, however, literature is still perhaps the best way to make a real connection to those in another country. Through stories we meet people who may not exist exactly as they are rendered on the page, but whose spirit is inherent in the homes and on the streets of their own geography. Sefi Atta, with her book of short stories, *News From Home* proves that learning doesn't have to happen through real photos and newscasts; her characters, her language, and her attention to complex, subtle shifts in relationships make her book both a series of lessons about Nigeria and a lovely way to pass the time.

The characters in Atta's collection are all different ages, enjoy different levels of privilege, and travel for different reasons. In "Madness in the Family," a mother witnesses the crumbling of her own life as her eldest daughter falls victim to bi-polar disease and her husband flees to London—and his mistress—taking their younger children with him. Atta writes: "...you were confronted with the dilemma that, no matter how much money you had and no matter where you could escape to overseas, you could not save yourself from your own country."

Make no mistake—though Atta's stories are often about people on the very fringes of luck, she does inject a sense of humor into her writing. In "Green," a young American daughter accompanies her parents to the immigration office in New Orleans where they hope to get their green cards; she hopes they get home in time for her soccer game. Atta delivers dialogue that is exact and funny to read: "'You guys,' I say. 'If you're going to live in this country you might as well get used to soccer. It's a part of life.'"

While Atta's stories are political ones, she does not force her characters into political positions that don't come naturally. Every urge is organic, every demonstration is heartfelt. Readers notice first who she is writing about; later they notice why she is writing about them. Sharp, powerful language and authentic characters are her primary concerns and as a result her stories are rich and wonderful.

ANDI DIEHN (September / October 2010)

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