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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Scent of Water

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A professional young widow who has recently emerged from an abusive arranged marriage finds her life changed by unexpected sympathy for a man reviled for killing a loved one. Esam Bassey is a skilled pediatric surgery resident who teaches Sunday school in the Cross River State of Nigeria. One night she dreams of a man in prison whom she hasn't met but who nonetheless appears in news footage the following day. The coincidence strikes her as a cosmically inspired sign which demands action so Esam joins her church's prison outreach team and meets him.

Confessed murderer Mike Dabi shows hostility to Esam intent on driving off this stranger whose interest lacks a tangible reason. For her part Esam is troubled by her inability to leave Mike to his fate. She tells her twin sister "'…what puzzles me most is the bond I feel between us. It terrified me.'"

Esam continues to visit and draw the convict out eventually enlisting her publicity-hungry barrister brother-in-law in the fight for a retrial. As Mike's arc sputters uncertainly upward Esam's share of page time markedly diminishes until the book's subject seems to have shifted. Mike's financial resurgence is largely thanks to a corrupt crony (no less than the Ambassador to the United Nations) who has repaid an old favor by illegally swinging piles of government contacts Mike's way. The malady of neopatrimonialism is so entrenched in the nation's psyche that Nigerian readers may see little out of order with this conflict solution while readers from elsewhere raise their eyebrows.

Societal context is all-important to this engrossing work. Here is a petroleum-intensive country the most populous one in Africa. Fairly or not it has become associated with infamous internet frauds alleged to profit government officials. Today there are efforts to get away from politics divined by membership in rival ethnic groups but factionalism persists with Muslims dominating in the north and Christians in the south. Since dictatorship ended in 1999 the endemic scamming and pocket-lining simply changed beneficiaries. Despite limited reforms money and patronage connections still overcome law. Money laundering is popular but draws attention from frightening thugs as illustrated through violence visited on a minor character's home: "Once hired assassins came to their house raped his sister and threatened to wipe out the whole family. They had killed his only senior brother to drive the message home."

After chilling autocracy gave way to the Fourth Republic Nigeria's literary community resumed publishing quality fiction and freer commentary. Recent standouts include the 2007 Orange Prize winner Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Caine Prize winner Helon Habila. *Scent of Water* should earn Ogunyinka an invite to the round table of national literature with its thought-provoking criticism of legal injustice and a refreshingly unconventional love story between deeply traumatized people.

The author is a pastor in Calabar and host of the television program "Issues of Life." *To Where the Wind Blew* is her previous book; the next project is a series on the topic of Wisdom.

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