

Seasons in Hippoland

Wanjik Wa Ng'g

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Wanjik Wa Ng'g's dreamlike coming-of-age novel *Seasons in Hippoland* is about the power of storytelling.

Mumbi grows up in Victoriana, a country populated by freedom fighters and generals and oppressed by a succession of men in colorful berets. Her parents are partners at the House of Lawyers. She attends Catholic school in Westville, the capital city, where "government ministers zoom... by in Mercedes-Benz sedans, oblivious of the potholes."

But after Mumbi is caught smoking in high school, she is "exiled," forced to spend summers with her eccentric Aunt Sara in Hippoland. Mumbi learns to love her aunt and the exotic countryside, with its marshes "where the hippos once belonged," its monsoon winds, and its marketplace "replete with smells of curry and goat soup and coconut rice and plantains."

Aunt Sara weaves elaborate tales for patrons at Mexico 86, a beer hall known for dancing, gossip, and stories that are "stewed, strained, mixed and served up to neighbors, friends and foes." Aunt Sara also has a history of protest and rebellion, and admires Nelson Mandela and Mbuya Nehanda. Mumbi becomes enchanted by her aunt's tales of love and magic, and by her images of blue porcelain bowls for healing and suitcases full of dreams. In Hippoland, Mumbi also glimpses first love.

After Mumbi learns the arts of storytelling and political protest, she becomes a lawyer like her parents, but she is imprisoned when her aunt disappears under mysterious circumstance. Still, Mumbi is a heroine who prevails, and who maintains her reverence for storytelling: "Yes, stories can be told in any place ... We must never stop from reading the book of life. Our world is one big bowl of an unfolding story."

Part fairy tale, part political parable, *Seasons in Hippoland* is a powerful novel whose women are resilient and creative in the face of oppression.

KRISTEN RABE (September / October 2021)

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