Clarion Review

General

The Crystal Bird
Helen Drayton
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

"A piece of human history has emerged in this cave that could fill a gap in information about ancient civilizations and rewrite history." Allan Cline, a dedicated archaeologist, has penetrated an ancient African paradise. What he and his friends find there could have implications for all of humanity—but how will they let the world know? Staying in the African utopia means they can never share their remarkable discovery, but leaving could be perilous, even deadly.

In this heady mixture of fact and fantasy, Trinidadian poet, artist, and lecturer Helen Drayton has created a gem-like realm named Ashaise, where Africans live in harmony, protected from outsiders by unusual celestial phenomena and their own canny distrust of strangers. When Cline's party overcomes daunting barriers to find Ashaise, the purity of its culture is suddenly threatened. Inheritors of a heretofore unsullied civilization started in 1450 by a band of Masai who refused to be captured by slave traders, the Ashais are harmonious and healthy, having conquered most diseases by means of the medicinal power of the eggs of huge, shimmering "crystal birds."

When Cline falls in love with Princess Jiena, King Meleke offers the intruder a choice: All may stay, even though the others want to get back home to share their new knowledge; or all must go, taking nothing, not even their photographs. How can Cline choose to leave Jiena? Why should the world be denied the knowledge of the crystal birds' healing power? How could he possibly let the Ashais fall victim to humanity's greed and exploitation?

By grappling with such grand themes, Drayton has fashioned a dynamic story that echoes classic time-and-space travel odysseys. Drayton develops her ideas through the characterizations she dramatically, and, on occasion, poetically, brings to life. Allan Cline is an African American who feels drawn to Ashaise as if he is hearing some ancient drumbeat calling him home. Jiena is strong, letting her feelings for Cline flow while maintaining her sense of

what is best for all. King Meleke recognizes Cline's adventurous spirit and suspects that his is the new blood that the tribe will need to survive, even as the inborn mistrust of outsiders forces him to banish Cline and his crew.

At times, the didactic aspect of the novel overwhelms the story line, especially when it is executed in long, rather stilted conversations between Cline and his idealistic friend, Chris. However, it is only at those times that the novel drags; generally, it grips readers with its focus on the dilemma of imperiled explorers and star-crossed lovers, and the contrastingly serene, enviable lives of the Ashais.

The interplay between ancient African culture, seen here at its apex, and modern civilization, which still includes slavery, disease, and warfare, makes this fantasy click. Readers will no doubt be enchanted by Drayton's atmospheric descriptions of the magical world of Ashaise.

Barbara Bamberger Scott