

Tiny Sunbirds Far Away

Christie Watson

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Blessing, the heroine of this remarkable coming-of-age novel, is an intelligent, sensitive young girl who finds her privileged life stripped away when her Nigerian businessman father cheats on her mother. She and her brother Ezekiel are removed from the city with its private schools, flush toilets, and servants, to live in the primitive compound of her maternal grandparents. Blessing has suddenly to cope with leaving school, learning a new language, changing religion, and using privies, plus bigger issues like water pollution, international oil cartels, armed gangs of child guerillas, polygamy, and female circumcision.

Ezekiel crumbles first. Plagued by allergies and lacking medical treatment, he withdraws into apathy and then anarchy, drinking palm wine and finally allying himself with the child army. Through him, Blessing sees the anger of the Nigerian people for the way their homeland is exploited by “white devils.” Then their mother, working in the oil compound, acquires a white boyfriend, Dan, a loving but naïve birdwatcher who tries to bring the family together, even as Ezekiel is further alienated and Blessing watches, helpless.

As her life went from light to dark, it gradually becomes apparent that only she could bring back the radiance and see the “tiny sunbirds” on the far horizon.

For Blessing, the slip into poverty has one shining virtue. Unable to go to school, she is empowered by her grandmother to become a midwife. The scenes in which the young girl assists in births are some of the most powerful in the book: “She screamed the noise that I heard only at that time, when a woman was pushing a baby’s head out. It was a noise from another, older world. The head arrived. The baby was deep blue. Its lips were white. It had a tiny nose and puffy cheeks. Beautiful.”

Blessing gradually understands that her ability to assist in childbirth will be her saving grace. When her mother departs for London with Dan, Blessing realizes she doesn’t want to leave her African home.

Christie Watson is an Englishwoman married to a Nigerian, and was a nurse for many years before turning to writing. Her book depicts the sober, sometimes terrifying aspects of life in an African village, along with what makes it beautiful: family, tradition, and a vitality that springs from taking the long view of adversity.

BARBARA BAMBERGER SCOTT (May / June 2011)

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