



Walk On, Bright Boy

Charles Davis

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The Spanish Inquisition, which instituted mass conversions of Jews to Catholicism and the expulsion of the Moors, was only reluctantly endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, it was largely a political maneuver by Ferdinand V and Isabella to unify the disparate principalities of Spain and push the Ottoman Turks out of the southern regions. This medieval site of religious oppression and political expediency provides the setting of Charles Davis's haunting novel *Walk On, Bright Boy*, the story of a young boy's friendship with a Moor who is targeted by the Inquisition.

In many ways a gothic novel, *Walk On, Bright Boy* narrates the moral *bildungsroman* of a nine-year-old Spaniard, whose horrifying encounters with humanity—in the shape of the ruthless Inquisition, a xenophobic community, and a psychopathic tithe collector—would seem reason to lose faith altogether. But the novel is also an assertion of spirituality shaped by the traumas of childhood, a Moor's lessons in observing the world, Gnostic thought, and an education through the Catholic Church. The title of the novel is a translated phrase from a novel by medieval Islamic philosopher Ibn Tufayl about a boy who grows up in isolation but discovers “the same spiritual truths as the highest authorities in the world.”

As the title suggests, the novel is about walking as a vehicle for seeing the world, thinking, becoming part of a landscape, even of narrating experience. From the Moor, the narrator learns the gift of walking in the mountains near their village: “walking was a form of storytelling in itself, a way of finding your way through the world.” Walking is also an ecological act, for it is a literal engagement with a physical place. “The landscape,” the narrator says, “breathes with the rhythm of your walking, as if conspiring with your progress to create a private perfection of harmony in which there are no barriers between you and the world.”

Charles Davis's first novel reflects his own peripatetic travels far from his native England to Sudan, Turkey, Ivory Coast, Spain, and France, and it explores the exhilarations and fears of the engagement with strange geographies and foreign cultures. Notwithstanding the use of ubiquitous Christian imagery, the prose is truly insightful, economical, and almost lyrical in its portrayal of the complexities of human action. A short narrative, *Walk On, Bright Boy* leaves the reader curious about the implied frame of the novel, a manuscript confession written for the Inquisition.

Despite its setting in medieval Spain, the novel speaks to contemporary collisions of political expediency and religious faith throughout the world. It is a reminder of the complexities of an individual's allegiance to religion, community, nation, and geographic place.

KEYA KRAFT (August 8, 2007)

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