

★ **White****Deni Ellis Béchard**

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A white child appears among the street urchins of the Congo, claiming to be both a witch and bewitched. Two American conservationists disappear in the jungle, one under suspicious circumstances, another purposefully elusive. Deni Ellis Béchard's *White* lands its journalist lead smack in the middle of these two seemingly unrelated stories for a tale that feels like James Michener and Gabriel García Márquez joined forces to craft a meditation on race.

*White* is somehow both breathless and introspective, a careening political thriller and a work of deep contemplation. Béchard's eponymous protagonist heads to the Congo chasing a story. He's trying to track down a mysterious conservationist at the center of a web of corporate corruption. On the plane, he meets Sola, an anthropologist following intrigue of her own. A colleague has found a white—not albino—child on the streets of Kinshasa who claims to be an African girl transformed by a demon. Over the course of joining with Sola to recover the child's origins, Béchard finds himself having to reckon with a memory he's set aside for some time.

As a novel, *White* enthralls and inspires wonder, its ambitious storytelling working through a captivating mix of political intrigue and something near magical realism. This artistry allows Béchard to move into somewhat dangerous territory: he is a white author writing about race and colonialism. While any of his interwoven story lines could easily move into clumsy metaphors, the book unfolds with thought-provoking nuance.

In *White*, there is nothing clean cut about the way whiteness manifests in geopolitics. There is also nothing simple about the way we internalize systems of privilege and power. They are insidious, haunting even the “woke” among us, a phenomenon Béchard illustrates through his self-referential protagonist with notable self-awareness.

*White* is a rare work of fiction in which one can get lost in storytelling and grow as a thinker at the same time. Captivating, careening, thrilling, and magical, this is intelligent entertainment.

JESSIE HORNESS (September/October 2018)

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