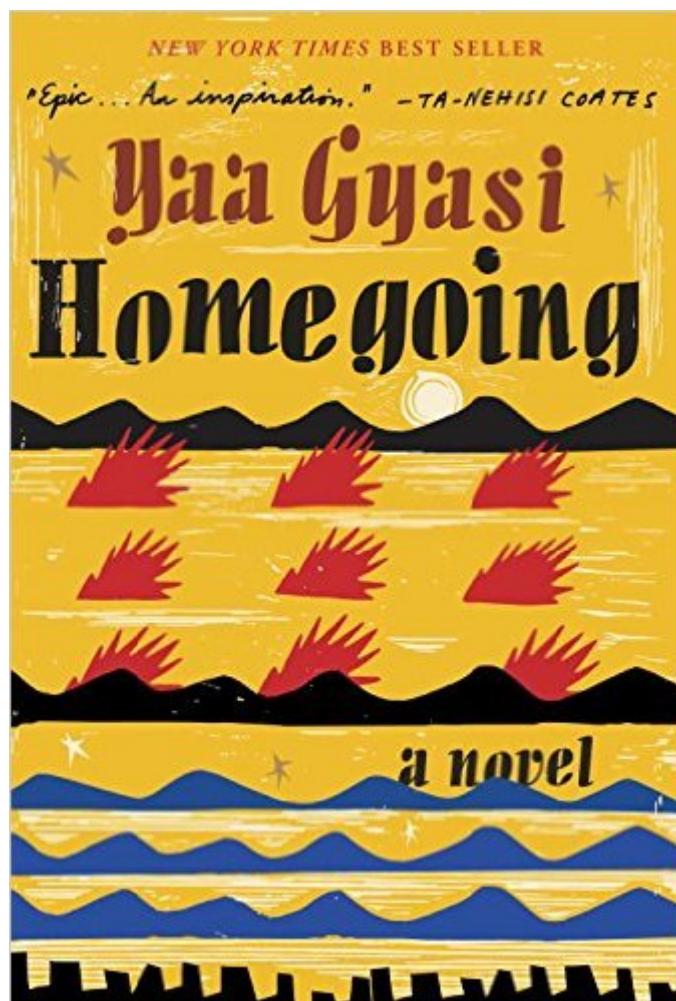


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Homegoing: A Novel



Synopsis

“Homegoing” is an inspiration. • “Ta-Nehisi Coates’ The unforgettable New York Times best seller begins with the story of two half-sisters, separated by forces beyond their control: one sold into slavery, the other married to a British slaver. Written with tremendous sweep and power, Homegoing traces the generations of family who follow, as their destinies lead them through two continents and three hundred years of history, each life indelibly drawn, as the legacy of slavery is fully revealed in light of the present day. Effia and Esi are born into different villages in eighteenth-century Ghana. Effia is married off to an Englishman and lives in comfort in the palatial rooms of Cape Coast Castle. Unbeknownst to Effia, her sister, Esi, is imprisoned beneath her in the castle’s dungeons, sold with thousands of others into the Gold Coast’s booming slave trade, and shipped off to America, where her children and grandchildren will be raised in slavery. One thread of Homegoing follows Effia’s descendants through centuries of warfare in Ghana, as the Fante and Asante nations wrestle with the slave trade and British colonization. The other thread follows Esi and her children into America. From the plantations of the South to the Civil War and the Great Migration, from the coal mines of Pratt City, Alabama, to the jazz clubs and dope houses of twentieth-century Harlem, right up through the present day, Homegoing makes history visceral, and captures, with singular and stunning immediacy, how the memory of captivity came to be inscribed in the soul of a nation.

Book Information

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Knopf; 1st edition (June 7, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1101947136

ISBN-13: 978-1101947135

Product Dimensions: 6.6 x 1.2 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars • See all reviews (389 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #334 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #6 in Books > Literature & Fiction > African American > Historical #25 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Family Saga #87 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical

Customer Reviews

Homegoing begins in fire, as a house slave sets herself free by burning her master’s African village

to the ground, and ends in the ocean, as two of her two descendants - from two completely different lineages - find, finally, perhaps, a sort of reconciliation. In between, Ms. Gyasi traces the entire history of Africa and African-Americans. For the slave, Maame, had two daughters: the daughter of her captor, who she left behind in the burning village; and the daughter of her real husband. Effia and Esi grow up in warring villages, each only a distant rumor to the other, and they take wildly different paths. Effia is sold to a white British lord, living in Africa to negotiate the slave trade, and she spurs a line of descendants who grapple with the impact of the slave trade within Africa. The story of how slavery began in Africa is not one I knew well, and it was heartbreakingly jarring, to learn how the different tribes stalked and captured each other, selling rival sons and daughters and wives to the British, fueling the trade. Esi is herself captured, and kept in the dungeon of the Castle where her sister lives as the "wench" wife of a British trader, until she is sent through the Middle Passage to America, into slavery. The story of Esi's life in the dungeon, waiting to be shipped she knows not where, like every bit of the book, is so detailed and rich and true that it is astonishing to realize the author is only 26 years old. This book could easily be a lifetime achievement, and instead it is just the beginning of what I imagine will be an amazing body of work. *Homegoing* has many, many, many strengths, and perhaps just one weakness. The strengths are found in the story, and in the writing. It is a glory of riches. From the wars between the Asante and Esperante tribes in Africa in the 1700s to the Middle Passage to the slave plantations to life as a freeman in the North to the villages of Africa in the 1800s, to Harlem, through to the impact of the prison culture and drug culture of modern day America, the scope of this book is astonishing. And it is only 300 pages long. My one wish with the book is that it started to feel a little bit that I was getting a glimpse of a life, when I wanted more. In some ways, the book is a series of interlocking short stories: every chapter is the story of one character, representing that generation. There are 14 chapters, I think; seven generations, and Esi, Effia and each of their descendants get one story per generation. So we see Esi in the Dungeon, and on the Middle Passage, but then we do not see her again. We hear from her daughter, Ness, that Esi in America was known as "Frownie" because she never smiled, and that when Ness was born, there was a strange sound heard, which some suspect was the sound of Esi laughing because it was never heard before or since. I cared for Esi, and wished we had heard more of her story after she reached America. Similarly, Ness herself represents the story of slavery, but we only have about 20 pages with her. Those pages are wisely used - I fell in love with her and with Sam, her proud African husband - but again, it is gone so quickly. It was hard not to feel some frustration; these characters and stories started to feel almost wasted, so much richness that we just didn't get a chance to explore. I came to understand that Ms. Gyasi is telling the story not of one

person, or even one family, but instead, tracing a much larger theme, and arc, of the cost of cruelty, and the redeeming power of sacrificial love. The story begins with a slave escaping (an African slave escaping from an African village), and ends hundreds of years later, as two of that slave's descendants return to the village, and to the ocean. It is a promise of healing through the most horrible crimes, for which the most horrible price is paid. On some level, it is so much more powerful than yet another story about a family. And yet - I cared so much for these people, I wish I had known them a bit more. But maybe that is the point as well.

This has to be one of the best books I've ever read, if not the best. Debut author Yaa Gyasi weaves these disconnected characters together with such care that they seem fully fleshed even though you only get such a brief glimpse of each of them. The novel follows the descendants of two half sisters who have never met, one of them remaining in Africa's Gold Coast and the other being shipped off to America as a slave. Individual stories are just long enough to get to know the heart of each person in their defining moments. Despite differing experiences in different countries, the characters share similar hardships and joys as they try to navigate life. Each character has in some way become disconnected with their ancestors and/or home and Gyasi shows the long-term effects of that. I was amazed at how skillful Gyasi was at authentically depicting these settings and giving the characters their own unique story, each one a patch in a larger quilt. The writing is lyrical with a flow that I found very inviting and it was hard to put this book down. I couldn't believe this was a debut novel. I was sad to see the story end yet happy for the conclusion. I can't wait for more from this author. Highly, highly, highly recommended, 5 solid stars and then some.

Yaa Gyasi's *Homecoming* is a profound and beautiful reminder all great fiction is a tantalizing paradox. A great novel is a story that never happened but its "truth" is undeniable. Imagined characters, places, and events may feel more authentic than autobiography and memoir. With all due respect to Solomon Northup and Frederick Douglass, both powerful storytellers, Gyasi matches and in some ways surpasses their achievements. Stories of slavery and racism (separate but equally toxic) are intertwined with brutal misogyny by African and American men. Like the very best writers this young Alabaman (by way of Ghana) does not judge the characters that inhabit her story. She tries to imagine the demons and inner lives of the victim, the slave owner and slave trader. She details the excuses we make for our sins without ever wagging her finger. The structure of the novel bridges two continents and cultures. Alternating chapters tell the stories of two African half-sisters and their descendants. One is sold into slavery to America, the others remain in what becomes

present day Ghana. The structure seamlessly makes the point mankind is culturally diffuse but the willingness to inflict suffering and the ability to transcend it is at the core of our nature. The stories of nine generations in both locales show the African diaspora as both tragedy and triumph. A fair portion of the tragedy self-inflicted. The writing is assured and often a mixture of powerful and poetic: "...for the rest of her life Esi would see a smile on a white face and remember the one the soldier gave her before taking her to his quarters [to rape her], how white men smiling just meant more evil was coming..." While the structure is effective and keeps the narrative moving briskly it is not without problems. Each descendant receives a chapter, in effect a short story. Most feel fully realized but a few seem like vignettes. Some, like the story of Ness (short for Goodness) were as haunting Toni Morrison's best writing in Beloved, Other times I was frustrated--reminded of Jane Smiley's Some Luck which was marvelously written but seemed to switch subjects just as I was "tucking in" to a good tale or character. Another downside of any saga is the need to hit every historical touchstone so we move from the Middle Passage to life as a slave in the deep south, an escape north, the great migration, Harlem in the 20s, etc. etc. By the end, it was starting to feel forced. However, even with these imperfections (which really are no more than blemishes) Homecoming is an enormously satisfying experience. There is a lovely description of an old village grandmother asking little children "have you heard the story of Anansi and the sleeping bird?...they would all shout NO! and giggle into their hands, thrilled by the lie the were telling for they had all heard it many times before, learning that a story was nothing more than a lie you got away with." Like those children I was thrilled by the "lies" Ms. Gyasi tells and gets away with in Homecoming. I know too their purpose is to make us care about and connect us to each other regardless of our village, our tribe or our continent. It's what great fiction does. It's why her novel is a great success.

I bought this book based on the stellar reviews. It was a good book, even technically brilliant, but a poor choice for me. I dislike books of short stories and sagas that skip to the next generation as soon as the reader becomes engaged with a character and storyline. I did not pay attention to the description of 300 years of history in 320 pages. Also, I read the book on my Kindle. It would have been nice to be able to flip back to the family tree.

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