

These Crowded Streets

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Feb. 25, 2011

The very first words in “Open City,” an indelible debut novel by Teju Cole, imply an inevitability, connecting the narrator’s past with his present task, that of explaining his place in the world: “And so,” his narrator, Julius, says, “when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city.”

Julius’s peripatetic wanderings and their connections to personal histories — both his own and those of the people he meets — form the driving narrative, allowing him to reflect on his adopted New York, the Africa of his youth, the America of today and a Europe wary of its future. With every anecdote, with each overlap, Cole lucidly builds a compassionate and masterly work engaged more with questions than with answers regarding some of the biggest issues of our time: migration, moral accountability and our tenuous tolerance of one another’s differences.

It’s the autumn of 2006, and Julius is in his early 30s, absorbed with the humanistic intellectual life and a lover of classical music. Born in Lagos to a German mother and a Nigerian father, Julius has always felt like something of an outsider. While at the Nigerian Military School, he was mindful of not being sufficiently black. After moving to the United States to study medicine, he learned what it was to not be white. As the perpetual Other, Julius casts a disquisitive eye over the world he encounters, one where a diversity of identities and ideas is often overlooked as the norm.

From Morningside Heights, his peregrinations liberate him from the stresses of both his work as a psychiatric fellow at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital and his recent breakup with his girlfriend. His feet lead him widely, to Tower Records and Central Park, to diners, movies and the subway, to the financial district with its gaping wound at ground zero. Julius visits friends, goes to museums and concerts, vacations in Europe. He attends a poetry reading at the 92nd Street Y. Everyday activities, all.

The significant travels occur, however, via the interactions of the quotidian and his mind, an intellect at once solid in its urbanity and restless in its isolation. Julius summons a palimpsest of connecting and conflicting histories. Some of these concern the oppressed, like the slaves interred in the

African burial ground near Wall Street, or the Moroccan clerk at an Internet cafe who gives his perspective as a Muslim intellectual. Others involve the forgotten: a statue in Chinatown, erected in honor of a 19th-century antidrug activist, now collecting pigeon droppings; a Liberian refugee, sitting in limbo in a detention center in Queens. Most of the histories, however, are of the often memorialized — Mahler, Nietzsche, Alexander Hamilton, New York City police officers killed in the line of duty — who live on either in the work bequeathed to us or in the myths constructed around them after their deaths.

Cole's writing is assured, his ideas are well developed, and his imagery is delicious: a bus is "like a resting beast," public chess tables are "oases of order and invitations to a twinned solitude," and in an ailing friend's room Death hovers "with its cheap suit and bad manners." In places Cole's prose recalls W. G. Sebald's, or the young James Joyce's in "The Dead." And his talent for juxtaposing the past and the present turns this book into a symphonic experience: a disabled person on the subway sets Julius thinking about a Yoruba creation myth; this connects with a book his patient wrote about Cornelis Van Tienhoven, the brutal settler of New Amsterdam, and the horrors inflicted on the Native Americans in subsequent centuries; this segues into thoughts on skepticism about global warming, then partisan politics, then Idi Amin, then racial representation in the film "The Last King of Scotland" and other media, until finally Julius considers his own place among it all. Thus he decides to visit Brussels, with the vague notion of finding his aging German grandmother, his remaining link to his maternal past.

Plot developments like this one can at times seem perfunctory. When Julius gives up on finding his grandmother, we're left with the impression that his trip was mostly an excuse to meditate on the differences between Europe and America. Other times, metaphors may seem too capacious, or references too ponderous. (The connection between a bust of the Vichy-supporting poet Paul Claudel and Auden's odes to Yeats and the Bruegel painting in a museum nearby may not immediately bring to mind, as it's meant to, the responsibilities of the intellectual during troubled times.) And while this book will disappoint some who require plot twists or a character's epiphanic transformation, Cole need not worry. His readers will be those who understand that all stories are interconnected, that literature is not mere entertainment, and that art is nothing if not an extended conversation spanning eras, nations and languages.

The novel's importance lies in its honesty. Characters make declarations that may seem untenable to some readers, though these

characters are not zealots. One genteel European who spent her life practicing medicine in the United States describes America as a “terrible, hypocritical, . . . sanctimonious country.” The Native American author who wrote about Van Tienhoven finds it “a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past.” An Ivy League academic wonders whether choosing the circumstances of one’s death is not only more dignified, but also simply right. In a cafe, a young philosopher with a taste for egalitarianism believes that Israel has no title to its territory in Palestine, reasoning that its claim is only as strong as his is, as a Moroccan, to Spain: “Now how would it be if we invade the Spanish peninsula and say, Our forefathers used to rule here in the Middle Ages, so it is our land. . . . It makes no sense, does it?”

And yet Cole, who is in his mid-30s and moved to the United States from Nigeria in 1992, is neither radical pinko nor reckless provocateur. One realizes from his novel that the promises of America are so great that they often can’t help but lead to disillusionment. Through his characters he shows how the world is seen by those who are forced or unafraid to consider the possibilities beyond the status quo; he shakes the familiar comforts and urges us to confront viewpoints usually dismissed as inflammatory.

I did have one larger objection, to a discomfiting turn the novel takes toward its end. A woman from Lagos whom Julius knew in his youth shares an ostensibly shocking revelation about a transgression in his past. To this forgotten or repressed or secreted memory he responds ambiguously. In any other story, such a twist would send tremors across the pages, yet here, set against the novel’s grand scope, it feels unnecessary, either a misstep by a young author or an overstep by a persuasive editor. Could the denouement not simply have comprised the undramatic culmination of the book’s ideas?

“A book suggests conversation,” Julius explains early on. “One person is speaking to another.” In “Open City,” this dialogue does precisely what literature should do: it brings together thoughts and beliefs, and blurs borders. Cole suggests that we re-examine, as perhaps limited and parochial, the idea of the Great Fill-in-the-Nation Novel. Instead, we can look again at the notion of what Goethe called *Weltliteratur*. This book may not be the Great World Novel, but it points to such a work’s possibility and importance. Judging from his performance here, Cole may eventually be the one to write it.