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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Purple Hibiscus.* Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2003. 307 pp. $23.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56512-387-8.

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The Best Things in Life

Adichie's debut novel is a thoroughly engaging and exquisitely crafted piece of work. As a first novel it is nothing short of astonishing. To the outside world, fifteen-year-old Kambili, her seventeen-year-old brother Jaja, and their self-effacing mother Beatrice, are living the dream life in Enugu, Nigeria. However, behind the enviable gates of the estate, provided by their benevolent businessman, father, and husband, Eugene Achike, life is less than rosy. Eugene's religious fanaticism and overbearing hand end up imprisoning and incapacitating those whom he professes to love the most. He metes out severe punishments for minor transgressions, leaving in his wake physical and emotional scars.

As if the pressures of home life are not enough, the children must deal with the social and emotional ups and downs of adolescence, peer relations, and petty rivalries. A ray of light enters this grim picture in the person of Eugene's widowed sister, who invites the children to spend time with her family in the university town of Nsukka. This visit to Aunty Ifeoma's modest home in the university apartments begins a series of life-changing experiences with far-reaching consequences for everyone in the Achike family. In the end, the most decisive actions come from the least expected sources.

Purple Hibiscus is a multi-dimensional novel. It is a tender first-person narrative of a teenage girl who finds her own voice, despite years of abuse and intimidation that have left her stuttering. It is a story of love, the strange love in her nuclear family that generates no laughter, the nurturing love that holds her extended family together, and the personal turmoil and excitement of her first crush. Kambili's narrative voice is fresh and authentic, her English enriched with local Igbo expressions and peppered with Nigerianisms: "The girl is a ripe *agbogho*! Very soon a strong young man will bring us palm wine" (pp. 91-92)!

Set in the Igbo region of eastern Nigeria, the story draws the reader into the environment and cultural experiences of a significant segment of Nigerian society. From the scenic hillsides of Enugu and Nsukka to the unpaved rural roads of Abba and Aokpe, each locale is essential to the main characters' well-being, providing a much needed balance between the busy urban centers and the ancestral and kinship base of the countryside. The author, herself an Igbo, is obviously familiar with her terrain and the urban-rural balance. One gets a taste of the shades and nuances of contemporary Nigerian life: the rich diversity of its peoples and their traditions, their staple and snack foods, and the variety of their religious beliefs.

In telling the story of Kambili and the extraordinary events that transform her world, Adichie manages to present and explore a number of important issues rather intricately. Her characters are complex and credible. On the question of domestic abuse, for instance, Eugene is at once the most courageous, generous, and compassionate citizen–receiving recognition from locals as well as world organizations–and the most unforgiving tyrant. His loved ones–ironically, his victims–are dazzled by his enormous persona, thus perpetuating the cycle.

Adichie courageously raises other poignant questions without ever resorting to preaching. Mandatory celibacy in the Catholic clergy is a logical issue when a young priest becomes the object of romantic affection; the legitimacy of Igbo traditional religion is obvious when observed close to Catholic ritual. She captures the resilience of the citizens faced with political instability and series of military coups; the struggle to maintain intellectual freedom and autonomy in higher education; and most of all, the preponderance of poverty and want in the midst of so much national wealth. Bright intellectuals and educators flee the country to avoid rising autocratic rule, intimidation, and deteriorating social services.

One minor criticism is the absence of a glossary for this novel. Adichie does a good job of placing most Igbo expressions in comprehensible context, but one can imagine the frustration of a reader wanting to find the translation of a term, the meaning of which is, at best, ambiguous: " 'Will the fuel make it, Mom? ' Obiora asked. '*Amarom*, we can try' " (p. 132).

Some of the themes in *Purple Hibiscus* may be too heavy for young children twelve years old and under, depending on their social maturity and reading experience. The novel is highly recommended for adults and older adolescents.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is the winner of the 2004 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Debut Fiction, and is the only first novel shortlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction.

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