

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



The Ghanaian-American writer Yaa Gyasi was born in 1989 in Mampong, a small town in the Ashanti region that functioned as the residence of the Kings of Ashanti in tandem with the city of Kumasi. Her family moved to the US in 1991 after Gyasi’s father received his doctorate from Ohio State University and went on to become a professor of French. The family also lived in Illinois and Tennessee, and Gyasi spent her formative years in Huntsville, Alabama, starting at age ten. As the somewhat shy child of immigrants, she found refuge and security above all in books.

After one of her stories was published in an American newspaper and after reading Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* at age 17, Gyasi decided to become a writer. She studied English at Stanford and received her master’s from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, a creative writing program at the University of Iowa. Prior to that, she worked until 2012 at a startup in San Francisco and began writing her debut novel, which she completed in 2015.

literaturfestival.com

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do Gifty and her mother use prayer differently throughout their lives, and especially after Nana’s death? What variations of prayer do the two women discover in the novel?
2. How does Gifty approach the moral predicament of running her science experiments on mice? What elements of her faith and sense of connection to God’s creations are evident in how she treats the mice?
3. Consider the stigmas surrounding addiction, especially opioid addiction, the rates of which are exploding in today’s society. What other stigmas and expectations was Nana responding to by not asking for help to deal with his addiction? How were others responding to stigmas by not doing more to help?
4. In what ways does Gifty take on the role of caretaker for those in her life? Who, if anyone, takes care of Gifty?
5. Gifty admits that she values both God and sciences as lenses through which to see the world. However, she also says that both “failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning” (198). Why does she have to lead with the caveat that she “would never say [this] in a lecture or a presentation or, God forbid, a paper”? How does the extreme belief in science mimic the faith of the religious zealots she turned away from?

6. What messages do Gifty and Nana hear about the intersection of race and poverty in their youth church meetings? How do the siblings respond to the conflation of the two—and what does the assumption that African countries are impoverished or need saving by missionaries suggest about the colonial power dynamic ingrained in our society?
7. Gifty refers to her relationship with her mother as an “experiment.” Are there similarities in the way Gifty approaches her work and her relationship with her mother? How did the separate events of losing the Chin Chin Man and Nana’s death affect their relationship? Throughout the course of their lives, how does Gifty determine whether or not her and her mother are “going to be ok” (33)?
8. Throughout the book, Gifty struggles to find a sense of community in places where people traditionally find it (school, work, family, church, etc.). What life experiences shape her understanding of community? In what ways does this affect her ability to build relationships with the people in her life (Anna, Raymond, Katherine, Han)?
9. Explore the idea of humans as the only animal “who believed he had transcended his Kingdom” (21). How does this idea influence Gifty’s relationship with science? With religion?
10. Describe the difference between Gifty’s connection to Ghana and her connection to Alabama. In what ways does she feel connected to her Ghanaian ancestry?
11. How does Gifty feel when she overhears congregants gossiping about her family? How does this experience influence her relationship with the church? With her family? With God?
12. Gifty privately considers her work in the lab as holy—“if not holy, then at least sacrosanct (p. 92).” Explain her reasoning, and why she chooses not to discuss this feeling with anyone.

penguinrandomhouse.com

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

Following her spectacularly lauded, bestselling historical and ancestral debut, *Homegoing* (2016), Gyasi’s turns to the contemporary, tracing the dissolution of a Ghanaian immigrant family. By the time Gifty leaves Alabama for Harvard, she’s resolved to “build a new Gifty from scratch” by shedding the debilitating experiences of her young life: her father’s abandonment and return to Ghana, her older brother Nana’s heroin overdose, her mother’s suicidal depression, her faltering faith. In Cambridge, she could be “confident, poised, smart . . . strong and unafraid.” Four years later, she’s untethered again, arriving at Stanford to work toward a neuroscience PhD. For all her groundbreaking research, she’s really just trying to comprehend what happened to beloved Nana via cocaine-and-then-Ensure-addicted lab mice which became willing to risk physical damage for gratification. Six years into the program, Gifty’s mother arrives, once more cripplingly withdrawn. Her silent presence will require some semblance of confrontation and reconciliation with their tragic past. Despite compounding challenges and tragedies, Gyasi never allows Gifty to devolve into paralyzing self-absorption and malaise. With deft agility and undeniable artistry, Gyasi’s

latest is an eloquent examination of resilient survival. -- Terry Hong (Reviewed 7/1/2020) (Booklist, vol 116, number 21, p22)

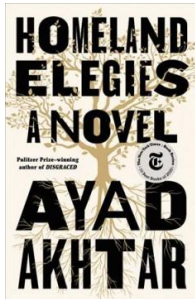
Publisher's Weekly

Gyasi's meticulous, psychologically complex second novel (after *Homegoing*) examines the consequences of a Ghanaian family's immigration to Huntsville, Ala. Gifty, the only member of the family born in the United States, is six years into a doctorate in neuroscience at Stanford, where she is attempting to see if she can alter the neural pathways leading to addiction and depression. Her project is motivated by the fate of her beloved older brother who died from a heroin overdose when she was in high school, and by the condition of her depressed mother, who is staying at Gifty's apartment. Though she now determinedly puts her faith in science, Gifty still feels the pull of her evangelical upbringing, and she struggles to reconcile the two opposing belief systems while juggling her dissertation and care for her mother, plus a growing attraction to her awkward lab mate. The narrative moves smoothly between the present and Gifty's childhood, with episodes such as a summer spent in Ghana with her aunt during a previous phase of her mother's depression rising in the background while Gifty works her way up in her field. Gyasi's constraint renders the emotional impact of the novel all the more powerful: her descriptions of the casual racism endured by the family, particularly at the hands of their nearly all-white church in Alabama, is more chilling for being so matter-of-fact. At once a vivid evocation of the immigrant experience and a sharp delineation of an individual's inner struggle, the novel brilliantly succeeds on both counts. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed 07/06/2020) (Publishers Weekly, vol 267, issue 27, p)

Kirkus Reviews

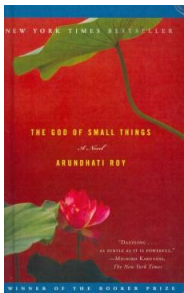
A scientist weighs the big questions that her private trauma bequeaths her. After *Homegoing* (2016) swept through seven generations, Gyasi's wise second novel pivots toward intimacy. It unspools entirely in the voice of watchful, reticent, brilliant Gifty, 28, nearly finished with her doctorate in neuroscience at Stanford's School of Medicine. Her formidable mother, a home health care aide, has plummeted into a second severe depression, and their family pastor has dispatched the limp woman toward Gifty via airplane from Huntsville, Alabama, "folding her up the way you would a jumpsuit." The first episode, when Gifty was 11, arrived after an opiate overdose stole the life of 16-year-old Nana, the firstborn son and more cherished child. Both times the Ghanaian matriarch has crawled mutely into bed, but this time not before asking adult Gifty if she still prays. "No," says Gifty, who turns her ontological questions on lab mice. She gets them addicted to Ensure and then opens their brains surgically, probing the neural pathways of recklessness, looking for clues to creating restraint. Gifty hopes to apply her results to "the species *Homo Sapiens*, the most complex animal, the only animal who believed he had transcended his Kingdom, as one of my high school biology teachers used to say." This work, Gifty insists, has zero to do with her brother's death. In 54 microchapters and precise prose, Gyasi creates an ache of recognition, especially for readers knowledgeable about the wreckage of addiction. Still, she leavens this nonlinear novel with sly humor, much more than in *Homegoing*, as the daughter of a traditional woman weighs what it means to walk in the world not quite a nonbeliever. The author is astute about childhood grandiosity and a pious girl's deep desire to be good; she conveys in brief strokes the notched, nodding hook of heroin's oblivion. In its wake, adult Gifty sits with the limits of both bench science and evangelical Christianity. Nowhere does Gyasi take a cheap shot. Instead, she writes a final chapter that gives readers a taste of hard-won deliverance. In a quietly poignant story, a lonely woman finds a way to be less alone. (Kirkus Reviews, August 15, 2020)

READALIKES



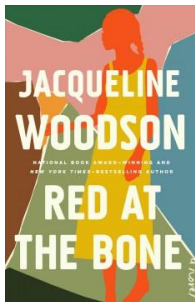
***Homeland Elegies: A Novel* by Ayad Akhtar**

A deeply personal work about identity and belonging in a nation coming apart at the seams, *Homeland Elegies* blends fact and fiction to tell an epic story of longing and dispossession in the world that 9/11 made. Part family drama, part social essay, part picaresque novel, at its heart it is the story of a father, a son, and the country they both call home.



***The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy**

In 1969, in Kerala, India, Rahel and her twin brother, Estha, struggle to forge a childhood for themselves amid the destruction of their family life, as they discover that the entire world can be transformed in a single moment.



***Red at the Bone* by Jacqueline Woodson**

As Melody celebrates a coming of age ceremony at her grandparents' house in 2001 Brooklyn, her family remembers 1985, when Melody's own mother prepared for a similar party that never took place in this novel about different social classes.