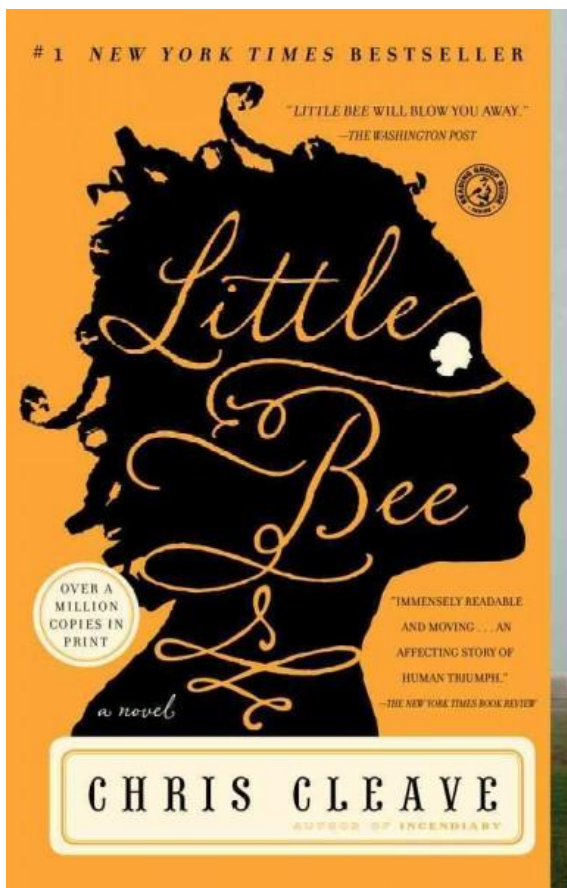


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1385715>

About the Book



Little Bee, a young Nigerian refugee, has just been released from the British immigration detention center where she has been held under horrific conditions for the past two years, after narrowly escaping a traumatic fate in her homeland of Nigeria. Alone in a foreign country, without a family member, friend, or pound to call her own, she seeks out the only English person she knows. Sarah is a posh young mother and magazine editor with whom Little Bee shares a dark and tumultuous past.

They first met on a beach in Nigeria, where Sarah was vacationing with her husband, Andrew, in an effort to save their marriage after an affair, and their brief encounter has haunted each woman for two years. Now together, they face a disturbing past and an uncertain future with the help of Sarah's four-year-old son, Charlie, who refuses to take off his Batman costume. A sense of humor and an unflinching moral compass allow each woman, and the reader, to believe that even in the face of unspeakable odds, humanity can prevail.

About the Author Source: <http://www.chriscleave.com/about-2/>



Chris Cleave was born in 1973. He lives in London with his wife and three children.

His debut novel *Incendiary* won a 2006 Somerset Maugham Award, was shortlisted for the 2006 Commonwealth Writers Prize, won the United States Book-of-the-Month Club's First Fiction award 2005 and won the Prix Spécial du Jury at the French Prix des Lecteurs 2007.

His second novel is titled *Little Bee* in Canada and the US, where it is a New York Times #1 bestseller. It is titled *The Other Hand* in the UK, where it is a Sunday Times bestseller. It was shortlisted for the Costa Book Awards.

Chris Cleave has been a barman, a long-distance sailor and teacher of marine navigation, an internet pioneer and a journalist.

Awards

Little Bee was shortlisted for the Costa Book Awards (<http://www.costabookawards.com/>).

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

A violent incident on a Nigerian beach has tragic echoes in posh London in Cleave's beautifully staged if haphazardly plotted debut novel. British couple Andrew O'Rourke and his wife, Sarah, are on vacation when they come across two sisters, Little Bee and Nkiruka, on the run from the killers who have massacred everyone else in their village—in the pay, it turns out, of an oil company seeking the land. Soon the killers arrive and propose a not-quite-credible deal: they will trade the girls if Andrew and Sarah each cut off a finger. Andrew can't do it, but Sarah does, and the killers drag the girls away. So two years later, when Little Bee shows up at Sarah's house on the day of the funeral for Andrew, who has killed himself, it seems almost miraculous. Later, however, it's revealed that Little Bee has been hiding around the O'Rourke place, and that Andrew seeing her set off his

suicide. Sarah nevertheless determines to help Little Bee get refugee status. Cleave has a sharp cinematic eye, but the plot is undermined by weak motivations and coincidences.

Library Journal * Starred Review *

Book clubs in search of the next *Kite Runner* need look no further than this astonishing, flawless novel about what happens when ordinary, mundane Western lives are thrown into stark contrast against the terrifying realities of war-torn Africa. Their marriage in crisis, Andrew and Sarah O'Rourke impulsively accept a junket to a Nigerian beach resort as a last-ditch attempt to reconcile. When machete-wielding soldiers appear out of the jungle and force them to determine the fate of two African girls, everyone's lives are irrevocably shattered. Two years later in a London suburb, one of the girls, now a refugee, reconnects with Sarah. Together they face wrenching tests of a friendship forged under extreme duress. Best-selling author Cleave (*Incendiary*) effortlessly moves between alternating viewpoints with lucid, poignant prose and the occasional lighter note. A tension-filled dramatic ending and plenty of moral dilemmas add up to a satisfying, emotional read. Highly recommended for all libraries and book clubs.

Kirkus Reviews

Cleave follows up his outstanding debut (*Incendiary*, 2005) with a psychologically charged story of grief, globalization and an unlikely friendship. The story opens in a refugee detention center outside of London. As the Nigerian narrator—who got her nickname "Little Bee" as a child—prepares to leave the center, she thinks of her homeland and recalls a horrific memory. "In the immigration detention center, they told us we must be disciplined," she says. "This is the discipline I learned: whenever I go into a new place, I work out how I would kill myself there. In case the men come suddenly, I make sure I am ready." After Little Bee's release, the first-person narration switches to Sarah, a magazine editor in London struggling to come to terms with her husband Andrew's recent suicide, as well as the stubborn behavior of her four-year-old son, Charlie, who refuses to take off his Batman costume. While negotiating her family troubles, Sarah reflects on "the long summer when Little Bee came to live with us." Cleave alternates the viewpoints of the two women, patiently revealing the connection between them. A few years prior, Sarah and Andrew took a vacation to the Nigerian coast, not realizing the full extent to which the oil craze had torn the country apart. One night they stumble upon Little Bee and her sister, who are fleeing a group of rapacious soldiers prowling the beach. The frightening confrontation proves life-changing for everyone

involved, though in ways they couldn't have imagined. A few years later Sarah and Little Bee come together again in the suburbs of London, and their friendship—in addition to that between Little Bee and Charlie—provides some salvation for each woman. Though less piercing and urgent than his debut, Cleave's narrative pulses with portentous, nearly spectral energy, and the author maintains a well-modulated balance between the two narrators. A solid sophomore effort, and hopefully a sign of even better things to come.

Literary Criticism

Exit Wounds

Some 50 years ago, the region near Nigeria's Atlantic coast provided the setting for Chinua Achebe's haunting novel of a world torn asunder by the vicissitudes of Anglo-imperial expansion. To capture the tragedy of colonialism in that account, "*Things Fall Apart*," Achebe looked to Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" for inspiration: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

The drowning of innocence and the anarchic consequences of the global reach are hardly confined to Achebe's Nigeria of yesteryear or to the colonial underbelly of Britain's "civilizing" mission. The story of globalization is a centuries-old account of historical interconnections shaped by exploitation, despair and, at times, moral conscience and optimism. Chris Cleave, a columnist for *The Guardian*, puts a modern-day spin on Achebe's concerns with his immensely readable and moving second novel.

While the pretext of "*Little Bee*" initially seems contrived -- two strangers, a British woman and a Nigerian girl, meet on a lonely African beach and become inextricably bound through the horror imprinted on their encounter -- its impact is hardly shallow. Rather than focusing on postcolonial guilt or African angst, Cleave uses his emotionally charged narrative to challenge his readers' conceptions of civility, of ethical choice.

Sarah O'Rourke might appear to be an insipid character, with her career at a British magazine, her Batman-costumed young son, her uninspiring lover and her gentrified Surrey lifestyle. When juxtaposed with the Nigerian refugee called Little Bee -- whom we first meet behind the razor wire of a

British immigration center -- Sarah is unsympathetic, even tiresome. But that impression changes partway through the novel when a flashback to Africa reveals her fortitude. There, it is Sarah, rather than her husband, Andrew, who gallantly comes to Little Bee's rescue. Sarah must also pick up the pieces after Andrew's descent from third-world cowardice into first-world madness.

Yet the character and voice of Little Bee reveal Cleave at his finest. As she navigates the dehumanizing indifference of immigration detention with her self-taught Queen's English, this young refugee tugs at the reader's conscience. For two years, she has avoided the "ravenous eyes" of the camp's men with her purposefully mismatched charity-box clothes, unwashed skin and bound breasts. Eventually, she turns up, illegally, at the O'Rourkes' home in Kingston-upon-Thames.

In the weeks that follow, the lives of Little Bee and Sarah will be woven into a web in which disparate worlds can be connected in the unlikeliest fashion -- through the music of U2 and the spontaneity of reality television. London, with its dizzying abundance and multiculturalism, looks like a parallel universe when compared with the impoverished Nigerian village where Little Bee grew up. Surely the locals would chide, "Little miss been-to is making up her tales again," were she ever to return to what remains of her birthplace. Yet it's this same village that instilled in her the skills and values needed to help her navigate toward her own scarred survival.

Like Little Bee, Sarah is a survivor. But the lessons of the past are not enough to steer either woman to safety. Instead, in a world full of turpitude and injustice, it is their bold, impulsive choices that challenge the inevitability of despair, transforming a political novel into an affecting story of human triumph.

Source: Elkins, Caroline. "Exit Wounds." The New York Times Book Review 17 May 2009: 15(L). Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions *Source:* <http://www.chriscleave.com/little-bee/reading-group-guide/>

1. "Sad words are just another beauty. A sad story means, this storyteller is alive" (p. 9). For Little Bee and other asylum seekers, the story of their life thus far is often all they have. What happens to the characters that carry their stories with them, both physically and mentally? What happens when

we try to forget our past? How much control over their own stories do the characters in the book seem to have?

2. Little Bee tells the reader, “We must see all scars as beauty. Okay? This will be our secret. Because take it from me, a scar does not form on the dying. A scar means, I survived” (p. 9). Which characters in the story are left with physical scars? Emotional scars? Do they embrace them as beautiful? Do you have any scars you’ve come to embrace? Did you feel more connected to Little Bee as a narrator after this pact?

3. Little Bee strives to learn the Queen’s English in order to survive in the detention center. How does her grasp of the language compare with Charlie’s? How does the way each of these two characters handle the English language help to characterize them?

4. How did it affect your reading experience to have two narrators? Did you trust one woman more than the other? Did you prefer the voice of one above the other?

5. Little Bee credits a small bottle of nail polish for “saving her life” while she was in the detention center (p. 7). Is there any object or act that helps you feel alive and beautiful, even when everything else seems to be falling apart?

6. Of the English language Little Bee says, “Every word can defend itself. Just when you go to grab it, it can split into two separate meanings so the understanding closes on empty air” (p. 12). What do you think she means by this? Can you think of any examples of English words that defend themselves? Why is language so important to Little Bee?

7. Little Bee says of horror films, “Horror in your country is something you take a dose of to remind yourself that you are not suffering from it” (p. 45). Do you agree? Was reading this novel in any way a dose of horror for you? How did it help you reflect on the presence or lack of horror in your own life?

8. Little Bee figures out the best way to kill herself in any given situation, just in case “the men come suddenly.” How do these plans help Little Bee reclaim some power? Were you disturbed by this, or were you able to find the humor in some of the scenarios she imagines?

9. What does Udo changing her name to Little Bee symbolize for you? How does her new name offer her protection? Do you think the name suits her?

10. "To have an affair, I began to realize, was a relatively minor transgression. But to really escape from Andrew, to really become myself, I had to go the whole way and fall in love" (p. 161-162). Do you agree with Sarah that an affair is a minor transgression? How did falling in love with someone else help Sarah become herself? What role did Andrew play in perpetuating Sarah's extramarital affair?

11. When Little Bee finds that Andrew has hanged himself she thinks, "Of course I must save him, whatever it costs me, because he is a human being." And then she thinks, "Of course I must save myself, because I am a human being too" (p. 194). How do the characters in the story decide when to put themselves first and when to offer charity? Is one human life ever more valuable than another? What if one of the lives in question is your own?

Multimedia

Chris Cleave on Little Bee: Voice (Video Clip)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnFX81fHCXA>

Chris Cleave discusses how he shaped the voice of Little Bee, a Nigerian refugee who comes to Great Britain seeking political asylum, in his new novel, *LITTLE BEE*.

Further Reading

Incendiary by Chris Cleave

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1249360>

(Call number: Fiction Cleave)

A distraught woman writes a letter to Osama bin Laden after her four-year-old son and her husband are killed in a massive suicide bomb attack at a soccer match in London. In an emotionally raw voice alive with grief, compassion, and startling humor, she tries to convince Osama to abandon his terror campaign by revealing to him the desperate sadness--"I am a woman built on the wreckage of myself"--and the broken heart of a working-class life blown apart. But the bombing is only the beginning.

The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe by Nwando Achebe

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1378932>

(Call number:

Ugbabe was exiled from Igboland, became a prostitute, traveled widely, and learned to speak many languages. She became a close companion of Nigerian Igala kings and the British officers who supported her claim to the office of headman, warrant chief, and later, king. In this unique biography, Achebe traces the roots of Ugbabe's rise to fame and fortune.

You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir by Wole Soyinke

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1266147>

(Call number:

In the tough, humane, and lyrical language that has typified his plays and novels, Soyinka captures the indomitable spirit of Nigeria itself by bringing to life the friends and family who bolstered and inspired him, and by describing the pioneering theater works that defied censure and tradition. Soyinka not only recounts his exile and the terrible reign of General Sani Abacha, but shares vivid memories and playful anecdotes-including his improbable friendship with a prominent Nigerian businessman and the time he smuggled a frozen wildcat into America so that his students could experience a proper Nigerian barbecue. More than a major figure in the world of literature, Wole Soyinka is a courageous voice for human rights, democracy, and freedom.

Author's official website

<http://www.chriscleave.com/>

News, information, and resources about the author.

Read-Alikes *Source: Books & Authors*

The Vagrants by Yiyun Li

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1325686>

(Call number: Fiction Li)

The Vagrants revolves around the execution of Communist Gu Shan after the Cultural Revolution in Muddy River, China. During the revolution, the state of Muddy River's society dissolved into complete chaos. Yiyun Li's novel tells the story of the people involved in the revolution who were affected by former Red Guard leader Gu Shan. After Gu's body is brutalized and buried, relationships and attitudes are forever changed. The cast of characters includes Gu Shan's devastated family, several outcast acquaintances, and the victims of the commander's cruelty. Coincidence and chance bring many of individuals together; some find strength and hope in Gu Shan's death, while others are destroyed.

Jesus Boy by Preston L. Allen

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1362630>

(Call number: Fiction Allen)

Preston L. Allen's *Jesus Boy* chronicles the shocking love story that blossoms between a devoutly Christian teenager and a 42-year-old widow. Against the backdrop of an African American town in 1970s Florida, the unusual romance between Elwyn Parker and Sister Morrisohn plays out. Their relationship scandalizes the community, but even as tongues are set to wagging, Elwyn and Sister Morrisohn establish a loving, sensual, and sometimes volatile union. They have no idea, however, how their affair will illuminate the darkest corners of their faith and expose some harsh realities to light for the very first time.

Book Club To Go! *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1325639>

(Call number: Fiction Stockett)

The 1960s civil rights movement serves as the backdrop for *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, a historical novel about African American women in Jackson, Mississippi. After returning from college during the summer of 1962, aspiring writer Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan begins collecting stories from the women she knows who work for the prominent white women in town. The more she researches and talks to these women, the more cruelty, prejudices, and lies she uncovers. In the midst of everything negative, however, Eugenia is able to give a voice to these women, and she tells their stories of courage, tolerance, and overcoming oppressive situations. Eugenia is able to interview and learn about 17 different women including Aibileen and her best friend Minny. These encounters help her to find her own voice as a writer and to realize what she wants to do with her career.

The Lovers by Vendela Vida

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1366421>

(Call number: Fiction Vida)

In *The Lovers*, award-winning author Vendela Vida tells the story of aging widow Yvonne, who returns to the Turkish seaside village where she and her husband honeymooned. Yvonne's plans to wrap herself in pleasant memories are soon derailed when she becomes wracked with grief over the loss of her husband. But an unexpected friendship with local village boy Ahmet slowly transforms the distraught widow, bringing her back to life in a way she never anticipated.

Book Club To Go! *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1321803>

(Call number: Fiction Verghese)

Cutting for Stone tells the story of a love affair between a young nun and a handsome doctor. Sister Mary Joseph Praise's life is changed forever when she meets a young British doctor on a ship from Kerala to Yemen. When Thomas Stone falls ill, Mary saves his life. Thomas is grateful and impressed by the young nun's nursing skills. He offers her a position at the hospital he is working at in Ethiopia. She turns him down, but a tragic event in Yemen sends her running to the hospital for help. The two become professional partners and secret lovers. Mary becomes pregnant, but keeps it a secret from the doctor until he is called in to save her during childbirth. When Mary loses her life, Thomas gives his twin sons up for adoption. Years later, one of the twins, Marion, searches for the truth about his identity.

Asta in the Wings by Jan Elizabeth Watson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1327521>

(Call number: Fiction Watson)

In *Asta in the Wings* by Jan Elizabeth Watson, Asta Hewitt, 7, and her 9-year-old brother, Orion, live in isolation with their mentally ill mother in Bond Brook, Maine. Raised on their mother's stories of the horrors lurking beyond their door, Asta and Orion create their own imaginative world within the safety of their home. Their bizarre reality is shattered when their mother suddenly goes missing and the siblings have no choice but to step outside. Shocked by the truth about the real world, Asta struggles to adjust. Without her mother, and soon separated from Orion, Asta can't help but realize the advantages of life within the walls of her family home. First novel.

Beatrice and Virgil by Yann Martel

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1356423>

(Call number: Fiction Martel)

Award-winning author Yann Martel tackles the subjects of creativity, despair, and the Holocaust in *Beatrice and Virgil*. After Henry's first book makes him a star in the literary world, he has a hard time repeating that success when his sophomore book is rejected by his editors. Henry packs up, takes his wife and unpublished book--about writers' perspectives on the Holocaust--and moves to another city. But when a strange letter from an aging taxidermist arrives in the mail, he has no idea how much his life is going to change--or how dangerously bizarre it's going to get.

Say You're One of Them by Uwem Akpan

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1312151>

(Call number: Fiction Akpan)

A collection of long fiction, Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* explores the terrible effects of war on childhood. With stories set in present-day Kenya, Rwanda, Nigeria, Benin, and Ethiopia, Akpan's collection examines the lingering effects that violence has on the life of a child. The first story, "An Ex-mas Feast," describes the struggles of a family living in the slums outside of Nairobi. Told from the point of view of 8-year-old Jigana, the family is waiting on twelve-year-old Maisha, who works as a prostitute, to arrive with the day's earnings so the family can hold a holiday celebration. Other stories describe drug use, hunger, desperate poverty, religious tensions, and human trafficking. The overwhelming influence of Western ideas and their effect on African culture are at the forefront of this collection.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

