

Lagos Noir.

Chris Abani (ed.).

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The cover image of *Lagos Noir* (2018) depicts a bustling, dusty street scene in sepia tones. From a slightly elevated vantage point, as if looking through a window, the reader gazes upon countless street vendors whose little umbrellas dot the sidewalk and partially deck a river of pedestrians flowing by underneath. There is a defunct bulldozer stranded in the middle of it. A string of cars and buses crawls along to the right. (Lagos's traffic jams are, by now, world-famous.) One is left to imagine the many clashing sounds and smells. Foregrounded in the middle of the picture stands a solitary man, carrying his things in a plastic shopping bag, besides an empty minibus taxi. He looks forlorn, staring blankly in your direction, beckoning you.

Lagos Noir is a collection of thirteen short stories by various authors which takes the reader on an unflinching, at times unsettling, exploration of “this beautiful, chaotic, glorious, resplendent, mess of a city,” (15) as editor Chris Abani describes Lagos in his introduction. While firmly rooted in its specific locale, the stories in *Lagos Noir* have a universal and eerily familiar ring to them, even for one, such as myself, who has never been to Nigeria.

As we embark on this ‘tour’, the reader might expect to stumble upon thirteen corpses along the way, because preceding the table of contents is a map of the Greater Lagos area with little icons of dead bodies strewn across it. The bodies indicate where each of the stories takes place. But not all the crimes committed in these pages amount to murder. ‘Crime’, as we shall see, comes in many shades of noir.

How are we to understand the titular phrase, “Lagos Noir”, anyway? ‘Noir fiction’ is a term derived from Marcel Duhamel’s *série noire* books which Gallimard began publishing in France at the end of the Second World War and is often associated with violent crime. But Philip Simpson (189) explains that noir fiction is not necessarily defined by its portrayal of violence,

rather, noir is stamped by its prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure, urban paranoia, the individual's disconnection from society, and cynicism:

Noir's universe is bleak, divested of meaning. It addresses social issues, such as class inequities and the motivations behind adultery, in an explicitly uncompromising fashion typically not found in mainstream fiction. Flawed human beings in these stories must somehow make moral decisions with no transcendent foundation of morality on which to base them. The consequences of those decisions are frequently fatal and always tragic to someone.

The four stories comprising Part 1 ("Cops & Robbers") plunge the reader into exactly such a world devoid of any transcendent moral foundation.

There is the story of an honest cop who is cornered by a system of perpetual bribery and of turning blind eyes ("What They Did That Night"). A motorbike driver, trying to scrounge his way out of poverty, tragically runs into the greedy arm of the law ("Heaven's Gate"). A proud, larger-than-life character is compelled to flee the country with fantastical results ("Showlogo"). A neat-freak winds up in a rat-infested apartment with a sadistic landlady ("Just Ignore and Try to Endure"). The latter is perhaps one of my favourites in the collection, precisely because it is such an effective and entirely non-violent psychological thriller.

Part 1 is thus reminiscent of the American hard-boiled detective fiction of the 1930s because it is similarly shot through with the kind of widespread corruption and moral degradation brought about by rapid urbanisation and modernity. In this case, there is also the spectre of colonialism and vast socio-economic disparities that seems to hang over Lagos like smog.

The five stories in Part 2 ("In a Family Way") are loosely tied together by the thread of domestic and familial crime, which includes such sins as spousal and/or parental abuse, adultery, envy and lust.

"Eden" by Uche Okonkwo, for instance, is a tale of two siblings in early adolescence who come across their father's secret stash of pornography. They cannot resist its lurid spell and so lose their childlike innocence irrevocably. But the fact that they are jointly culpable leads to an awkward sense of intimacy between them with subtle hints of incest. It is shocking, and quite unforgettable.

I was particularly impressed by the hard-hitting social commentary in some of the stories. Oppressive patriarchal attitudes are coldly undercut in Adebola Rayo's feminist revenge fantasy ("What Are You Going to Do?"), while Onyinye Ihezukwu's "For Baby, For

Three" might be read as a critique of the traditional belief systems that facilitate the exploitation of the faithful: A desperate mother will do almost anything to save her baby, but she might herself fall victim to fraudsters posing as men of God.

The third and final part of the book ("Arrivals & Departures") does not seem to have an overarching theme, but I would argue that these last four stories are all darkly comical.

A man laughs deliriously upon witnessing a bus robbery and a woman being molested. Why? Because he, too, was once molested and so succumbs to a kind of insane *schadenfreude* ("Choir Boy"). A man is killed for his diamond-encrusted walking stick, ostensibly given to him by a warlord. But who would kill for a walking stick, and are the diamonds even real? We never find out, and we are left to ponder the absurdity of it all ("The Walking Stick"). A naive British teacher falls for one of the internet phishing scams we have all heard of, but things take an unexpected turn in "Uncle Sam". And finally, a pet chimpanzee murders his owner in "Killer Ape" but things are not as they seem. In the end, justice becomes a slippery notion, and we as the readers are left feeling ambivalent. (Incidentally, "Killer Ape" by Chris Abani contains two overt intertextual references to canonical crime fiction texts i.e. Sherlock Holmes, and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders on the Rue Morgue".)

I would be remiss if I did not mention a couple of the interesting narrative strategies employed in *Lagos Noir*. In "Joy" by Wale Lawal, for instance, the story is told from the unusual second-person perspective, thus placing "you" in the uncanny position of the narrator/victim: It is "your" life that is being coveted, "your" husband that is being seduced, and "your" child that is being snatched. Pemi Aguda's "Choir Boy", on the other hand, is written in the form of a dramatic monologue and the reader becomes a fellow passenger on the bus with the narrator.

A review such as this might create the impression that *Lagos Noir* is a terribly depressing read, since it shows us a world that is bleak and divested of meaning, one that is populated by fallible, flawed characters. On the contrary. The stories in this collection are both thrilling and deeply human, at times surprising and bizarre, and utterly haunting; not to mention well-written and flawlessly edited. It is noir at its best.

Work Cited

Simpson, Philip. "Noir and the Psycho Thriller." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Charles J. Rzepka & Lee Horsley. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. pp. 187–97.

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