



The Virgin of Flames

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From the author of the award-winning *GraceLand* comes a searing, dazzlingly written novel of a tarnished City of Angels Praised as “singular” (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*) and “extraordinary” (*The New York Times Book Review*), *GraceLand* stunned critics and instantly established Chris Abani as an exciting new voice in fiction. In his second novel, set against the uncompromising landscape of East L.A., Abani follows a struggling artist named Black, whose life and friendships reveal a world far removed from the mainstream. Through Black’s journey of self- discovery, Abani raises essential questions about poverty, religion, and ethnicity in America today. *The Virgin of Flames*, a marvelous and gritty novel filled with indelible images and unforgettable characters, confirms Chris Abani as an immensely talented writer.

The Virgin of Flames Details

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From Reader Review *The Virgin of Flames* for online ebook

Mariana says

This book is astoundingly beautiful and devastating. It is dark and funny and really gets at the confusion of cities, gender, masculinity, and child hood. It is also irreverent and experimental.

Rashaan says

A violent and visceral take on the abstract experience of being multi-racial in the United States. Abani physicalizes what can often be a very nebulous and ephemeral existence, and stabs onto the page the confusion, the shape-shifting, and liminal consciousness of mixed race identities. Set in the City of Angels, he brilliantly captures what often defies language.

Ann Keren-zvi says

The characters in the book are fable like and the story takes place in East LA. The beautiful, gritty prose elegantly capture an essence of a city known as the City of Angels. I will continue to read passages from this book because of the writing. Mr Abani's chapters click off like photographs, and like a photograph can privately and intimately draw you into that world.

Jamila says

This book surprised me. It was heartbreaking and sad; yet, there were spots of humor and joy. Abani wrote with amazing poetry. His descriptions of Los Angeles were specific and colorful. His characters were honest and triumphant, even as they were shameful and violent.

Peter says

garbage

Trish says

This novel by Chris Abani is the literary equivalent of a Diane Arbus photograph—unsettling, terrible, grotesque, yet artistic. In the strange underbelly of the City of Angels Abani finds a kind of hope that describes something in human nature. His dreams, his attempts to “attend his ghosts,” are difficult to look at, but of all the people we might choose to illuminate the depths of human natures, Abani is among the most courageous and compassionate.

Ambiguous sexuality and race, death and desire, religiosity and uncertain faith are themes Abani returns to again and again in his writing. His main character, Black, is conflicted about his desires, and his confusion leads him to seek out those who have made unconventional choices, in hopes they will illuminate the path.

Black is an artist, a painter, but not for money. He paints murals on the sides of buildings, a type of large-scale graffiti requiring long hours hanging from pulleys and ropes. One of the more significant artworks Black had created is a huge mural of graffiti copied from the walls of men's washrooms around the country. Entitled "American Gothic—The Remix," the sexist, racist, religionist trash etched into bathroom stalls convey a particular wasteland of the psyche. Those phrases are interspersed with lines from renowned poets, shocking in their clarity and beauty when paired with filth.

In the City of Angels, Black is plagued by the Archangel Gabriel, who sometimes appears as a huge human figure, or otherwise as a pigeon. The appearance of the Archangel Gabriel and the Christian iconography and ideography shouldn't surprise us: Abani was educated in a seminary in his youth, and thought he might want to be a priest. However, the Christian themes are dislocating in the context of a searching sexuality and Black's painting of a fifty-foot veiled Muslim Virgin [Mary] on a building near a train tracks. Abani is reminding us that Islamic texts have recorded the Angel Gabriel appearing to prophets conveying news of the Annunciation or the incarnation of Christ, just as in early Jewish and Christian texts, showing commonalities these religions once enjoyed.

Many comments, observations, and philosophies expounded by the characters in this novel are in the record of Abani's interviews. His background as a half-white Nigerian who initially moved to London and then to the United States has made him uniquely able to describe the experience of Black, as "going through several identities, taking on different ethnic and national affiliations as though they were seasonal changes in wardrobe, and discarding them just as easily." Black's friend, the "butcher-boy" from Rwanda called Bomboy, also seeks new identities, new documents, new names—furtively, on street corners out of sight of the police, in the no-man's-land of east L.A., where the cops and emergency services rarely respond to calls for help.

When Black discovers that men can "become" women with some genital fiddling, his sexual liberation is complete. Whiteface and a blond wig allow him to escape his race. In a stolen wedding dress drenched in blood and turpentine, Black accidentally becomes an emblem—a horrible and disgraceful emblem—of desire, of a perverted hope. The finale of the book is classic L.A.: (view spoiler)

Amanda Birdwell says

I feel bad. I certainly do not have the street cred to *not* love this book by a gay, politically oppressed Nigerian. And I have to say that at least I was able to finish this one -- unlike *Graceland*, which I have checked out and returned about a million times. I just... I just don't want to hear that much about penises.

I get that it is a valid topic to write about. I even imagine that, five years ago, I could have written a fabulously self-indulgent paper on Black and his penis and his experience of being raped, having sex with a transgendered person, getting painful erections and half-erections and no erections. But it's like -- what is the story here? What happens between the beginning and end of this book? He gets raped, but that's treated as incidental. He hooks up with Sweet Girl, but then he beats her up. His friend dies, but I don't even really recall the guy's name.

There are these moments; there is this mood. I thought about the book a lot while I was reading it. Truthfully, I think he has some of the same limitations that I did, as a writer -- he's so caught up in the inexpressible aspects of experience that he's lost interest in a conventional narrative. He doesn't think he has to tell a story, or he thinks he is telling a story, but I can't follow it, as a reader.

But the dogs, though. There is this singular image of these dogs, and it makes me think I missed the entire book. Because there are moments in *Virgin* that are transcendent. There's just so much shifting-through that has to happen, first. So I finish the book and I'm just thinking about that one moment, with these dying dogs, and of Black's penis.

Because, really, dude. Every page.

Chad says

chilling, hilarious and tragic. all the more incredible after seeing C. Abani read last Friday night in the District of Columbia. weaves together gender, race, catholicism, child abuse, black outs, and the Blackmobile (a yellow VW bus) into some stellar depictions of Los Angeles.

Tyler Stoffel says

Black, a 36-year-old (the age of Christ) half-Nigerian half-Salvadorean mural artist spends his time being chased around East LA by the archangel Gabriel while he obsesses over a transexual stripper and his own desire to dress in women's clothes, as he paints a fifty-foot tall mural of the Virgin of Fatima. Sounds crazy, but it is told so well that I believe it. I loved the dirty city imagery and the casual drug use portrayed.

Very good characters, Black, Ziggy and Bomboy are all interesting, and somewhat dark. Abani develops them just slowly enough to give the reader familiarity, while keeping them mysterious. The motivations of the characters are believable, even at the very end when Black deviates from his calm, passive demeanor into a woman(ish)-beating man. This is also a good example of a writer developing the setting as character, both East LA and the LA river are presented more as characters with personalities than as places.

This story was handled very well by Abani. He overlays the absurdity of LA and the American version of celebrity onto the down and dirty lives of a trio of marginalized characters, two of which are very successful, one in a third-world entrepreneurial way, the other in an only-in-LA way. The poetic prose is worth reading, I would have enjoyed just the city descriptions even if there was no plot.

Megan says

You should read this book if you enjoy hearing other people bitch and moan about how hard their lives are in a painful fashion that lacks wit and clever design.

jo says

i am blown away by this fantastic book. i tried to read it a few years ago but i wasn't in the right space and i found it too difficult. some of it is prose poetry. many passages are stunning. i am tempted to copy the whole rosary gloss here but it's long. read it. find it and read it. amazing stuff.

black is a grown man who's spiraling downward while gripped by conflicting powerful forces, among them an uncontrollable creative drive (he paints murals), torturous childhood memories, apparitions of supernatural creatures in the catholic tradition (mostly the archangel gabriel, but also the virgin), an obsession with a female transexual stripper, truckloads of self-loathing, and desperate suicidality.

it's a lot to handle in one slim novel but abani does it so gorgeously, so compellingly, the book is almost tactile. abani and black love los angeles as much as i do and the depictions of the city, which dominate the book, are stunning. quite apart from the obvious connection between the city of the angels and black's apparitions, black and los angeles are metaphors for each other, faces of the same phenomenon, which is: rootlessness, exploitation, trauma. they are both a gash on the human/civilization continuum. there is a passage toward the end in which iggy, black's friend and a veritable human guardian angel, a saving grace, waxes prophetic about los angeles. whatever. if you have lived in the city, you know that los angeles is a cry of pain and a cry of beauty.

in a heart-rending scene black sits by the river (always by the river, this man-made creation that is also the hidden gold thread of this strange city) with a group of dying dogs. owners use a particular bridge to throw over their no-longer-wanted dogs. black spends the night with the dying and dead dogs. he strokes them and ministers to them. one of the dog dies with its bloodied head in black's lap.

but black is not as good with humans. humans terrify him. the narrative of his childhood trauma is powerful. memories keep intruding. horrendous abuse emerges. black is the product of an nigerian father dead in vietnam and a latina mother crazed by loss and poverty.

iggy, who represents the voice of sanity, is not all that compassionate toward black's childhood trauma. i don't think i like that. you can't just get over trauma like that. and god knows, black tries. he tries through his impermanent art, he tries by going to very dark places in hope of discovery. he keeps not understanding, not knowing. and when he eventually does understand, well, he can't take it.

i think i know the los angeles described in this book because i had a wonderful guide into it, a friend who, fittingly and tragically, died when she was 39 (this book is for you, f.), and because i sought it out. it's dangerous but it's also beautiful. it's ruthless. when i lived there, simon and i kept saying, this is the end of the frontier, you go any farther you're in the ocean. whatever those who pursued the frontier were seeking, they didn't find it in los angeles. los angeles is a mess. in a way, it's a tremendous failure. in another, it wears the sores of humanity on its sleeve. if you want to love humanity at its most abject, los angeles is as good a place as any.

gender and sexuality are dealt with beautifully in this strange poetic novel. black's desire, by which he is repelled to the point of madness, is presented as possibly connected with childhood abuse. of course there is no evidence at all that sexuality in the sense of sexual orientation is connected with childhood trauma, but it's also difficult to deny that desire is formed through all sorts of strange channels, and that one is left to live with it, however distorted and aberrant one may perceive it to be, for the duration.* so in a way this is also an investigation into the origins of desire -- as sexual desire, as fantasies, as artistic inspiration, as life-giving

force.

i cannot say i don't understand people who wrote such negative reviews of this book. it's not an easy book to read. the language in itself is a bit challenging, but what's most challenging is the raw collision of so many forces -- the evil we do each other, the pain that ensues, the desire in which this pain gets transformed. tough stuff. gorgeous stuff.

* *no* desire is distorted, aberrant, bad, evil, yucky, or icky. learn to love your desires. if you can't, find someone who'll help you.

Nicole Gervasio says

This is a novel which, lamentably, is too often mistaken for a representation of "real life" (whatever *that* is) for queer and trans people of color (and/or sex workers) in Los Angeles. Abani's said it himself before (look up his TED Talks online-- they're great)-- that a gendered or raced person is inevitably read for his identity rather than his imagination.

If you're going to read this novel, the worst thing you could do is put on the anthropologist's khaki hat, walk in with your legal pad, and wait to be "informed" about queer urban subculture. You're also doomed if, as many of these reviews do, you write off *Black* as a whining, too-egregiously-symbolically-named, financially insolvent artist merely playing out the plight-of-the-impooverished-painter in a modern-day setting. And, likewise, if you enter the novel as a queer, trans person, or sex worker braced to bristle about yet another violent mis-representation of "your" community.

Get these points straight: this novel is *not* speaking for anybody. It is not missionizing in the name of the radical left. It is not exploiting sex workers. It is telling a story that is *meant* to make you feel uncomfortable, angry, turned on, ashamed, and/or disoriented *all in the name of learning more about resilience from the stories of people who are affected in such miserable ways*.

After all, isn't Sweet Girl the heroine who successfully defends herself in the end? Isn't Black the benighted visionary who never quite succeeds and pointedly fails, quite literally, in having a future? And isn't that failure all the result of his own phobia, prejudice, shame, self-abhorrence, etc.? Aren't those ugly things that everyone has felt at some point in time?

You've got to approach this one literarily: think of sex work as a hyperbolic metaphor, not a political choice or unfair occupation. Think of transgenderism as a source of crisis and conflict, not only an identity per se. Think of Black as a protagonist who never gets to play the hero-- and consider *why* there might be a reason for that, instead of just writing off the novel as "another boring story about a poor, black queer who sucks at life."

David Sasaki says

There are two ways for me to think about *The Virgin of Flames*. A.) it is a typical (and overdone) coming of

age novel from a liberal UC professor focused on gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Or, B.) it's a probing study of East and Downtown LA from a global citizen who is at once native and guest of Lagos, London, and Los Angeles. Obviously, I prefer sticking with B. For anyone who has waited hours in LA's Union Station or who has bought a piñata on Olympic, Abani's descriptions ring truer and clearer than our own memories. It's obvious that he walked almost every block of East LA while writing it. I know that behind this novel there is a real Ugly Store, a real Black, and a real Sweet Girl. They are who make Los Angeles such a special place.

Wyatt says

Fans of Middlesex will surely like *The Virgin of Flames*. The synopsis (a street artist who's obsessed with a transexual) had me unsure that it would be my kind of book, despite having loved Abani's last book, *Graceland*. Abani picks up where he left off with the strange eroticism that his last character got out of putting on makeup as an Elvis impersonator, and takes it to the next level...hell, he takes it ten levels beyond that, into a gritty, beautiful, story of a muralist in L.A. which is also everyone's story, in that it's partially about the guilt and abuse we all share: the torture that religion is for some, disappointment with science as a be-all/ end-all, the horrors of Rwanda...

It's not the L.A. we like to idolize. It's the other L.A., poor Latin American L.A. (L.A.L.A. if you will) solarized and blown up to idol-worthy proportions. It's Wassup Rockers, but Wassup Transvestite. It's *The Painter of Battles*, but *The Painter of Battles Between Religion Guilt and Free Sexual Expression*. It's *It's A Wonderful Life* (an allusions used within the book) for the non-white, not-straight George Bailey (/George Lopez). It's the next best thing in magical-realism-meets-gay-lit since *A Visitation of Spirits*.

Okay, so this book's a mind-grabber. It has a lot more going for it than just a transexual love story...and let's be honest, it's not like that's the story you read every day to begin with.

TVOF doesn't ride on preposterous situations of subcultural characters, ala *Coupeland* or *Palanhiuk*.

I'm definitely a big fan of stories in which an ordinary guy gets boosted to the status of a religious figure (*Palanhiuk* has been there before with *Survivor*). My last read was *The Highest Tide*, another case where people want so badly to believe that they won't even take the scientific testimony of the person responsible for the hoax. Abani writes, "You're a good man, Black." "No. I'm not." "Hush. Let me believe it."

In an odd way, *The Virgin of Flames* (though not for children) may be to L.A. what *The Highest Tide* is to the South Puget Sound, in that it captures a regional spirit as well. According to Abani's main character Black, L.A. is unique among cities because...

-There is no "L.A. State of Mind." It's like a tickle in the back of your throat before you sneeze. You can become the person that you want to be in an instant...or not (paraphrased)

-L.A. is a city full of truth, even if it does have a fake plastic mastodon pretending to drown in a tar pit. (").

-"This city wasn't a city. And if it was, it was a hidden city. There were several cities within it, and you had to yield to it, before it revealed an of its magic to you. It was a slow realization...it forced you to find the city with you. In that way, it was a grown up city."

You can tell that Chris Abani is a poet as well. The one line that summed up his book as an endeavor: "carrying the darkness like a perverted torch."

Carry on, Abani, carry on. It was a great book to read the day after Pride Parade in Providence. It will keep you questioning your preconceptions about gender. Now I have this big rolly polly giant of a writer marching around in my mind...March on you big stud...wait, did I just say that?:)

Kate Gould says

Los Angeles, California. Black is a busy man. By day he collects racist and sexist jokes from toilets for his mural (one from Buckingham Palace via Sharon Osborne), while being stalked by Archangel Gabriel, and obsessing over transvestite stripper, Sweet Girl. By night he stands atop his spaceship in Iggy the psychic tattooist's wedding dress, letting devotees believe he is the Virgin Mary.

It's so self-consciously edgy, it's painful. Maybe I'm a cynical conventionalist, but I'm not sold on his cast of self-obsessed artistes, expecting you to be as enamoured of their nonsensical ramblings as they are while they babble on about "changing the psychic landscape" of LA by painting it without the religious buildings.

I did learn something: transvestite strippers hide their genitalia through careful manipulation and strategically placed surgical tape. Should you want to know how it feels, Black's "bliss, breathlessness and the onset of terror" probably cover most eventualities.
