



The January Children

Safia Elhillo , Kwame Dawes (Forward)

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In her dedication Safia Elhillo writes, “The January Children are the generation born in Sudan under British occupation, where children were assigned birth years by height, all given the birth date January 1.” What follows is a deeply personal collection of poems that describe the experience of navigating the postcolonial world as a stranger in one’s own land.

The January Children depicts displacement and longing while also questioning accepted truths about geography, history, nationhood, and home. The poems mythologize family histories until they break open, using them to explore aspects of Sudan’s history of colonial occupation, dictatorship, and diaspora. Several of the poems speak to the late Egyptian singer Abdelhalim Hafez, who addressed many of his songs to the *asmarani*—an Arabic term of endearment for a brown-skinned or dark-skinned person. Elhillo explores Arabness and Africanness and the tensions generated by a hyphenated identity in those two worlds.

No longer content to accept manmade borders, Elhillo navigates a new and reimagined world. Maintaining a sense of wonder in multiple landscapes and mindscapes of perpetually shifting values, she leads the reader through a postcolonial narrative that is equally terrifying and tender, melancholy and defiant.

The January Children Details

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From Reader Review *The January Children* for online ebook

leynes says

I read *The January Children* over the course of three days. It's a collection of 52 poems, mind you, usually I would have read it in thirty minutes—but Safia didn't allow that. I needed to take my time, I even scribbled one drawing per poem into my copy because her words inspired me, to create something myself, to try something new, to let my thoughts wander, to think, to reflect. It is very rare for me to completely click with a poetry collection, there's usually a lot of white noise and only some rare sparks of brilliancy; with Safia it was exactly the other way around: I almost enjoyed all of her poems, there were just a handful that I found unnecessary as they were repetitions of earlier poems wrapped in different words, apart from them, I was in love from beginning to end.

This collection of poetry was recommended to me by Shamina in 2017. I am somehow glad that it took me so long to finally pick it up, as I truly feel I read it at the right time in my life; a time during which I am reflecting a lot on my racial identity as well as where I belong, which spaces I am allowed to inhabit, who considers me as "other", who considers me as "same". A lot of Safia's words rang very true to me and I am in awe that she managed to express herself so clearly. I love poetry that is easily accessible, I love it when I immediately feel like I "get it", without the poetry feeling cheap and contrived. Safia chose her words very carefully, whether it be English or Arabic, everything fell effortlessly into place. Her train of thought runs smoothly throughout this collection. I never felt lost as a reader. I felt home.

The "January Children" are the generation born in Sudan under British occupation, where children were assigned birth years by height, all given the birth date January 1. At the beginning, Safia quotes Adonis: **"How many centuries deep is your wound?"** A question that contains a lot of pain and suffering for Black people, looking back at your ancestors, your grandmothers, your parents, there is a lot of trauma and hardship infused in your blood line. You cannot quite manage to completely shake yourself free from it, as you are one of its products.

To feel alienated from your "own" people (whatever that means) and the place you were born, the place you have grown up in, is a nasty feeling, I wouldn't wish it upon anyone. But sometimes it's hard to feel like you truly belong when the society you live in has carved out no space for you. With the weight of the hopes and dreams and expectations of your parents on your shoulders who came to this country so that you would have a better life, I sometimes feel like I was set up to fail. How am I possibly going to meet all of those conflicting expectations? How can I be a "good" German and a "good" Women of Color and a good Cameroonian when all concepts seem to contradict one another.

**there's a saying about women who cannot
remember their homes how they love to mourn
what does not belong to them**

Safia is talking with an accent about home, she's a lost girl full of all the wrong language, */stupid girl, atlantic got your tongue/*, how can she reclaim what isn't hers? Or is it? Safia doesn't have the answers, but she has all the questions, she is full of them. What has distance done to her? */ & last time i was home a soldier stopped the car asked where I was from laughed when i said here/*

The January Children is an incredibly personal collection, Safia writes with a vulnerability that is deeply engaging. There's no escaping her words, I had to take all of them in, deal with how they affected me. I am

very thankful that this collection exists. We need more writers to be brutally honest about themselves, even if they are not sure of who they are and where they are meant to be in the world.

Darkowaa says

!!! <https://africanbookaddict.com/2017/02...>

Reading the Forward by Kwame Dawes is imperative if you want to understand and appreciate this collection lol.

Thank you to Netgalley via University of Nebraska Press for the e-ARC.

Whitney Atkinson says

4.5 stars

WOW. I'm at the point of reading poetry where most of it is forgettable, but I anticipate this will be one that lingers with me. So many powerful moments about being black, about feeling stranded between different cultures, and navigating memories vs. reality. Touching, but made me tearful. Definitely a stand-out collection I've read all year.

Nafiza says

This was so glorious and now I desperately need a copy of my own that I can underline and and scribble notes and odes in.

Samantha says

This is a really fantastic collection centering on the British occupation of Sudan, about the navigation of borders and postcolonial space upon returning to a home one no longer recognizes or feels at home in.

Jherane Patmore says

After listening to her perform excerpts at Calabash I had to get this book and I read it all in one sitting. It's beautiful, powerful and magnetic.

BookishDubai says

" i get my languages mixed up i look for answers in what is only music
i heard the lyric about a lost girl i thought you meant me"

So many beautiful poems. You can't help but fall in love with the Sudan that Safia writes about.

Alaa Bit Hashim says

"It is not presumptuous of me to declare that what we have here in The January Children is the first sound of what will be a remarkable noise in African poetry. Safia Elhillo has already laid out in this collection a complex foundation for a rich and ambitious body of work. What is unmistakable is her authority as a poet- she writes with great control and economy, but also with a vulnerability that is deeply engaging. Above all, her poems are filled with delight- a quality of humor that is never trite but always honest and insightful."

-Kwame Dawes

Poet Kwame Dawes presents a comprehensive and extensive forward in the beginning that readers can use as a guide while reading Safia's poetry, it also provides context to the relationship with the late Abdel Halim Hafez, the iconic Egyptian Singer who is at the center of a number of Safia's poems in this mesmerizing collection. Hence, the forward here, is an essential part of this book.

Safia's poetry in this collection takes us back in time, to the days of *[I came from a sudan that had gardens & magnolia flowers]*, just before *"all the alcohol in Khartoum was poured into the Nile"*, tell us about when *"police arrive/ rip lanterns from trees/ & fire a shot"*, and fills our hearts with nostalgia, pain and grief when she reminds us of our aunts in Sudan with *"their men lost or upstairs sleeping or done to America to look for work"*...

Safia puts into rhythmical, well-articulated words the agony, the heartache and the confusion of a whole generation from second-generation immigrants, Diaspora millennials, and daughters who ask *"did our mothers invent loneliness or did make them out mothers"*...

Safia's book is not only about our generation, the millennials, but also about the generation of Abdel Halim Hafez, the ones who found themselves in his heartbroken voice, who loved themselves because he loved the brown in them, the ones who passed on their loneliness, and their heartbreaks to their daughters.. Safia's book is about the *"fourteen brown/ nightingales diving/ in the name of/ a communal beloved"*

"The January Children" is not only about romance and Abdel Halim *"we learned love from a dead man/ you understand my problem"*, and it is definitely not only about the history of distress and misery in post 1989 Sudan *"Above all, the story of Sudan/is the record of a fight against/ nature"* *"& dalia's been arrested & yousif's been arrested sudan broke my mother's heart"*, it is about all shapes, colors and scents of love, angst, hope, millennials, family, police brutality, lost countries, oceans crossed, music, lyrics and words diluted, Arabic, English, languages mixed in a girl belonging to two, no three nations, belonging, this, is a book about the melancholy of belonging and not belonging.

"here I am little dagger ready/ to make a home in your shirt pocket/ answer me answer me"

'Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.' And that is exactly what The January Children would do to the reader, it is a collection of poetry that takes your breath away, and leave you speechless and immersed in an ocean of emotions. Powerful, personal and heartfelt as it should be, this book is a must for both poetry readers and those who are not into poetry.

*“I guess I see the parallel i am brown like her i am always halfway gone like her
i’m not as cruel but I have tried it’s just like the lyric says i cant sing but it goes
?????? ?????????? ???? ??? ?????? ???
reassure me how is the browngirl what has distance done to her”*

Personal Note/thoughts:

Speaking on more personal an intimate level, I must admit that it has taken me more than a week to read this book, because after 2-3 poems I fall into tears and sobs, because my heart is still breaking over Sudan [*sudan broke my mother’s heart*], it did the same to me. Different stories, circumstances, and diverse causes but the agony is the same. I haven't been back home in 4 years because I am too weak to face my pain, and this book took me back there, to where I am running from.

I have loved Abdel halim since I was 9 or 10, my mother taught me to love him, or maybe I inherited his love from her. She spoke in his accent, that's how she was raised and taught in the British Colonialism and then Nimeiry days, which she spoke of all the time , my mother was a January child and I miss her, like I miss Sudan.

**“& in my mouth what exactly
i am not named in the very first language i call Arabic my mother tongue
& mourn only that orphaning i mime
i name nubia & hear only what I cannot speak
i point to my body point to a pyramid & point to a spot on the map
& what is left is only water”**

Jeimy says

Not what I look for in a poetry collection in terms of form, but I love the themes of colonization, diaspora, and the issues of identity these states create in the author.

Maggie Gordon says

Haunting and lyrical, Elhillo writes for Sudanese people of the diaspora. As such, not all of her words were easy to understand, but that's because these poems were not for me. I still enjoyed their beauty and the glimpse at lives unlike my own.

Rayyan says

I occasionally go to a local poetry slam/open mic type of thing at a lounge nearby on Wednesdays, and on

one of the random nights I decided to attend, Safia Elhillo was the featured poet. I hadn't heard of her before, hadn't researched her prior to attending, and hadn't even checked who would be performing. After the open mic portion, she came up and read a collection of selected works.

As soon as she said a word in Arabic I teared up because I. am. so. here. for WoC especially MUSLIM WoC honing their craft and speaking up.

As she went on I found my self straight up crying because her work is beautiful and quirky and thought-provoking and so so important all at the same time. I immediately went home and ordered The January Children on Amazon and followed her on all her social media. I've read this book several times, and I have it sitting on my coffee table to go back to certain pieces often and to show random people who come to my apartment bits of her work (including my dad who does not care for poetry at all and is in no way sentimental; and he loved it).

lady victoriana says

I am neither a poet nor a particularly frequent reader of poetry, so I can't say that this review will be too incisive.

What can I say about The January Children? First, it is beautiful, and it feels like home. Unlike Safia, I am neither black nor Sudanese, but I am Egyptian, the daughter of immigrants, and the themes of colonialism and diaspora resonated with me. Safia talks about the similarities that bind Egyptians and Sudanese and Nubians and the frequent racism and colorism that pulls us apart. She also spends a great many poems talking about Abdelhalim Hafez, probably the most popular and beloved Egyptian singer of all time. My childhood is so infused with memories of Abdelhalim Hafez that it was impossible not to feel that glow of nostalgia whenever he was brought up.

And now here is where I show that I am really not a poet: I didn't really...get the placement of everything? The way the lines were broken up, the way the poems were structured, only confused me. I'm not sure I really "got" everything the way I was meant to. I think the peculiar form of the poetry is what stopped me from really truly loving it. This collection definitely deserves a second read, however; it's a lot richer and denser than it may seem at first glance.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

"& what is a country but the drawing of a line"

I first encountered the poet Safia Elhillo when I read New-Generation African Poets: A Chapbook Box Set, where my favorite was What I Learned in the Fire, which must be listened to. So I jumped at this collection of her poetry, her first!

Another reason is that Safia is Sudanese-American, so her background and themes fit nicely with my Africa 2016 reading project. She says herself that she is from nowhere, or at least that must be how it feels.

Highlights:

asmarani makes prayer

"...a border-shaped wound will
be licked clean...."

vocabulary

(this one must be seen because it combines Arabic words with English.. for now listen to her read it)

Another poem, untitled, is in the video above. When she performs them, she threads them together like a larger story, which is amazing. There is a series of poems about her mother in a former version of Sudan, beautiful.

"did our mothers invent loneliness or did it make them our mothers were we
fathered by silence or just looking to explain away this quiet..."

to make use of water

(another one to hear, a slightly different version is here)

Powerful, moving, personal... this is what I always want poetry to be.

(Thanks to the publisher for granting me early access via NetGalley)

sara says

this collection makes me want to remove all the 5-stars from every other book i've ever read just so this alone stands out and shines, as it deserves, and every child of any diaspora feels compelled to read it: a review

Jess says

this book is incredible in everything it handles and invites the reader into as it arcs and explores. my relationship to language and to the double-edged sword of culture and history will not be the same since reading the january children. very grateful for safia elhillo's writing.

!!!!!!!

thx
