



## The Woman Next Door

*Yewande Omotoso*

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## **The Woman Next Door** Yewande Omotoso

Hortensia James and Marion Agostino are neighbours. One is black, one white. Both are successful women with impressive careers. Both have recently been widowed. And both are sworn enemies, sharing hedge and hostility which they prune with a zeal that belies the fact that they are both over eighty.

But one day an unforeseen event forces the women together. And gradually the bickering and sniping softens into lively debate, and from there into memories shared. But could these sparks of connection ever transform into friendship? Or is it too late to expect these two to change?

## **The Woman Next Door Details**

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Author : Yewande Omotoso

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## From Reader Review The Woman Next Door for online ebook

### Maddie (Heart Full Of Books) says

7/10 Last Year's Novels/ Contemporary Lit Module

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### ♥ Sandi ♡ says

Two well educated old ladies living next door to each other - one white and one black - in the 1950's. Both women had lost their husbands. There was no love lost between these two women, they bickered about everything. Only the hedge between their properties kept them apart, when all of the sudden, due to an unfortunate accident, the two women are thrown together - living together. Does this mellow their animosity or further incite it?

I tended to love some of the characters in this story and dislike others, both for their weaknesses and their strengths. Good writing by the author and probably her intent. This book appears much like an authors debut novel, however it is not. Omotoso is a recognized award winning author. Not a bad novel, by any means, it is a mellow novel, nothing explosive, detailing the everyday life of two rich women in Africa during apartheid, and how each in their own way faced and solved problems.

My rating of 3 stars is due to a couple shifts in the reading, not readily explained, and to twice feeling like I had lost the immediate vision of the story. This may have been a overlooked fact or situation, earlier in the book, but it caused a slight fracture in my overall grasp of events.

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### Donna says

Hortensia James, 85, small with a bad leg, bitter and angry, waits for her husband to die, releasing her from sixty years in a wrecked marriage. She lives in Katyerijn, a housing colony in Cape Town Constantia in post-apartheid South Africa. She is the only black owner in the colony. Her next door neighbor is Marion Agostino, a recent widow facing financial ruin and her racism. She's also an architect who designed the home Hortensia lives in, one she always coveted for herself, but could never purchase whenever it came up for sale. And now, Hortensia has decided to make some changes to that award winning floor plan which was Marion's first project and the jewel in her career crown. What follows is the deconstruction and reconstruction of not just a house, but of a relationship between these two women who, though very different on the outside, may have more in common than they know.

I read this novel for my book club which often challenges me to sample books I'd never choose on my own, some of them to my liking and quite a few not. So when I first started reading this book which featured two very disagreeable main characters who seemed to care only about themselves, I was sure which category it would fall into. I groaned inwardly at the thought of having to endure them for an entire book which I predicted I'd never rate more than two stars. But something happened along the way. I didn't exactly grow to like Hortensia and Marion, who at the beginning appalled me, but I became fascinated by them and their outrageousness, and enjoyed their prickly conversations, wanting to know how they came to be as they were and if they'd ever grow and change.

This isn't a book to read for its historical elements on post-apartheid South Africa since it barely touched upon it. It's more of a book about human nature and the nature of racism as the reader learns the history of these two women and what has brought them to their present state, individually and collectively, when they finally sit down and truly talk.

*Hortensia left out stories of what she called 'the freeze'. Hard stares from fellow students and lecturers alike; stares from people who looked through you, not at you; stares intent on disappearing you; and stares you fought by making yourself solid.*

*Marion had avoided history. Or she'd invented her own. After all, what was history but a record of what gets noticed? Noticing, it seemed to Marion, was what life was really about. Noticing and not noticing, remembering and forgetting.*

*"You say I'm a hypocrite. I have to be. I have to pretend it happened somewhere else; that I read it in a book. I would not be able to get out of bed otherwise."*

Surprisingly, there was much humor in this book, as well, and many insightful lines that made me stop and think. Here are some of the ones that stood out for me:

*The medication took turns making Hortensia feel like a superhero and making her want to punch everyone. In other words, it had little effect on her.*

*Marion the Vulture was repairing her nest.*

*'I don't see him as black.'*

*'Of course you don't. That's what makes you racist.'*

*Agnes's face had always surprised Marion. Two eyes, a nose and mouth, yes, but the composure. Where does someone, especially without much money, buy that kind of peace? Life was much too glaring without the shade of lots of cash.*

*She tied a block of concrete to her ankle and let it drag her down. Hating, after all, was a drier form of drowning.*

*Conversation flapped about, looking for deep waters.*

*Was time here, she thought, in the room with them? Had time sat down for a short while?*

*Night was the real measure of love, Hortensia thought. Anything can sparkle in the daylight. But night –that was when humanity got tested.*

Recommended for book clubs and anyone who enjoys unique characters and thought-provoking lines like those included in this review.

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### **Eric Anderson says**

There's something so irresistible about a story where old people behave badly. Maybe it's because we all

wish we had the right to say exactly what we feel without worrying about future consequences. "The Woman Next Door" focuses on two elderly neighbours Hortensia and Marion who live in a small upscale community in South Africa. Both are professionally successful independent women, but they don't get along at all and don't feel the need to pretend to get on. This leads to a lot of amusing confrontations and bitchy banter, especially at the neighbourhood meetings which are more glorified social occasions than gatherings to talk business. However, both these women are experiencing severe personal problems whose difficulties are amplified by their advanced age. On top of this claims are being made upon the land around them as compensation for the slaves of past generations who inhabited this area. They grudgingly become more reliant upon each other to navigate these difficulties, but that doesn't mean either of them are willing to bury the hatchet.

Read my full review of *The Woman Next Door* by Yewande Omotoso on LonesomeReader

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### **Shawn Mooney says**

I'm interested in South African literature, so I was hoping the mediocre reviews were wrong. They were not: I bailed on this less than 10% of the way in because of the underwhelming prose.

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### **Robert says**

Bailey's Women's Prize for Women's Fiction 5/16

First of all *The Woman Next Door* is a good book. I did not mind the writing and the characters were ok. There are flaws though and these occur throughout the whole novel.

The plot deals with Hortensia and Marion, two widows who live next door to each other and quarrel regularly. Hortense is black, Caribbean born while Marion is a Lithuanian Jewess. Both have been successful in their careers and both have suffered hardships of some sort. The setting is post apartheid South Africa, where racism exists but in a more subtle format.

There is a TON of potential with a plot like this and Omotoso tries to stuff everything in this novel and that's where the problems start.

Is *The Woman Next Door* about racism?, about women's rights? friendship? facing fears? a meditation on death? is it about architecture? textile design? about the sins of the past? Religion? Chauvinistic attitudes? The problem is that way too many subplots are crammed into the book so that none of them give the book depth. Every good idea is fleeting and I found that annoying, and the subplot with the reclaimed land of the village would have been a terrific idea but I felt that it was dealt with badly so it appeared as a waste of ink. However when Omotoso sheds all the million good ideas and focuses on the actual friendship/rivalry between Hortensia and Marion then some great passages crop up. As it is though, *The Woman Next Door* is an frustrating read.

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## Simon says

Technically it's a 2.5 from me. I liked it enough but didn't want to rush back to it when I put it down which is such a shame as I thought I'd love it. Two neighbouring women, one white and one black, hate each other and spy on each other over the dividing walls of their gardens, that is until circumstances lead them to needing each much to both their displeasure. A tale of race, apartheid, the expectations of women and old age; sadly delivered slightly too saccharine and simply for me.

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## Jennifer says

I thoroughly enjoyed this! It got too simplistic towards the end, but the majority of the book was a breezy, funny, and warm look at aging and regrets. I think a novel like this proves that you can explore topics like race and reparations without writing a dark, pensive book (not that the gloomy books aren't important, but some people will respond more to this type of writing). Recommended if you're looking for a quick, fun read (and especially if you like characters with some vinegar in them!).

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## Jeannette Nikolova says

*Also available on the WondrousBooks blog.*

Country: Barbados

**The Woman Next Door** is a story about the years-long feud between two neighbours, *Marion and Hortensia*, living in post-apartheid South Africa. While Hortensia is a woman of color, grumpy and angry at life, Marion is a racist, white snob. Both are successful in their careers, both are strong willed and don't like backing down. The sum of all of these characteristic creates a bitter relationship between them which looks like it could not be overcome...

I would not say that this central story that I told you above is the most important one for me in the book. Ultimately, **The Woman Next Door** narrates the development of the relationship between the two women, but what I enjoyed the most is their separate back-stories, which were not connected to their relationship. At least on the surface. Because looking back at their pasts, one can make sense of what made them who they were.

The back-stories were ones of struggle, of marriage, of dreaming, even. I was mostly touched by both of their respective marriages and love-lives. That being said, I don't necessarily say I was touched in a good way. Mostly, I felt saddened, even scared to read about how their marriages fell apart, became empty, loveless, passionless. I don't even think there would have been any development between Marion and Hortensia in terms of companionship if they hadn't been this lonely and this sad.

Which brings me to what I didn't like about the book. First, it was very gloomy, upsetting almost. I felt hopeless, not only for the characters' future, but for the future as a whole. Because the message **The Woman Next Door** sent was: you will grow old, your partner will stop loving you, your children will abandon you, life will screw you over time and again.

Between the two main characters, I preferred Marion, as rude as this might sound. Because at the end, she was the one who managed to overcome her flaws a lot more than Hortensia did. Both were high level b\*\*\*\*es, don't get me wrong. But Hortensia was too stubborn to even try to change in the slightest. And she was much too bitter. Marion was fooling herself into believing she was right and she was doing good, Hortensia wanted to be mean, she wanted to make people feel bad, to offend them, to be cruel.

However, and this is something that won points for this book, it also seems to be a somewhat realistic picture of the lives of some old people I've seen. The bitter/mean part, so it was interesting to see how the entire thought process goes that leads to such meanness.

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### **Megalion says**

This is one of those literary fiction novels where the main characters are female. And it's about the subtleties of how women relate to each other. Especially from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds.

Marion and Hortensia are both strong women. They've had successful businesses. Have opinions and not afraid to state them or stand up for them. Both are strong willed and sometimes stubborn. Hortensia especially so.

They've been living next door to each other in a suburb of Cape Town, South Africa for going on 20 years. And have had a bitter feud for the whole time.

As the novel begins, both are now retired. Have little to do with their days which means the feuding is even stronger than ever.

Yet... eventually everything must change and it begins in this novel with their husbands dying only a short period apart from each other. The deaths are the rocks thrown into the pond and now their lives are rippling... and crossing each other.

It's very well written. I really appreciated the subtle insights given to the characters. Like this one:

*"The problem with shame, Marion thought to herself, is that it breeds unproductivity. It is such a crippling thing."*

Another one:

*"They ate and Hortensia thought about how intimate eating with someone was. How you might not ever really know a person until you took soup with them, listened to them slurp or try not to slurp, listened to them swallow."*

In the small details that we take for granted, Yewande has reaped interesting new insights and perspectives.

For me, Yewande has become another author to watch for.

Highly recommended. Easy 5 stars from me.

Thank you to the publisher for the free copy of this book in exchange for my honest review.

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### **Christine Zibas says**

Fantastic writing and excellent characters, although not what you'd expect. Two cranky old ladies in a Cape Town suburb eventually learn to come together after years of being enemies. Highly recommended!

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### **Navidad Thelamour says**

I received a copy of *The Woman Next Door* from its publishers, Chatto and Windus, via NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review.

Hortensia James and Marion Agostino have been rivals for decades, though they've lived on the other side of a hedge from each other for all those years. In post-apartheid South Africa, one is black and one is white; what they have in common is their spunkiness in old age, that they've both been recently widowed and that they both feel a certain superiority from the successful careers they once had. They've become comfortable sniping at each from across the way, antagonizing each other over racial differences and otherwise at neighborhood meetings, but when unexpected life circumstances hit them both, will they be willing to set their differences aside and find friendship within each other?

I was really looking forward to reading this novel by Omotoso and had it on my to-read list before I knew that I could get in on NetGally. However, *The Woman Next Door* was a bit of a disappointment for me. For me, the conflict never came across as organic or authentic. The build-up of their long-time feud seemed rushed, superficial and underdeveloped. With this being the very foundation for the way that the novel unfolded, the novel never came together for me. It never grabbed me or moved me in any way. In fact, I found it difficult to even finish. The characters seemed to only be developed based on stories told to each other in dialogue and narrative passages that never delved deep enough into their background for me to feel that I knew them or to sympathize or identify with them. I found the writing to be threadbare, just enough to tell the story, but not enough to feel complete, certainly not enough to hold my attention as a reader.

With that in mind, I'm giving this novel 2 stars because there were elements of the plot that worked well and could have really made this novel a delight, but I can't give Omotoso more than that because I honestly felt it wasn't well executed at all. 2 stars \*\*

The Navi Review | Twitter | Instagram

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### **Pearl says**

I was really excited about this book. I would have preferred some of the backdrop as to Hortensia's character been revealed much earlier. By the time the author revealed the root of her bitterness the character was so cold and unsympathetic the reveal didn't make her any more of character I should invest in. To the author's credit I enjoyed placing two female elders at the center of the story. While I was reading I pondered how the lives of "successful" women can be shaped by others and their actions and ultimately render them with little control.

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## Claire McAlpine says

Loved it, this is my kind of popular summer read, it brings to mind the recent Alaskan classic I read and enjoyed immensely Two Old Women: An Alaskan Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival by Velma Wallis and another that I didn't enjoy so much A Man Called Ove.

It's a tale of octogenarian women Hortensia and Marion who are neighbours in a suburb in Cape Town, South Africa, Marion is a white woman, born there, who has lived through political change, though not learned much from it, rather she has tried to keep as much distance as she possibly can from ever having to confront her deeply embedded, never dealt with ancestral shame.

Hortensia is a black woman, whose parents left Barbados for London, where she grew up and was educated, becoming a successful textile designer, and marrying an Englishman, with whom she moved to Nigeria and eventually (not sure why) to retire in South Africa.

Both women have had similarly sucessful professional lives, both run their own businesses, Marion as an architect, though the birth of her children brought her independence to an earlier close than Hortensia.

Now they are neighbours, on the same street committee and keep each in check - they each represent to the other things about themselves that they would never admit shame or hurt them, so instead they take their bitterness out on each other, assuming that the other isn't capable of understanding their perspective.

Here Marion contemplates her particular shame:

"What Hortensia didn't seem to understand was that sometimes we have to honour our ancestors and side with them. This meant we justified what was horrible and turned away from what needed scrutiny. This life of ignoring the obvious required a certain amount of stamina. The alternative to this was to set on a path to make rubbish of what had gone before us. This approach - of principles - activism and struggle - required stamina too. All the same, she'd chosen the other one."

While grumpy old Ove was just plain annoying and unpleasant to spend a whole book with, these two are actually good company, they have interesting back stories, that are drip fed throughout the narrative, they're funny and although they are going to learn something when their lives inevitably come closer than they would have wished for, there's not that sense of over the top, moral victory, I liked that while they overcome something by the end, they don't change too much.

I picked this book up when it was long listed for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction 2017 and while it didn't make the short list, it definitely made my list of authors to continue to watch out for and read.

**Yewande Omotoso** was also born in Barbados, grew up in Nigeria and moved to South Africa where she writes and runs her own architectural practice. This is her second novel.

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## Hannah Greendale says

Click here to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

In South Africa's Cape Town suburb of Constancia, Hortensia James and Marion Agostino are neighbors. Both women had successful careers in their youth, are recently widowed, and they attend the neighborhood committee meetings where they delight in needling one another. Fueled by longstanding racism and unmet desires, they both long for something the other has and are subsequently bitter rivals. When unexpected events force Hortensia and Marion together, a spark of friendship threatens to dissolve their bitterness.

*Their rivalry was famous enough for the other committee women to hang back and watch the show. It was known that the two women shared hedge and hatred and they pruned both with a vim that belied their ages.*

*The Woman Next Door* is a cornucopia of elderly woman, replete with age-defying beauty regimens, gossip, and irascible attitudes.

*Old women, with their wigs, their painted nails, their lipsticks seeping down whistle lines; scared and old rich white women pretending in the larger scheme of life, that they were important.*

Hortensia and Marion are both venomous women with a dash of vinegar, but they assault one another with little more than carefully worded jabs, such as insults delivered in the guise of a compliment. Absent are the juvenile machinations and playful pranks that would have validated a comparison of their story to the rivalry of Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau in *Grumpy Old Men*.

Critics have praised this book for being "outrageously funny" or liable to make one "howl with laughter," but it garnered no laughter, no chuckles, not even a smirk. This book is void of humor, something it sorely needed to bolster its otherwise tepid pacing and bland characters.

Hortensia and Marion are both in their eighties, and each woman is resigned to death, willing and ready for the Grim Reaper to swing his scythe. Their resignation toward death makes this story depressing rather than funny.

*In another year she would be eighty-two. Her parents had died before then, living separate lives in the same old-age home, quiet in their bitterness and hate. Why couldn't she have followed their example? Why did she have to live longer? What was the point anyway?*

The writing lacks a certain richness, and the author's use of pronouns is occasionally difficult to follow. Now and then the author's intended meaning is puzzling:

*'Race this, race that. Everything race - "when you say 'these people'" . . . Cow!" Marion braked in time to spare a cat scuttling across the road in the half-light of dusk.*

When the reasons for the rivalry and bitterness between these two women finally emerge, they feel weightless and unworthy of such discord.

Topics like slavery, colonialism, immigration, race relations and class are explored at the surface level with no bold assertions made or uncomfortable truths proclaimed.

*The Woman Next Door* is a quick, flavorless read with two exceedingly similar protagonists and a painful lack of payoff.

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