



## Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe

*Doreen Baingana*

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## **Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe** Doreen Baingana

In her fiction debut, Doreen Baingana follows a Ugandan girl as she navigates the uncertain terrain of adolescence. Set mostly in pastoral Entebbe with stops in the cities Kampala and Los Angeles, *Tropical Fish* depicts the reality of life for Christine Mugisha and her family after Idi Amin's dictatorship.

Three of the eight chapters are told from the point of view of Christine's two older sisters, Patti, a born-again Christian who finds herself starving at her boarding school, and Rosa, a free spirit who tries to "magically" seduce one of her teachers. But the star of *Tropical Fish* is Christine, whom we accompany from her first wobbly steps in high heels, to her encounters with the first-world conveniences and alienation of America, to her return home to Uganda.

As the Mugishas cope with Uganda's collapsing infrastructure, they also contend with the universal themes of family cohesion, sex and relationships, disease, betrayal, and spirituality. Anyone dipping into Baingana's incandescent, widely acclaimed novel will enjoy their immersion in the world of this talented newcomer.

**\*Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in the Africa region**

**\*Winner of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Award Series in Short Fiction**

**\*Winner of the Washington Writing Prize for Short Fiction**

**\*Finalist for the Caine Prize in African Writing**

## **Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe Details**

Date : Published September 12th 2006 by Harlem Moon (first published January 1st 2005)

ISBN : 9780767925105

Author : Doreen Baingana

Format : Paperback 184 pages

Genre : Cultural, Africa, Short Stories, Fiction, Eastern Africa, Uganda, Literature, African Literature, Womens



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## **From Reader Review Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe for online ebook**

### **Brandon Fryman says**

This book was such a great read. I especially like the "A Thank You Note" and "Lost in Los Angeles" chapters. They were awe inspiring and thought provoking. This story was written about Uganda, Ugandans, and how Ugandans face certain daily practices. One of my favorite passages from the book "What better way is there to bury your dead, but not to go lustfully after life? I must scream against death just like I used to with life. I must live even harder." I just love this book, its harsh conditions, and the love of Uganda when the story ends. Each chapter is a different point of view told by three sisters and none of the chapters follow any kind of story, each chapter is its own rich story.

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### **Joanna says**

While this book is called a set of short stories with interconnected characters, it reads best as a whole. The book tells the stories of three sisters, focusing mostly on Christine with a couple of stories from Rosa and Patti. The writing is immensely powerful and the stories are extremely compelling. In particular, the stories tracing Christine's time working in the United States (in Los Angeles and Washington, DC) before returning to Uganda tell the story of identity, race, politics, diaspora, and power in an incredible way. The book also unflinchingly reflects the beginning of the AIDS epidemic and its effect on modern Uganda through the personal story of Rosa in a letter to a former lover. Highly recommended.

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### **Phyllis says**

A novel in stories of 3 sisters in Uganda. A Thank You Note ( my vote for best story of the book) gives the true feeling of the AIDS crisis of the 80's in Africa that I have ever read.

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### **Ferris says**

This is an interesting collection of connected short stories which manage to convey the lives of three Ugandan sisters from youth to adulthood. The stories are written in a direct style, in the distinctive voices of the three sisters. The plots range widely, from the joy and mystery of being alone in her parent's bedroom playing with her mother's jewelry, to the hunger and hardship at boarding school, to the firestorm spread of HIV/AIDS across the country, to studying in the USA, to coming home to Uganda after eight years in the States. The emotional tenor ranges from childlike wonder to fury to disillusionment to self-discovery. All in all, a series of vignettes which give the reader some glimpses into daily life in post-Amin Uganda, and to the challenges faced by anyone growing up in one culture and trying to blend into a new one. Baingana does a wonderful job of balancing aspects of general humanity with facets of life specific to Uganda. Very nice collection!

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## **Sandra says**

Few authors can capture multiple themes and weave them so effortlessly.

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## **????????? ??????? says**

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## **Erin Reilly-Sanders says**

While categorized as a set of short stories, this title reads more as set than individual stories as the same characters of three sisters reappear throughout all the stories. The technique of different voices and a variety of media such as a journal and a letter helps separate the voices to an extent but in many cases it is confusing as to who is speaking, perhaps suggesting that each sister is not as separate as one would assume and is instead different possible trajectories of one generic female Ugandan. However, the stories are specific glimpses instead of an overall description of life in Entebbe. I think this personalization allows a connection with characters, allowing introspection about stereotypes and cultures, that wouldn't develop if the author tried to make more general statements. With the rest of the stories reflecting the Idi Amin troubles so gently, the section on AIDS does seem to stand out profoundly from the rest of the book, sort of rambling on in

some sort of possessed frenzy which may in the end be appropriate, but feels a little odd to me rather than fitting.

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### **Joslyn Allen says**

Review from <https://chronicbibliophilia.wordpress...>

Christine Mugisha is a young girl coming of age in Uganda under the specter of Idi Amin's terror-filled reign and the emerging horror of the AIDS epidemic. Christine and her sisters are fortunate; though they live with want, they are well-off and well-educated.

“We were at Makerere University; we were the cream of the crop. We had dodged the bullets of Amin, Obote, all the coups, the economic war, exile and return, and here we were on the road to success. We were the lucky ones, the chosen few. No one said this out loud, of course, we just knew we were different, protected; our fate was privilege. We didn’t consciously think it, but the knowledge sat at the back of our minds like a fat cat. We were intelligent, read books for fun, had worn shoes and socks to school while villagers went barefoot; we spoke proper English; listened to Top of the Pops rather than Congolese music; ate with forks, not our fingers. And, of course, we would one day leave this place to work in southern Africa, or go to Europe or America for further studies. Escape, but not by dying.”

For Christine, her family status certainly gives her advantages, but the path to success is anything but clear. Facing the universal struggles of coming of age – discovering your own voice and deciphering the rules of the adult world – is only part of Christine’s battle. She must also cope with an unstable government, threats to her health in the midst of sexual revolution, racism and sexism, and the expectations of a nation.

“So, in Higher, as it’s called, we have this extra duty in school and as privileged young women in Uganda, a third world country, don’t you forget, because we are getting this excellent, government-subsidized (white) education. We must represent all the impoverished throngs who are not as lucky as we are, especially the women. We must be graceful, hardworking, and upright; disciplined enough to withstand the hordes of lusty men at university, in offices, or on the street who will try to ‘spoil’ us – unless, of course, they want to marry us. Then, as educated, faithful wives, we will work alongside our Christian husbands in our modern civilized homes (bedsheets folded to make perfect hospital corners), while serving our country in a lauded profession.”

The simple beauty and stark contrast of the cover image perfectly capture this book’s nature. Baingana’s words are quiet and measured, peppered with lilting phrases and vivid imagery that fill the mind’s eye.

“As my parents’ voices receded toward their bedroom, an argument inevitably began. Taata grunted a word or two, low commas to Maama’s continuous sentence of complaint, a wail, a plaintive song. Her voice choked with tears. She seemed to be forcing them back while letting streams of anger pour out.”

At times, I felt Baingana relied too heavily on the reader to conjure up emotion; her characters were stoic and her words were often flat, even in highly emotional situations. Though her work contained beautiful outtakes of delicate phrase, they were often buried in lengthy, dispassionate passages. I appreciated her skill and, even more, her story, but a greater balance with more pops of color and passion would have made this novel leave stronger mark.

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## **Joel Benjamin Benjamin says**

I'd never considered the beaches and fish of Entebbe when I first heard of Tropical Fish. Yes, I knew it was a short story book set in Uganda but that was the last thing on my mind. And this is the thing about this short story collection, it did not start with the title story.

Be warned there are spoilers.

This book shows us the lives of three sisters, Christine, Rosa and Patti in an era between the madness of one dictator and a new liberator in the tropical African country, Ugandan.

The issues that jump out at me are the African family/society and how it interacts with itself and the West, plus what happens when things do not turn out as planned? What happens when lust turns into death? When sadness turns into addiction? When apathy turns into normalcy? Each of the sisters might have an answer to give.

Christine is the main focus in this tale. We see her journey through teenage, school, dating, interracial relationships in a Least Developed Country, moving to a new country, adapting to new norms and cultures, and then having to finally move back to her home. Can a first home eventually become a second?

(Arguments of the Migration vs Home African Literature will have something to pick from this story). For periods of time you're in Christine's mind as she goes through all these changes and perhaps the question at the end is do you empathise, are you reviled or do you have no response?

Patti is the silent rock of the story. She and her mother are the ones who decide to settle with the circumstances around them and rest. Her quabbles are with hunger mostly and when hunger is dealt with, she and God have no issues.

Rosa is a firework. An excited teenager whose unencumbered outlook to life leads her to the highs of life and ultimately the lows. Hers is a short appearance and quite an apt symbol that way.

You start to wish that after the final line of the last story there was a new chapter, a new short story to follow but there is none. The wisdom dispensed is firm and not long-worded. Perhaps I want it to continue because now I understand her struggles, her questions, her issues?

Or perhaps the sadness of their collective childhood stole a few secrets from mine and it was necessary to leave it quickly? I can't tell you. I can say, that in a way, the life of many Ugandans is shared with that of the Mugishas in Entebbe, and you should read it and find your lessons, I am keeping mine.

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## **Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says**

This is a collection of eight short stories about the lives of three sisters as girls and young women growing up in Uganda. It's not an "awareness novel" - the stories are about relationships and the characters' inner lives,

not "Africa issues," though one does deal with AIDS through a very personal lens. This was the most remarkable story in the collection to me, with more intense emotions than are found in the others. Overall, the writing is adequate, but I did not find this collection particularly noteworthy or memorable.

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### **Jadie says**

Again, a book for class. I'm not usually big on vignettes which is what this novel is, but these vignettes are very much connected. They focus around three sisters growing up in a village in Uganda and their coming of age. The ideas revolving around religion, culture, education, discrimination, etc that come up throughout the vignettes are portrayed in beautiful and emotional ways.

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### **Tayari Jones says**

I'd read Tropical Fish before, but I had forgotten just how brilliant Doreen is! I am forcing myself to choose only two stories for my packet, but I can't begin to choose. I love me some coming of age stories and her young narrators are aces. I know I'll end up using one of the epistolary stories because writing a letter that seems like a letter, but still tells a story is a complicated maneuver-- which Doreen pulls off not once, but twice in the collection.

So, here are the stories I am thinking of using and a little bit of summary.

- A Thank You Note This story is a letter from Rosa who is in the final stages of HIV to her lover, David. The letter is both personal and real, but at the same time really gives a reader a close look at the physical ravages of the disease and also the way that you can trace the spread of HIV to the complicated networks of culture.
- Hunger A formerly well-off girl in boarding school must beg for sugar from the "posh" girls. This is a dynamite look at class and entitlement. The ending put me in the mind of James Baldwin. So good I wanted to eat it.
- Tropical Fish The title story is a knock out. Christine, whom we meet as a girl in earlier stories, is grown up now and has fallen into a relationship with a British exporter of fish. It's about sex, power, race, and voice.

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### **Marie Ainomugisha says**

I wish I read Doreen's book back in high school. Tropical Fish is an easy and entertaining read which encompasses beautifully told memories and a true reflection of the life of a young Ugandan girl in the lower middle class society of the country. Reading it felt like some parts of my childhood were being retold to me. Never related so much with a book. Worthy purchase.

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**Mary says**

<http://www.maryokekereviews.blogspot....>

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**Julia says**

I'm so glad I've discovered this book here on GR - it didn't sound so very special, but as I have a personal interest in Uganda, I'd decided to read it, anyway, just for the cultural information - and I got so much more. Doreen Baingana is a unique voice, very deft at describing complex emotions and relationships, down-to-earth, very sincere, sometimes heart-breaking.

I hope she's going to tackle a novel or another set of connected short stories. Especially, the letter of Rosa to the lover who most probably infected her with AIDS, is extraordinary - moving, harsh, wild, provoking. I haven't read a braver confrontation of the topic yet. Very human, leaves me wanting more of this.

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