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For fans of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a stunning novel set in 1930s Somalia spanning a decade of war and upheaval, all seen through the eyes of a small boy alone in the world.

Aden, Yemen, 1935; a city vibrant, alive, and full of hidden dangers. And home to Jama, a ten year-old boy. But then his mother dies unexpectedly and he finds himself alone in the world.

Jama is forced home to his native Somalia, the land of his nomadic ancestors. War is on the horizon and the fascist Italian forces who control parts of East Africa are preparing for battle. Yet Jama cannot rest until he discovers whether his father, who has been absent from his life since he was a baby, is alive somewhere.

And so begins an epic journey which will take Jama north through Djibouti, war-torn Eritrea and Sudan, to Egypt. And from there, aboard a ship transporting Jewish refugees just released from German concentration camps, across the seas to Britain and freedom.

This story of one boy's long walk to freedom is also the story of how the Second World War affected Africa and its people; a story of displacement and family.

Black Mamba Boy Details

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Author : Nadifa Mohamed

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From Reader Review *Black Mamba Boy* for online ebook

Paul says

Nadifa Mohamed's first novel is an homage to her father and is based on his life and wanderings around North East Africa in the 1930s and 1940s. Mohamed explains the title as being related to something that happened to her grandmother:

"When my grandmother was heavily pregnant with my father, she was following her family's caravan and she got lost and separated from the others. She sat down to rest under an acacia tree and a black mamba snake crept upon her belly before slithering away, leaving her unharmed. She took this as a sign that the child she carried would always be protected, and that's how the title of the book came about."

Mohamed also has a specified purpose as well as telling her father's story:

"Much has been written about how Britain's Jamaican community celebrated Usain Bolt's charge to gold. But British Somalis, who have been here in numbers for over two decades, are not so firmly placed in the national consciousness. And often when we are written about it is with the worst connotations: violence, terrorism, gangs ... young Somalis' sense of identity seems more powerfully formed by the persistently negative representations found in the media."

The novel starts in Aden, in Yemen in the 1930s when Jama is living with his mother; it is narrated in the third person. Mohamed explains the structure is based on African "praise poetry":

"Griots are wandering praise-singers who are also the historians and storytellers of their societies. Even though it is a West African tradition, I thought it suited perfectly my father's story; I wanted a style that would celebrate his life with great literary flourishes rather than objectively describe it. The griot tradition also shares similarities with Somali poetry in their methods of composition and dissemination, and was a natural fit to the wandering, exploratory life of my father."

When Jama's mother dies he decides to go and search for his itinerant father in Somaliland. We have a geographical tour of the area and a historical one as Jama becomes involved with the Italian army invading Ethiopia in the Second World War. Jama, as he is growing up lives on the streets and life can be tough as he is often hungry. His voyage is an Odyssean one around North Africa and ending up in Britain. Jama experiences famine, war, illness, loss, racism and homelessness. He also finds kindness from Somali communities around the area of his travels and sometimes in unexpected places.

Mohamed writes well and her descriptive powers have lyricism and power:

"At the darkest hour of night, the sky cracked and revealed a blue and white secret kingdom. The high heavens and low earth were joined by a sheet of conquering raindrops, followed by a thundering marching band that seemed to be playing drums, cymbals, violins, and reedy flutes whose notes fell down and smashed against the gasping desert earth, battering down an angry song of life."

The novel is easy to read and also provides an account of colonialism and its effects. Towards the end of the book Jama is working as a stoker on a British ship, The SS Exodus with a cargo of Jews purportedly being taken to safety, in actuality prisoners; an illustration that it was not just the Nazis who persecuted the Jews. Mohamed challenges the western narration of these events, but also provides hope for the beleaguered communities of Northern Africa.

There are irritations at times, but this is an accomplished first novel which engages the reader and makes its points effectively.

Thepocobookreader says

Black Mamba Boy is the debut novel by Nadifa Mohamed, recounting her father's extraordinary journey through parts of East Africa and the Middle East on his quest to find family and prosperity. Set over a period of twelve years from 1935-1947, it was interesting to read about a world in the midst of change and the colonial campaigns still very much active in those regions, particularly in Eritrea where Mohamed writes that 'Indian and Italian killed each other over African soil.' I would however, liked to have delved a little deeper into this and read more about the personal effects on Jama, the main protagonist, who shares little personal or emotional insights throughout the book. Whilst the novel itself is very enjoyable and Mohamed's writing style is rhythmic and strong which make for an easy read, to me the book, at times, felt somewhat trapped between autobiography and historical fiction, but this is only a minor limitation. What is instead an overwhelming feature is Mohamed's love for her personal history and the need to tell this story 'because no-one else will'. Her evocation of the horn of Africa comprising of deserts- 'the birthplaces of prophets' and wealthy houses with courtyards filled with 'bougainvillea and purple hibiscus' as well as bustling lively cities was a joy to read. The rich and diverse cultures and people living together in relative harmony is a far cry from the fractured images we see today, particularly of Somalia. Black Mamba Boy is a story of considerable hope and survival but at its heart, this is a novel of change. Running parallel to this post war world in change is Jama, charting the journey from boyhood to maturity, loss to love and like so many after him who 'make their footprints in the sand' they would 'pack up their bags and move like nomads over Africa and Europe, discovering new worlds'.

Beth says

Without education or mothering after the age of ten, Jama finds rooftops to sleep on with friends and roams streets to steal food. Based on the life of the author's father beginning in 1935, Jama wants to make it rich and think he can if he gets from Somalia where he was born to work in Egypt. He accomplishes his goal of where3 he wants to get, but not the one of becoming rich! He continually is running away from each area he obtains.

In the process he gets stuck in a French army where regular white soldiers mistreat him, keeps avoiding border crossings where he might have to show a non-existent passport, marries and leaves a girl he loves, and keeps on going until finally, without being rich, he comes back to live with her. By the time he has gone through Eritrea, the Sudan, Palestine, the Red Sea, and then works on British Ships going to London and other ports, I was exhausted. Any inveterate traveler would be exhausted, because anyone else's conditions could never be as terrible as what this poor kid suffered.

Ben Babcock says

I'm so thankful that I can read. I'm thankful that I happened to be born and grow up in circumstances that allowed me the luxury of literacy and the free time required to exercise and hone my reading skills. Books are a tool for education, a refuge and a means of escape, and a powerful drug that entertains and empowers. I can only imagine what people who grow up in circumstances more abject than mine think when they first behold a book, first understand the words on a page--what a feeling that must be.

In *Black Mamba Boy*, Jama's path to literacy is a slow and rocky one. As a boy in Aden in 1935, he struggles

to find a place. Eventually, his mother's death forces him to leave home in search of his father, who has never returned from his own quest for fortune. Jama spends the next ten years travelling from one part of East Africa to another. Along the way he tries a myriad of jobs, from the most physical and menial to the terrifyingly militaristic. Throughout his travels, Jama is anchored at one end by his faith in his mother, who is watching over him from the afterlife, and his imagined conversations with his father, urging him to continue on this journey without an end.

The story can seem a bit aimless, at times. Though Jama is primarily motivated by the quest to find his father, he takes a slow, meandering path towards that goal. Just when it seems like he has found a stable job that will help him earn enough money to find his father, a twist enters the story and shakes up his life. Death, racial abuse, poverty, and even locusts dog Jama's heels. As he travels from community to community, he is forever at the mercy of his identity as a Somali, as a black African, as a young boy. Each encounter, for better or for worse, changes Jama and influences his growth. By the end of the book, he is no longer the naive boy who left Aden to find his father. He is an accomplished young man with a child and wife of his own waiting for him; he has seen the world, seen what it offers and the problems it creates. He is not infallible, not invincible, but he is not defeated either.

The narration in *Black Mamba Boy* can seem very distant. Some events happen very quickly, with weeks or months passing in the span of a paragraph and very little characterization of Jama to show for it. Even events that receive a slower, more detailed treatment seem to happen at a remove. The tense here is one of a definite, fixed path rather than a pregnant, possible past. There is little in the way of suspense. Near the end of the story, Jama is delighted with how much he has earned from his first voyage aboard a British ship out of Port Said. Then he squanders the money on women in London. This kind of reversal could have happened slowly and intimately, with the reader cringing as it becomes apparent what is happening. Instead, it happens quite quickly, and I never really felt connected to Jama as he was wasting his money. The same kind of distance is present for most of the book. I'm not a fan of this kind of narration and the barrier it creates between reader and protagonist.

That being said, the narration also clearly presents a world view of a young boy. It provides an interesting perspective of East Africa just before and during World War II. There is no intrusive injection of political concerns, no exposition about the disposition of British or Italian or German forces in Africa. The information, and its interpretation, in this book all comes to us the way a young man from Somalia might learn and interpret it as he travels across East Africa. His opinions of Italians, Britons, and other Europeans are formed from his close--and, sadly, colonial--interactions with individuals from these nations. There are ironic observations or misunderstandings that we, as readers from a different background, might be tempted to find laughable--for Jama, though, they are real and credible points of view.

This perspective was what originally drew me to *Black Mamba Boy*, so I'm glad that my expectations were not misplaced. This isn't just a novel set in Somalia but told from the point of view of a wise, educated person. It isn't about the struggles of Somalis filtered through the lens of someone who shares my upbringing. It's not even filtered through the lens of someone like Mohamed himself, or her father as he is now (upon whose life the story is loosely based). It's a raw portrayal of what the life of a young boy in Somalia at that age might have been like. There are cultural and social forces, such as the clan structure, that somewhat escaped my understanding--but I could see their presence. There is nothing wrong with a more polished presentation, such as in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. But I really appreciated this type of perspective.

I picked up *Black Mamba Boy* on a whim, knowing nothing about the book or its author. I was pleased with the result. Though it lacks a single, defining characteristic that makes it awesome or intriguing, there is

enough to this book to make it a worthwhile read.

Karen Triggs says

You can almost smell this powerful first novel. There is the stink of rotting goat meat, the sour odour of sweat and dust and the hot smoke in the boiler room of a British Navy steamship, as we follow Somaliland-born Jama, the main character, on an extraordinary journey from the backstreets of 1930s Yemen, through '30s and '40s Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, to the '50s docksides of peasouper Britain.

If you wrung out the pages there'd be a mess of blood and sand - the young Jama is educated in the school of exceptionally hard knocks, losing first his mother, then his father, and then - worse - conscripted into Mussolini's army, East Africa branch.

So, it's a visceral read and UK-Somalilander author Nadifa Mohamed's writing is so raw that, at times, I had to put the book aside and take a deep breath. It turns my stomach even to recall a scene in which one of Jama's friends is brutally sodomised and then slaughtered by a couple of power-crazed Italian soldiers in Ethiopia. For that one she wins the Reservoir Dogs Grand Prize for the Graphic Portrayal of Senseless Violence.

I won't say it's all doom and gloom - Black Mamba Boy is not quite a misery memoir. In fact Jama is a very hardy and resourceful young man, who takes his pleasures where he finds them - how could he survive otherwise? Neither is he on a western traveller's journey of self-exploration. Instead he lives like a Somali nomad writ large, riding the waves of history and circumstance on the surfboard of his wits until he finds a place of relative rest - a damp and foggy postwar England plastered with signs declaiming 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs'.

Nadifa Mohamed may be the first writer to try to infuse a novel written in English with the flavour of the Somali language. 'Spare', 'lean', 'efficient' - these are not words to describe her prose but in my view her cross-cultural literary experiment is an interesting one which will bear more fruit as her style develops.

This one's a 4/5, then, on the basis that I'm looking forward to reading Novel No 2 which I understand is in production, and set in 1980s Hargeisa. I'll save my fifth star for that.

Muna says

I just completed "Black Mamba boy" and thoroughly enjoyed the read. Through her writing, Nadifa Mohamed brought to life the bustling streets of Yemen and weaved together beautiful descriptions of life in East Africa and the Middle East at the time. She also shed light on the brutality, loss of dignity and oppression faced by East Africans under the colonial rule of Italy and Britain. Her character Jama demonstrates the experiences of a refugee, a young boy and a father trying to look for a better life, he is met with many trials and meets friends and enemies along the way. Nadifa also shows the relationships between the Somali's themselves and the integral role played by clan ties in the culture. My only complaint would be that the book ended rather abruptly. I would like to know what happened to Jama, a sequel would definitely

be helpful. As for the reviewers who did not understand some words, there was a glossary in the front cover but I am not sure if this is a revised version of the book.

Dieuwke says

An interesting and educating read, I feared I'd find the book similar to "what is the what", but luckily that wasn't the case at all.

Yes, it does start with a grown up, yes it is about a little boy who covers thousands of miles in war-torn Africa -but that's about as far as similarities run.

Character Jama witnesses Africa during the second world war, he happens to be at places where the action is -or isn't. He loses friends, finds love, travels far.

Unlike other books, this book full of travel doesn't bore, nor did I once think "it can't be true". And indeed, it's fictionalized truth.

Surely this books deserves more than 3 stars only, but here taste has its say: descriptions of various towns in various countries in Africa just don't work for me. The smells, the looks -there have been a few times I noticed my eyes went wandering over the page to catch up where descriptions had stopped. That's personal. I know many people who wouldn't be bothered. To my liking that prevented it from a 4 star.

William says

This book was really in my wheelhouse. I love historical fiction. I love African literature. And I love reading about places that I have absolutely no knowledge of. The action centers around the horn of Africa in the pre and post World War 2 years. The protagonist, Jama, a Somali, finds himself caught up in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and its neighbors. Jama and his mother are living with very reluctant relatives and their situation is precarious. Eventually he leaves home to live on the streets only to return and find his mother dying. When she passes he lights out to find the father he never knew. Jama is a survivor and his adventures and near death experiences are harrowing to say the least. The author easily evokes both the beauty and poverty of the near desert lands and its melting pot of peoples. Jama's quest for reunification with his father and a better life for his family and friends is at turns heartbreaking and beautiful. The consequences of occupation by colonial powers on the peoples of the horn of Africa still reverberate. I feel that I got a vicarious peek at a place I've always wished to know a little better.

Moses Kilolo says

Nidifa Mohamed published her first book *Black Mamba Boy* in 2009. She took the material for it from her father's account of his real life to craft this phenomenal book, which, unlike her flawless beauty, is made more achingly beautiful by its mesh of strength and unapologetic flaws. I met Nadifa at a writer's workshop in the middle of last year, and the wisdom, passion and grace with which she spoke seems to be naturally instilled into her writing.

The book is about a journey. Not about a destination. Though Jama is convinced there is a destination. He dreams of meeting his father. Just like we all are in life, breathlessly working towards attaining our goals. In the end Jama realizes one thing; **“not to observe the hustle and bustle of life but to BE IT.”**

Jama sets out to seek his father whom he believes will make his life a lot better. He has grown tired and dissatisfied with his life on the street as a small Somali scavenger. And when his mother dies, he decides to move. An emotion and a decision beautifully captured by the writer when she writes:

“Life is just this, Jama thought, a long journey, with light and darkness falling over you, companions all around, on their own journeys. Each person sitting passively or impatiently, wondering whether the tracks of their fate will take them on their clattering iron horse to their destination or will sweep them away in an invisible path to another world.”

And so she sums up what each of us has felt at some point. That desire to move, to seek to complete ourselves somehow by finding an object of desire to which we might move towards. Often times this is an object that is never there, but it causes us to engage in the journey nonetheless.

Jama's journey is replete with trials and harsh moments, for which the writer does not shy away from in giving scintillating detail. At barely ten years old the boy is left to cater for himself, and when he begins his journey, one can only admire his spirit and courage. I looked up the map and traced my imagination from Yemen to Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, Marseille, Hamburg and finally Wales. My mind was spinning. I don't remember walking a distance more than a few kilometers in my life, and those of my friends who have been privileged to live in a country with a hitchhiking tradition, you will agree that this a great distance indeed. One with no highways but the scorching desert sands for your path. A little unapologetic flaw, I think, for which Mohammed allows Jama to transition rather too fast from place to place. Never truly settling. Though in fiction all is allowed, the very feeling that it is fictitious should perhaps not be a part of the reader's experience.

But Jama's spirit is not destroyed by the harsh journey, or the strange people that he meets along the way. One must also remember that this novel is set in the 30s and 40s. Just a few decades shy of the independence movement and at the height of colonialism, and equally, the onset of the World War II, which started in Europe. Mohamed puts this in context beautifully. Not only does one Italian official imprison Jama in a chicken pen, but he also renames him for his own pleasure. The cruelty meted on Africans by the colonialists is great; and the reader with an aversion to human indignity will probably skip this section of the book. In the writer's words the helplessness of Jama and his fellow Africans is clearly stated:

“It is hard to avenge yourself on someone you fear, when everything about them, their height, power, possessions, confidence, imposes a sense of your own inferiority.”

This is a straight-forward novel that is enjoyable both because of its beautiful, honest language and the beautiful scenes that come alive and stay with you long after you have read them. One may have a problem with the range of movement, the many places Jama visits and the many characters that he meets and leaves, but that is the nature of life. There really isn't an absolute need for a direct dramatic trajectory in life is there; we have the ups and downs that make it worth living. Even if, like Jama, we lack a map or have no single penny in our pockets

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

It took me a while to get through this book. I just didn't care about Jama, the main character, and he moves from place to place so quickly I didn't get a chance to care about any of the others. It is interesting to see the Italian occupation of Africa during World War II through a Somali boy's eyes, but I'm not sure the novel knew what to be. Travel? War? Epic journey? Instead it is a little bit of everything and not enough of anything.

David Hebblethwaite says

Black Mamba Boy is based on the story of Nadifa Mohamed's father, Jama, whom we first meet as a street child in Aden in 1935. When he falls out irrevocably with his friends, then loses his mother, Jama resolves to set out and find Guure, his own long-missing father, last heard of heading for Sudan – which is not nearly as far as Jama will travel over the course of the following twelve years.

Though it tells Jama's story, this isn't a straightforwardly biographical novel; from interviews, I gather that Mohamed embellished some parts, and that others were perhaps embellished already. Throughout, one is reminded that we make stories out of our lives: Mohamed's introduction/prologue, where she describes the inspiration for her book, is novelistic in tone and style; the departure of Jama's father becomes a tale to tell, as does the origin of his mother's nickname for her son (a mamba slithered over her while she was pregnant with him, but left both unharmed – hence the nickname Goode, or 'black mamba'); people displaced by the Second World War tell stories that transform their homelands into a distant paradise, whatever the reality was that they left behind.

Mohamed's narrative itself has the feeling of being told rather than written, with its long, discursive paragraphs; and its structure, swooping in on certain events, then back out again to continue Jama's journey. What's striking is that, whatever happens to Jama, one never doubts his story within the pages of the novel. Mohamed's voice has the ring of truth – the truth of the storyteller.

There are, however, moments when *Black Mamba Boy* stumbles; they tend to be when Mohamed is acting as the 21st-century person looking back on history, rather than as the novelist inhabiting the period. Compare, for example, her statement that 'at his tender age [Jama:]...could [not:] imagine the kind of mechanised, faceless slaughter the Italians would bring to Africa' (157) with the passage describing a battle a few pages later (165-8), which really evokes the sense of Jama's (and others') being caught up in events larger than any one person could ever hope to comprehend. There's no question, to my mind, which is the better technique.

(Another issue with the novel is the odd typo, in particular Mohamed's tendency to use a comma in place of a semi-colon; this happens often enough to be distracting, which is especially a problem when the flow of the story is so important.)

The wider historical context of *Black Mamba Boy* is one about which I know rather little, so I'm reluctant to judge how Mohamed represents history. But I will say that I have an abiding impression of Jama and others – individuals, peoples, nations – enduring circumstances almost too harrowing for words, and doing what they can to survive. Some make it through; others don't. Jama survives, of course, and one might say that the trait of his that most shines through in the novel is his tenacity, his striving to grasp the opportunities that come along, however steep the obstacles. What a story he had to tell; what a story Nadifa Mohamed has told.

Edi says

To me, the Middle East is a true crossroad of the world and this really comes to light in *Black Mamba Boy*. In the book, it seems Jama's quest takes him throughout the entire region where he is exposed to so many languages, foods, colors and vistas that they can't help but enrich and educate him. His survival depends upon him learning to know when to trust people and situations because he thinks he has no one but himself to rely upon.

It's hard to remember how young Jama actually is when he loses his parents because he spends so much of his life hustling to stay alive. Jama shifts from place to place, first to find his father, then I think because he's just unable to stay in one place because he never has. He wonders throughout lands in Africa and in the Middle East learning what it's like to be a foreigner in his own land because he has no family and because the British and the Italians are claiming and redefining the territory. His wondering is not aimless, he does have purpose in his adventure.

There is a mystical nature to the book reference in the title. Also, Jama's parents appear to him in visions to provide guidance and comfort. In fact, there's a lot to this book. It is steeped with the history of the beginnings of WWII, colored with the geography and spiced with food and language. There are a few clunky passages but it is a well told story. This is one of the few books recently that I didn't try to skim through passages and finish quickly. I actually let myself savor each word so that I could create a movie in my head while reading.

Joanna says

Jama is a resilient young man determined to find his father, no matter the sacrifice. He crossed countries after countries and discovered, grew, and survived. The story, somewhat fictionalized, is based on Nadifa Mohamed's father, Jama, who went on an amazing journey to find his father. I really appreciated the historic aspect of this book; the East African Colonial Era, and the meticulous details. While I liked the details, that were often poetic and refreshing, I sometimes lost track of the whole story as I concentrated on the details. Having traveled in East Africa and grown up in a predominantly muslim country, I was able to understand most of the terms used by the author, but for people who have no or little knowledge of that part of the world, a lot of terms were left unexplained. You can, however, figure the definition out in the context it is used in. In all, I really enjoyed this book.

Richard Brand says

It just wasn't my book. I could never find the theme or the passion. It was my fault as the story of the young boy was brutal. The saga of this story included being orphaned on his own. The passion to find a place. The desire to find his father. But the quest was to get to Egypt but when he got there it was a not what he hoped. Or his quest was to find his father and half way through he finds where his father is and his father gets killed. The story is not poorly written. The language is poetic in places. The event of the story include the aftermath of WWII and Jewish settlement of Palestine. Lorraine Adams said it was a "phenomenal fast-forward story." But it took me more than six weeks to push myself to the end of the book.

Bobbie Darbyshire says

More biography than fiction and sadly not quite either. Not enough historical explanation to educate me, not enough characterisation to hook me, not enough narrative shape to engross and entertain me. Some good descriptive writing, and I do know more now than I did, but the occasional sentimental authorial voice was intrusive, and, grrrrr, so many sentences were separated by commas - was her editor (like I was!) struggling to pay attention?
