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Graceland (Today Show Pick January 2005)



Synopsis

Graceland is a dazzling debut by a singular new talent. The sprawling, swampy, cacophonous city of Lagos, Nigeria, provides the backdrop to the story of Elvis, a teenage Elvis impersonator hoping to make his way out of the ghetto. Broke, beset by floods, and beatings by his alcoholic father, and with no job opportunities in sight, Elvis is tempted by a life of crime. Thus begins his odyssey into the dangerous underworld of Lagos, guided by his friend Redemption and accompanied by a restless hybrid of voices including The King of Beggars, Sunday, Innocent and Comfort. Ultimately, young Elvis, drenched in reggae and jazz, and besotted with American film heroes and images, must find his way to a GraceLand of his own. Nuanced, lyrical, and pitch perfect, Abani has created a remarkable story of a son and his father, and an examination of postcolonial Nigeria where the trappings of American culture reign supreme. "A richly detailed, poignant, and utterly fascinating look into another culture and how it is cross-pollinated by our own. It brings to mind the work of Ha Jin in its power and revelation of the new."--T. Coraghessan Boyle

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Graceland is an enlightening yet very disturbing look into the poverty-stricken and corrupt nation of Nigeria. Although this book is a coming-of-age story, it also displays a culture besieged by American influence and internal discontent. Abani's choice to name the main character Elvis is particularly interesting since the reference to an American pop culture icon contrasts with the other metaphorical names like Redemption and Comfort. He is cloaked in a culture to which he doesn't

truly belong and is alienated in a manner reminiscent of Ralph Ellison's nameless invisible man. Descriptions of the elaborate and vital kola nut ceremony are spaced throughout the book in a way that implies how deeply embedded such rituals are in Igbo people despite the background of American runoff; Nigeria has a society of multiple layers. Abani displays the curious intermingling of these two contrasting cultures very well. The book was very well-written and the format made it particularly realistic. It is not chronologically organized, but the date preceding each section prevents confusion. This format, with excerpts from his mother's journal and descriptions of the kola nut ceremony mixed in, makes it easier to understand Elvis' perspective; details about his earlier life and Nigerian culture provide a context in which the story is set. The only problem I felt there was with the book was I felt Elvis could have been more emotionally developed.

Chris Abani's *Graceland* is a compelling novel that chronicles the adolescence of a Nigerian Elvis impersonator left to fend for himself after his mother's death and his father's turn to alcoholism. The novel is set in post-colonial Lagos, Nigeria and provides a devastating look into the violence, corruption, and poverty of Africa's slums. But although it delves into the issue political tension, it is not solely focused on the local goings-on. *Graceland* is a story of human affliction at the hands of overbearing fathers, crooked governments, and western influence. If you are looking for an uncomplicated and linear novel, then *Graceland* isn't for you. Its plot jumps back and forth from Elvis' childhood to his teen years. Although these sudden shifts may seem disconcerting, they ultimately help the reader understand Elvis on a deeper level. The stories of his past make up who he is in the present, giving the reader a fuller sense of his character. The point of view also shifts throughout the novel. While most of the story follows Elvis, some parts of it are instead of his father's point of view, or even his cousin Innocence's. These short dips into another character's life and experience show that Elvis is not the only victim of the circumstances in Nigeria. It would be easy to point a finger of blame at Sunday, Elvis' father, but glimpses into his life show that he too has been irreparably damaged. Although he seems like the cause of Elvis' pain, he is just another casualty of corruption. Every character suffers, and no one lives unscathed. Bits of culture are also thrown into the mix: throughout the book, one can find Nigerian recipes, medicinal uses for herbs and plants, and the procession of the kola nut ritual.

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