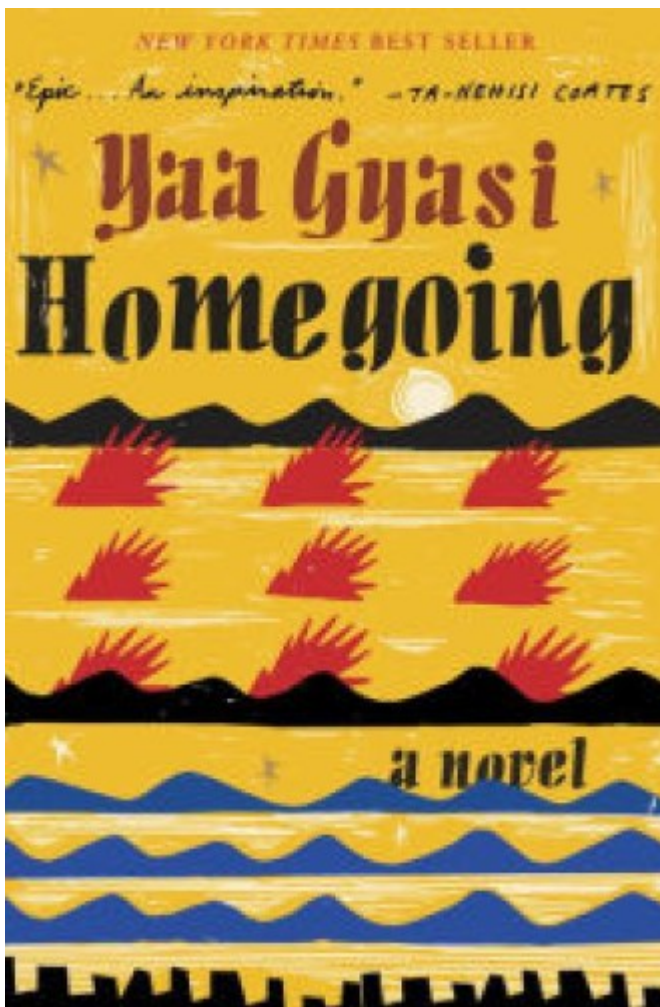


From generation to generation

Yaa Gyasi's novel reveals the freedoms and captivities we all inherit.

by [Erica L. Brown](#) in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Homegoing: A Novel

By Yaa Gyasi
Knopf

"No one forgets that they were once captive, even if they are now free. But, even still, Yaw, you have to let yourself be free." Captivity and freedom find many forms. We may be held in shackles of iron, or imprisoned by invisible bars within our minds. We may know freedom from bondage, from fear, from pain and suffering. We may have the freedom to speak our mind, to be called by our name, freedom to come and go, to learn and grow unfettered by unjust constraints. Yaa Gyasi's sweeping novel explores captivity and freedom passed from one generation to the next, sometimes generously given, sometimes wrested with considerable force.

Effia and Esi are half-sisters unknown to one another. Born in 18th-century Ghana, the two share a mother but little else. Their upbringings, not to mention their adult lives, are vastly different. Effia is given in marriage to a white man, the governor of the Cape Coast Castle, while Esi is captured and sold into slavery, first held in the crowded confines of the castle dungeon. We learn there is a saying about separated sisters: "They are like a woman and her reflection, doomed to stay on opposite sides of the pond." Indeed.

This ambitious novel spans more than seven generations and two continents, following the sisters' descendants as they journey through tribal lands and across vast oceans. Yet the narrative maintains a sharply defined focus, ever mindful of a very real present infused with memories of the past and hopes for the future. The reach of one generation into the other is undeniable as the harsh realities of loss and fear seem to be genetically encoded: fear of fire, of burning to the ground or raging out of control; fear of water, of drowning even on dry land; fear of losing one's self, or of finding oneself.

The prose is at once quietly chilling and hauntingly beautiful. An old woman's scowl is described as "held in place by the hundreds of tiny wrinkles that pulled at her skin, and her nails had grown so long they curled like talons." The tired feet of a pregnant woman are "so swollen that when she shoved them into her work slippers they folded back out and over, like bread that had too much yeast and could not be contained by its pan." A grandmother's voice is likened to "one of the seven wonders of the world. It was enough to stir in him all of the hope and love and faith that he would ever possess, all coming together to make his heart pulse and his palms sweat."

Recurrent themes echo through the years, inherited from forebears known and unknown. The insistent press of bodies, one against another, whether in the hold of a ship or a tenement apartment. The significant weight of fully feeling and knowing another human being, of acknowledging the other's whole being.

The idea of prayer as an act is seemingly sewn into the day's routine. For instance, Esi's daughter, Ness, prays as she picks cotton, "With the bend, 'Lord, forgive me my sins.' With the pluck, 'Deliver us from evil.' With the lift, 'Protect my son wherever he may be.'" Several generations later, Effia's descendant Akua maintains "prayer was a frenzied chant, a language for those desires of the heart that even the mind did not recognize was there."

The scars imprinted upon broken bodies which hold fast to their integrity create a cartography mapping the way toward wholeness and healing. Some scars are the remnants of physical violence at the hands of cruel masters. Others, inflicted by loved ones tangled in complicated circumstances, cut much more deeply, wounding the soul. This sense of geography is passed from one generation to the next, as courses are charted and direction determined.

As the novel's Marjorie Agyekum discovers, there are those books which find their way under our skin and into our hearts, "the books that she could feel inside of her." *Homegoing* has the capacity to be one such book. It evokes deep pain, and an even deeper sense of hope. It calls upon us all to acknowledge and claim our culpability in the atrocities in our midst. It invites us to feel the fear, harbor the hope, and find our faith in the promise of fusing together past and present in the interest of a future which will indeed allow us to go home, whatever that might look like. Whatever that might mean.