

A prodigal son story on the island of Trinidad

Claire Adam's debut novel is animated by a complicated landscape of family.

by [Abigail J. Paxton](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Golden Child

A Novel

By Claire Adam
SJP for Hogarth

If your son asks for bread, will you give him a stone? The question assumes the answer, but it haunts us all the same. Claire Adam's debut novel poses this question within a story of fathers and sons, set against a lush backdrop on the island of Trinidad. She tells the story in three parts over the course of two days, building around flashbacks and shifting points of view. At times it reads like a parable, at other times a thriller.

Clyde is a working man. He keeps watch over his wife and twin teenage sons. He minds his own business, avoiding cards, rum shops, and street corners. He takes pride in a modest home. Fatherhood is a burden, yes, but a necessary one. There are two kinds of fathers, he thinks: those who work hard to provide for their families and those who don't. He has two kinds of sons, Peter and Paul: one brilliant, the other simple. No in-between.

Within the first few pages, Paul goes missing. Clyde's own prodigal son confounds his binary thinking as the novel leads us deeper into the search and into the boys' personalities.

We learn that Paul lets his hair grow wild and wanders the bush in the night. People call him Tarzan. He's the opposite of Peter, who was docile and bright from the beginning and is now poised to attend college in the United States. Paul was a sickly baby. The family was told that Paul didn't have enough oxygen at birth and would always suffer from slight brain damage. Peter learned as a toddler to explain Paul's outbursts to people, saying, "We're twins. And he's retarded, he needs somebody to hold his hand sometimes."

The family dynamics feel familiar: Clyde worries about Peter's success while his wife, Joy, fixates on Paul and on keeping the boys together. Peter appeases the tension by coaching Paul through their expensive private schooling, mitigating Clyde's threats of sending him to a mental hospital. All the while, Paul is left alone to wake in the night and wander in the dark. "Why should he drag Peter out into the bush in the middle of the night, just to please Paul?" Clyde thinks when Paul goes missing and Joy suggests that Peter help in the search.

The heated tangle of Trinidad's landscape surrounds the story with its snarl of tree roots, tall grasses, and hiding places for spirits and runaways. Imminent dangers

unfurl in complicated gang systems, mysterious kidnappings, bandits, and murders. Dogs snap at the gates. Rains flood the roads.

Then Adam pivots to Paul's point of view. Hurricane rains are but a change in the weather; bloodthirsty dogs are just a game. He daydreams of his first kiss with a girl and taking her to the Deluxe Cinema. He escapes the house to lie on the grass by the river. As a little boy, he took comfort in pressing his ear to Clyde's chest and taking in his father's heartbeat or the sounds of his snoring at night. "He closes his eyes, tries to fix his mind on the feeling of his father's arms around him: his scent, the rhythm of his gait, labouring under his burden."

But where is Paul now? The specificities of Trinidad, particularly for readers who know little about the culture of the island, add to the suspense. It is a country with a history of colonization, where ethnicity and religion have been shaken up into a unique blend of Christian and Hindu, African and Indian.

Yet it also feels like any small town. Joy's relatives spill out onto their patio for a barbecue on the weekend, drinking and bickering. Family is central even when the dynamics are strange and strained. Economic disparity and questions of corruption and gang involvement keep the relationships fragile. "You see this country?" Clyde says. "Any bit of money you have? You have to hide it away."

We feel the anxiety of finances. Joy does quick budgeting of their modest income, the worth of their house, and projections of her income on a newspaper. Everything is a stretch.

The story feels like it could go on for 500 pages, the tensions stretching among distinct characters and the rich island culture. Yet Adam keeps her writing spare. The novel leaves us wondering about the systems we've crafted to understand our families and ourselves. Sometimes, a child's role in the family simplifies things, preserving our best hopes despite the heaviness of parental burdens. And sometimes the family story sours, becomes nearsighted, and forces foreclosure on the possibilities of our children.

The winding rivers and brooding rainclouds of the island reflect this complicated landscape of family, siblings, and fatherhood. Adam expertly brings goodness and decency up against the shadows of necessity and desperation. Paul and Clyde must confront the looming danger and what is expected of them. Will the prodigal make it home? Must we sell all we have? And if it comes down to it, would we rob Peter to

pay Paul?