

The Secret of the Purple Lake.

Yaba Badoe.

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This collection of short stories aimed at teen readers by renowned film maker Yaba Badoe is an exciting melding of narrative styles and storytelling traditions that traverses the world and multiple cultures. This interesting merging of worlds is carried over into the relationship between humans and animals that progressively moves from co-mingling, to an overlap and eventually ends with some of the characters becoming sēmiferis.

The transformation of characters from human to partial animal is part of a transcendental process. Even in “The Fish-Man of Purple Lake”, where Musa is transformed into a monstrous half-man half-fish it serves the purpose of being educative thus giving him the opportunity to repent and beg for forgiveness in order to return to his human form as a more enlightened, but humble, man. The humans thus-altered are imbued with power and magical qualities possible only in these combination beings. For example, Whale, Ajuba’s friend and constant companion throughout the remainder of the book, tells her, shortly after her legs are replaced with a fish tail, that she has the best of both worlds. Only with animal features, and therefore qualities, are the characters able to attain certain powers beyond that which is human. Badoe uses this positive depiction of human-animal hybrids to engage with the flawed nature of humans by making it such that only through animals and an affinity with nature can any form of life-affirming power be realised. This point is further illustrated by the fact that all changes that occur within the collection are from human to animal, not vice versa.

One of the coruscating features of this collection is that each of the stories can be read as a stand-alone story, but the characters and storylines are also seamlessly interwoven into other narratives within the collection, such that the text ends up as a combination of a short story collection and novella. Badoe’s use of

language is elegant and contributes significantly to crafting the interchanging worlds of her stories that are at once transposable yet distinct and unique. While it is the language that brings her worlds together, it is her attention to the details of the geography, customs, music, food and drink that distinguishes each culture and each world through which the narrative flows.

The book opens with “The Fishman’s Daughter”, a story, set in Ghana, about Ajuba who is driven out her village after the death of her father while fishing in the ocean and is forced to live out her days in the ocean also. She re-emerges later in the book as the mermaid-love of a Norseland viking, Prince Leo, who is himself transformed from a prince, to a walrus and finally to a merman in “The Walrus Prince”. Whilst the “The Fishman’s Daughter” is written in the narrative style of an African tale replete with West African undertones, the following stories are written in the convention of the Western fairy tale starting with “The Wild Princesses of Orkney”, within which the setting of Scotland is evident in the scenery and traditions woven into the story. The fairy tale aspect of this story is concretised by the princesses searching for husbands, *à la* the Grimm Brothers. It is in this story that we are first introduced to Prince Leo who is drowned in this story and resurrected in “The Walrus Prince” where Badoe transports the reader to Norseland, again through the subtleties of details like the representation of foods and beliefs. Although “Romilly The Golden Eagle” is the prequel to “The Wild Princesses of Orkney”, giving us insight into the princesses’ parents and the deterioration of their relationship, and an understanding of how they find themselves with an absent mother who can transform into an eagle, and forced into marriage by their father; the majority of the story is set in the Middle East. The narration is consistent with the location. Aspects of Western fairy tales are again present, with Romilly playing the role of the fairy god mother and granting her daughter good fortune in marriage. The final story in the collection, “The Fish-man of the Purple Lake”, can be read as the closing of the circle. Not only is the story set back in Ghana, but we also learn how the fish-man, who we first meet in “The Fishman’s Daughter”, came to meet

the terrible fate of loneliness and an inability to make friends. Illustrating her narration skills, Badoe credibly brings Romilly back into the narrative not only in the role of the fairy god mother, but also as the Musa’s long deceased ancestor.

There are instances of slightly untidy editing, particularly in “The Wild Princesses of Orkney” where there is an abruptness in the narrative that is somewhat jarring, and a clumsy introduction to the youngest princess Jewel, after several pages having lapsed in which Jael was proclaimed the youngest of the siblings, hence her elevation to the status of boy-child. However, what I found to be one of the greatest let-downs of this collection was the author’s failure to more clearly problematise the gendered roles and stereotypes that make up both the Western and African fairy tale form in which she wrote her book. Whilst it is possible for the collection to be read against the grain and there is a tongue-in-cheek reading possible, it is not likely that this will be a skill or ability that her implied reader will be in possession of. The other disappointment in the book is the illustrations—they lack the sophistication necessitated by the narrative and indeed detract from the overall loveliness of the collection.

However, Badoe is to be congratulated on her collection for its thought-provoking conflation of worlds, both human and animal, cultures and storytelling traditions to produce a collection of stories that are obviously set in very different locations and cultures, yet manage not only to be part of the same collection, but are also cleverly interwoven without it seeming contrived or incredible. This book is an ideal offering in our current push towards a global amalgamation of languages, cultures and universally accepted modes of conduct and a way to show future generations possibilities for peaceful co-existing.

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