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**Book Review**  
**GraceLand**  
A Novel  
by [Chris Abani](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer  
Posted: October 7, 2005

Elvis is not called Elvis for nothing. Named by his late mother for her favorite musician, he is not only an Elvis Presley fan himself but an Elvis imitator on a small scale. With pancake makeup, a jumpsuit, and a boom box he performs for tourists on the beach and hopes for tips — just one of many schemes, some more illegal and dangerous than others, with which he tries to survive.

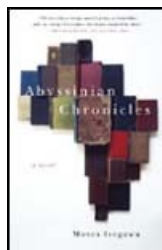
*GraceLand* is set in Lagos, with flashbacks to other locations, and Abani presents all the filth and violence and energy of the city, from the smell of the lagoons to the shantytowns that spring up under the highway flyovers. So fatalistic are the inhabitants of Lagos, we see, that they cross the highways by flinging themselves into traffic. The many pedestrian bridges go unused.

*GraceLand* is packed with incident and observation: sometimes a little too packed. But when the observations are as sharp as most of Abani's, it's forgivable. It might not have been really necessary, for instance, to have one character explain how the World Bank and IMF rip off developing countries — but the explanation is one of the most clear and concise I've ever seen.

Like *Abyssinian Chronicles*, *GraceLand* features scenes of intense violence that are hard to read, but both books are redeemed by scathing honesty and a good dose of dark humor. Toward the end of the book, Elvis, the main character, observes a starving man who is dancing and talking to himself. "The man laughed, and as his diaphragm shook, Elvis thought he heard the man's ribs knocking together, producing a sweet, haunting melody like the wooden xylophones of his small-town childhood."


**About the Reviewer**

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at [www.geoffwisner.com](http://www.geoffwisner.com).



Abyssinian Chronicles  
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—Mahatma Gandhi