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# 'Speak No Evil' Review: The Dangerous Passage to Manhood

Uzodinma Iweala's new novel explores a young man's search for identity, complicated by love, duty and cultural misunderstandings.



Novelist Uzodinma Iweala.

PHOTO: CAROLINE CUSE

*By Geoff Wisner*

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**In 2005**, the Nigerian-American writer Uzodinma Iweala published his first novel. He had just turned 23, having graduated from Harvard the year before.

"Beasts of No Nation" was a tale of suffering and violence told by a child soldier in an unnamed African country. The book was an enormous success, winning for its author a raft of awards and a spot on Granta's list of 20 best young American novelists. A movie version starred Idris Elba as the sinister Commandant.

More than a decade after “Beasts of No Nation” comes Mr. Iweala’s second novel, “Speak No Evil,” at first glance a much tamer affair. Niru Ikemadu is the son of successful Nigerian immigrants, his father a corporate CEO and his mother a physician. A senior at a private high school in Washington, D.C., Niru is a track star who has won early admission to Harvard. Nothing for him to do, it seems, but coast to the end of the school year, then enjoy the summer.

But Niru has a secret, on which much of the story hinges. A spoiler alert may be called for, although the secret is revealed on the jacket of the book, and on page 16 of the story.

Niru is gay. Or in any event, he strongly suspects that he is gay.

This wouldn’t appear to be a problem in the sort of place where we first meet him, a Global Literatures class taught by one Ms. McConnell, who has traveled and taught in Kenya and India. Niru likes his teacher but finds her somewhat naive. Her classroom is decorated with what Niru suspects are the sort of “freshly made antiques” sold to tourists.

“Sometimes Ms. McConnell burns incense and the room smells of sandalwood or cinnamon. It makes my nostrils tickle.”

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## SPEAK NO EVIL

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By Uzodinma Iweala

*Harper, 214 pages, \$26.99*

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Ms. McConnell would surely not be fazed if Niru came out to her, but Niru’s father is another matter. A survivor of the war in Biafra, he does his best to control everything and everyone around him. “He is all power, all will,” says Niru.

“He’s the one who reminds us constantly that if he could walk ten miles to get sardines and tinned tomatoes for his family during the war, dodging low-flying Nigerian fighter planes that made a sport of strafing hungry refugees, then there is nothing he or we can’t do.”

When Niru's father finds his son sending messages to a young man he found through a gay dating service, he is angry and confused. He assaults Niru physically, takes him to be questioned by the family's minister, and then packs him off to Nigeria for some religious reprogramming.

Niru's mother is more accepting, but despite being a doctor in America, she finds it hard to stand up to her husband, and perhaps for that reason is deferential outside the home as well. "She folds her hands in her lap and breathes in deeply each time she wants to say something. She does this with contractors and delivery people, anyone she feels might not listen—a deep breath in, her eyes closed, and then her words coming out on the next breath before she can think again."

Niru himself, though raised in America and praised for his athletic and academic skills, also has trouble asserting himself. He loves and doesn't want to hurt his parents and his older brother, now off at college. He is not at all sure that the ministers are wrong when they see something unclean in his desires.

It doesn't help that the confrontation with his father was triggered by the actions of his friend Meredith, a young white woman whose sense of safety and entitlement causes her to overstep boundaries. Having discovered that her attraction to Niru won't be reciprocated, she takes it upon herself to put him on the path to romantic bliss. It is she who downloads the dating app onto Niru's phone.

If Niru's struggle with family, friends and sexuality makes "Speak No Evil" sound like a YA novel, then perhaps it is. Certainly it tells its story through the voices of young adults: Niru for the first two-thirds of the book, and Meredith for the final third. The language is clean and direct enough to be read by young people, and the sexual scenes not overly explicit. But the author brings an adult sensibility to his subject.

"Beasts of No Nation" was an impressive achievement for a student writer, but part of that achievement was an artful blurring of the kind of detail that could only have been acquired with more experience, or at least more research. Though it takes place in seemingly safe D.C. rather than a war-torn African nation, "Speak No Evil" is a more ambitious and riskier novel, with a deeper understanding of its

characters' conflicted hearts. Mr. Iweala's novel weaves together sexual, religious and political strands as it builds to a devastating climax.

*—Mr. Wisner is the author of “A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa” and the editor of “African Lives: An Anthology of Memoirs and Autobiographies.”*