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A Broken Nigerian Marriage

A debut novel that centers on wedlock and childbirth, in a society where those two mean everything.

Geoff Wisner reviews 'Stay With Me' by Ayobami Adebayo.

By Geoff Wisner

Aug. 18, 2017 4:45 pm ET

'**Stay With Me**,' the accomplished debut novel by the Nigerian author Ayobami Adebayo, begins at the end, or nearly the end. It is December 2008, and for 15 years a woman named Yejide has been living alone in the city of Jos: a few friends, a few lovers, and a hair salon that provides a comfortable income.

Three young men, each doing his mandatory year of service in Jos, are murdered in election violence. Yejide decides it is time to leave Jos and return to Ife, the university town 500 miles away where she met her estranged husband, Akin, and where they had tried to make a family.

"Nobody here knows I'm still married to you," she writes to Akin on the day of her departure. "I only tell them a slice of the story: I was barren and my husband took another wife. No one has ever probed further, so I've never told them about my children." There were three: a daughter, a son, another daughter. All died young.

It's a seemingly simple premise, and a rather bleak situation. But as the novel unfolds, we find that Yejide's story is far from simple, and by the end it no longer looks so bleak.

American readers could be forgiven for assuming that the title "Stay With Me" is the plea of an unhappy wife to her husband. In fact, it is the plea of an unhappy mother who fears that her child is destined to die. The death of a child is devastating anywhere, but in a culture like the Yoruba, where a woman may be

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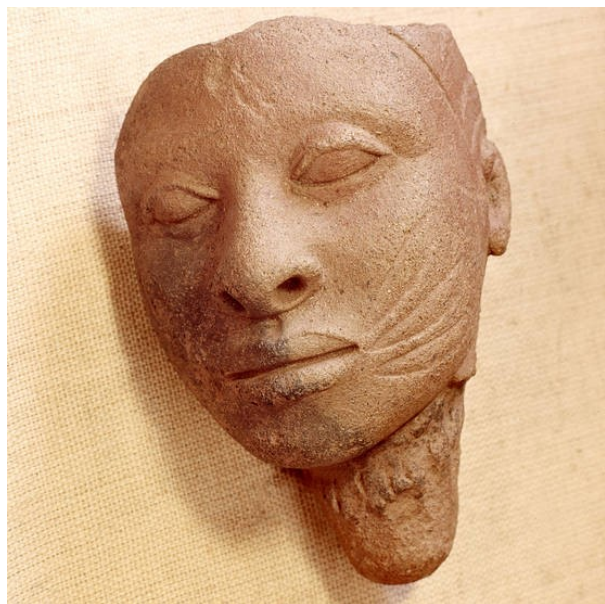


PHOTO: ALAMY

STAY WITH ME

By Ayobami Adebayo

Knopf, 260 pages, \$25.95

referred to as Iya Ade, or “mother of Ade,” the death of a child undermines her very identity.

Yejide and Akin struggle for several years to have a child. As time passes, relatives get involved. Under pressure from his mother, Akin takes a younger second wife, who addresses Yejide as “our mother.” “Her words pierced me,” Yejide says. “I was not her mother. I was not anybody’s mother. People still called me Yejide. I was not Iya This or Iya That. I was still merely Yejide.”

Akin’s feckless younger brother Dotun offers to lend the couple his youngest son, on the theory that the presence of a child in the house might help hurry another into the world. She warms to the idea, and to Dotun himself. True to his nature, Dotun fails to fulfill his promise, yet he lingers as a disquieting presence in Yejide’s life.

Yejide and Akin are educated city people, but old traditions live on in their psyches. Desperate to conceive before the second wife does, Yejide finds herself leading a goat up the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Miracles to meet a supposed

miracle worker. When Yejide's first child dies young and her second is hospitalized with sickle cell disease, Akin's mother declares that the children are *Abiku*, the Yoruba term for a spirit that is born to a mother again and again, never intending to live long.

The novel is peppered with details that make it clear it is not taking place in, say, Cleveland. This is a world where robbers send a letter to their victims ahead of time, announcing their imminent arrival and specifying how much money they expect the household to collect for them. In Yejide's hair salon one day, her customers compare pounding yam to the act of love in a way that makes her increasingly uncomfortable. "Madam, why is your face hard like this?" one asks her. "*Abi*, you don't eat midnight-pounded yam?"

"Stay With Me" is told in chapters that alternate between Yejide's and Akin's points of view. Unlike so many first-time novelists, Ms. Adebayo shows empathy with all her characters, no matter how selfish or wrongheaded they may sometimes be.

Ms. Adebayo excels at conveying Yejide's turbulent, and defiant, emotional life. "I was armed with millions of smiles. Apologetic smiles, pity-me smiles, I-look-onto-God smiles—name all the fake smiles needed to get through an afternoon with a group of people who claim to want the best for you while poking at your open sore with a stick—and I had them ready."

The more stoic suffering of her husband, Akin, is conveyed with terse language and sentence fragments. "The word 'sweetheart' always sounded strange on her lips," he says of his second wife. "It was a word she did not mean and I did not believe. But she kept saying it as if she thought repeating it would make it true."

The personalities and motivations of Ms. Adebayo's characters are believable, though their physical presences are barely sketched in. Akin describes Yejide early in the book: "She was effortlessly elegant. Only girl on the row who didn't slouch." But there is no description of Akin until much later: "His skin was bronze-brown and in the sun it took on a glossy sheen."

The same is true of the cities and landscapes through which the author's people

move. There is little sense of what it is like to climb the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Miracles, or why the city of Jos is considered beautiful. The book has a headlong momentum that keeps us turning the pages, but the strain of stage-managing all the secrets, betrayals, and misunderstandings that drive the plot sometimes shows. When the last page is turned and we think back over what has happened, plot holes that escaped us in this flurry of activity become apparent. Isn't Akin too intelligent to overlook the flaws in his scheme to have children? Is it plausible that an important secret could have been kept from Yejide for 15 years?

When Ms. Adebayo takes a moment to breathe, her characters express themselves with beautiful clarity. Confronted with the new wife Akin has taken in secret, Yejide says, "Rage closed its flaming hands around my heart." Sitting by the bed of an ailing child, "Loneliness wrapped itself around me like a shroud." Moments like this, even more than the author's gift for plot, are the reason to look forward to more work from Ayobami Adebayo.

—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."

Appeared in the August 19, 2017, print edition as '.'