

# Reviews...



## BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE d. Jasmin Dizdar (1999)

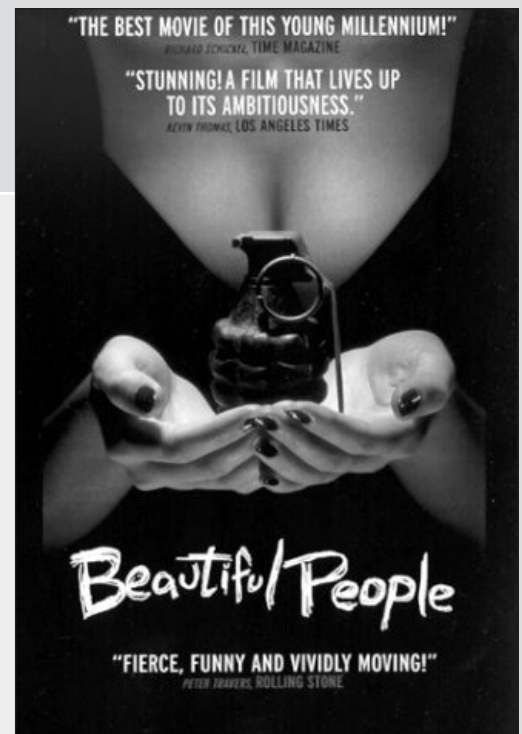
Now available on video

"You're English. Never forget that". So one English football hooligan tells another in *Beautiful People*, a movie about the day-to-day travails of an assortment of Bosnian refugees in London but which has a few corrosively pertinent things to say about nationalism of any stripe. While English football hooligans play at refighting old battles in the pubs and in the stands, entire nationalities do the same thing for real in vicious wars. It's the same myopic hatred, just on an immensely larger scale.

The Balkans have provided tragically fertile soil for filmmakers in recent years. *Beautiful People*, a British film by a Bosnian director, is partly a black comedy but also a poignantly knowing portrait of refugees in a country whose attitude to them is deeply ambivalent. They are a dislocated underclass, housed in council flats if at all, let adrift in a strange place, hampered by language barriers in gaining access to services such as health, patronised by the complacent upper class, kept at arm's length by mealy-mouthed politicians and regarded by established immigrant communities as a threat to already dwindling resources. To the racist white unemployed, they are to be scorned, blamed and resented. Problems at home, problems abroad.

Several stories are skillfully tracked. Refugees encounter an indifferent Britain; Londoners encounter a distant and unwanted war. Idealism collides with pragmatism. An idealistic young medico falls in love with a handsome refugee at her NHS clinic, to the distaste of her snobbish Establishment family; when she takes him home, one of them says cluelessly "personally, I'm very much against ethnic cleansing" while another holds up the historical fact that the English Civil War was 400 years ago as some kind of lesson. A young husband and his wife, raped by Serbs in the war, seek an abortion from a weary English doctor on the edge, himself battling an ex-wife for custody of his own kids. A middle-aged Croat and Serb get into a name-calling brawl on a London bus and pursue their rather farcical vendetta even into the hospital ward they end up sharing with a curmudgeonly Welshman; and a paralytically hungover English soccer hooligan named Griffin wakes up in wartorn Bosnia without a clue how he came to be there.

*Beautiful People's* humanism brings an appealing warmth. When Griffin is awoken by starving Bosnian peasants poking at him, it's boisterous black humour; but when he stumbles uncomprehendingly through a UN field hospital, farce is mixed with tragedy. He volunteers his stash of heroin to anaesthetise a bloody amputation, his first ever act of true selflessness. It's a moving sequence upon which the movie and indeed the whole of Griffin's life hinges – when he returns home Griffin is no longer a mindlessly xenophobic football hooligan. The Bosnian husband and wife are slowly persuaded by the weary English doctor's benign humanity that they cannot visit the prejudices



of the past on an unborn, blameless child. The grumpy, hostile Welshman in the hospital ward - product of a culture repressed for centuries by the English - makes the Serb and the Croat put aside their animosities, or at least compel them to understand that they aren't the only peoples with a bone to pick.

Their stories are realistic and humanely told, and engagingly small-scale even if the issues are not. If I have one criticism of *Beautiful People*, it's that the resolution of the various stories is a little too schematic, a little too neat, and the story of the BBC war correspondent grappling with post-traumatic stress syndrome is not quite convincing. On the whole, *Beautiful People* blends black humour and humanist concern to bring empathy and a sense of hope. The concluding scenes - video footage of a happy wedding day in Bosnia before savage animosities overwhelmed it - are a bitter-sweet echo of the weary English doctor's advice to the young pregnant Bosnian bride: "If life works out just a tiny little bit in your favour, it can be beautiful". Words of a sadder and wiser man.

**Reviewed by David Bolton**



## ABYSSINIAN CHRONICLES

By Moses Isegawa

Picador \$21.00 PB 493 PP

It is not often that a book dealing with life in Uganda captures the imagination of Western prose readers. Moses Isegawa's thinly-disguised autobiographical narrator Mugezi matures from a wide-eyed boy observant of village life to a politically astute adult having experienced personal loss against a background of national tragedy.

This book is an observation of post-colonial decay set on a large canvas of vibrant characters drenched in superstition, Catholicism and sexual longing.

The tale opens with the flavour of magic realism as Mugezi's father Serenity is caught in the jaws of a crocodile. By the time of Mugezi's final flight to Amsterdam, Uganda is in the grip of a far sinister predator - AIDS.

It would be wrong to assume that Isegawa's debut novel is solely a story of endless despair. Ultimately it is optimistic and characterised by some amusing vignettes. The discovery the narrator's mother is nicknamed "Padlock" on her wedding night illustrates this vibrant family is not bereft of humour. Inevitably, Idi Amin Dada cast a formidable shadow over the proceedings thereby undermining Mugezi's trust in his country's leader.

In 1971 Idi Amin seized power from Obote in a bloody coup declaring himself president for life. He traded

with Britain and the US while flirting with the socialist world. It was the war with Tanzania in 1979 that forced him to flee Kampala and a bankrupt country.

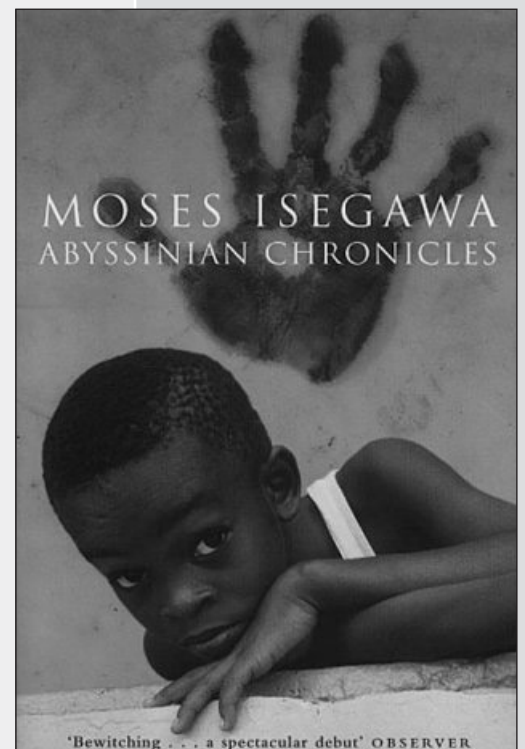
Mugezi's discovery of his grandfather's broken body on a street corner and the horror of his aunt Kasawo's gang rape is a potent reminder of how human tragedy can ignite an author's passion. His course through life as an above-average student, school-teacher, liquor brewer, black marketeer and politically-astute operator is threatened by the country's abyss. Serenity believes Abyssinia (Ethiopia's ancient name) is a fitting name for modern Uganda: "land of false bottoms." Never is there an end to the depth of despair.

Isegawa's move to Amsterdam has given him the distance he needed to reflect with clarity on the sadness of his country's post-colonial history.

In scope this vast debut novel can be compared with the celebrated works of Salman Rushdie giving us a bitter-sweet taste of life in a forgotten part of the developing world.

It is to be hoped this welcome English translation will herald future works of quality from countries too often without a voice. Tired he may be of First World cocktail perceptions of Africa, he is nevertheless as celebrated in Europe as he is in his beloved homeland. This searing, passionate work of life on the inside of a country on the road to political and economic order is highly recommended.

**Reviewed by Peter Bouilly**



# Reviews

# Transitions

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### As if I am not there: A NOVEL ABOUT THE BALKANS Slavenka Drakulic\*

(Abacus, 1999. r.r.p. \$25.25)

Those of us lucky enough to have been born and grown up in Australia can not fully appreciate what it is that survivors of genocide/ethnic cleansing, political violence, torture and rape have gone through. Certainly, we have images, statistics and daily news reports of humanity's inhumanity. However, we can not presume to know what an individual has suffered. When the philosopher Martin Buber was challenged on the number of Jews who perished in the Nazi Holocaust he replied that it did not matter if it were 6 million or not, it mattered still if it happened to only one person. Our emotional response and insight is greater from an account of personal outrages than from the cold tabulation of human rights violations. It is through personal accounts rather than statistics that we can know their pain. It is to fiction or biography we must turn for some insight into the emotional life of individuals caught up in these atrocities. Drakulic's novel is one such.

The narrative follows a year (1992/93) in the life of S. a primary school teacher in a Bosnian village. The book opens with S. (daughter of a Serbian mother and Muslim father) just having given birth to a boy conceived from one of many pack rapes/beatings she underwent in a concentration camp (it is estimated that up to 60,000 women have been raped in the Balkans conflicts). We are then

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of Torture and Trauma Survivors**

taken back to the day Serbian forces enter her village, separated the males and females and transported them to adjacent death camps. For the first few weeks S. undergoes privation in the form of minimal shelter and food. When she is transferred to “the women’s room” she is subjected, almost nightly, to gang rapes and bashings. After 3 months in the camp she catches the eye of “The Captain” who while feeding her and treating her decently, still takes sexual advantage of her (at this stage S. sees the sex as an acceptable “pay off” for being treated civilly). After 7 months in the camp the women who are still alive are exchanged for Serbian captives. They are dumped over the border in Croatia, and soon find themselves in a refugee camp outside Zagreb. Within a month S. is accepted as a refugee by Sweden and is flown to Copenhagen where she gives birth to the son conceived in the camp.

This is an important and carefully constructed novel - Drakulic is at pains not to make this an anti-Serbian tract. The use of initials only to identify characters means that we are not constantly reminded that this person is Bosnian, Serbian, Muslim, Orthodox, or Catholic. Similarly, apart from chapter headings needed to identify where the action is happening the words Bosnia(n) or Serbia(n) rarely occur in the novel. One is constantly reminded while reading this novel of the universality of abuses the characters undergo. Indeed, this universality is apparent from the novel’s epigraphs - quotes from the writings of Primo Levi (survivor of Auschwitz, and along with Tadeusz Borowski the best chronicler of the Nazi Holocaust), Eva Grlic (survivor of imprisonment and torture in Tito’s Yugoslavia), and Varlam Shalamov (survivor of Kolyma, a Russian concentration camp).

Frequently, while reading this book I was struck by the fact you could change the location from Bosnia to Germany, Poland, or Siberia, from the 1990s to 1930s, 1940s, or 1950s. The story would be basically the same - rape, torture and other forms of brutalisation, with local variations.

Drakulic employs a plain almost distanced style (at least it seems so in this English translation), which paradoxically makes the narrative more powerful, the emotional impact that much greater. Again, Levi and Borowski both use an unadorned style which is all the more affecting for being so.

People who work with traumatised refugees will recognise the emotions, rationalisations, the coping mechanisms S. employs in simply surviving, both in the camp and after. Dissociation, somatization, irrational feelings that one somehow deserves this, not wanting to ask about the “disappeared” in case one is told, the feeling of falling in the crack between the past and the present, the recurrent nightmares, and not having the words to describe your ordeal.

After being released from the camp S.’s ordeal is not yet over. There is the waiting and waiting, there is the finding of a new home. Like many survivors, S. is faced with 2 common responses from people who have not been subjected to such abuses. Firstly, people just don’t want to know - the novel’s title comes from Levi’s book *If this is a man* where he tells of his Auschwitz experience and people, including his family, behave “as if I am not there”. Secondly, many people behave as if it were the fault of the survivor, as if they brought it on themselves.

The novel ends on a positive note with S. reconciled with the baby



she did not want (she discovered her pregnancy too late for an abortion). She will probably keep it (the novel opens with the birth and S.’s determination not to touch the child but have it immediately adopted).

If you are looking for an explanation of how or why one group of humans try to turn another group of humans into non-humans this novel will not supply it. If, however, you want an account of the emotional life of a torture survivor I recommend this novel. Read it and marvel, while horrified, at the resilience of the human spirit.

\*Slavenka Drakulic was born in Croatia in 1949. She is a journalist who has written 3 previous novels and 3 books of non-fiction (including *Cafe Europa*). She writes in both Croatian and English. As *If I am not there* was Croatian translated from Croatian into English by Marko Ivic.

A number of articles in English by Drakulic are available on the Internet.

**Reviewed by David Finlay**