

Beneath the Lion's Gaze: An Interview with Author Maaza Mengiste

By Chanté Griffin

Written for VONA Voices Newsletter

The brutal, blood-filled images are commonplace on the front pages of *the New York Times* and in CNN broadcasts: civil wars, upheaval of old regimes, massive change, massive graves. Portraits of Africa's sons fighting.

"I've heard it said," writer Maaza Mengiste begins, "that a revolution usually starts in the name of love. There's a group of people who want to fight and sacrifice for the sake of something greater than them, for the betterment of a group of people. But in the midst of that, we get this violence and this death and chaos."

Mengiste's debut novel, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, depicts the civil unrest that began in Ethiopia in 1974, setting off a wave of killings and subsequent migration from the country. Set in Addis Ababa, the novel shows Emperor Haile Selassie being removed from power after a sixty-year reign while the Derg, a Marxist military group, seizes control of the country. The practices Selassie's government is being removed for —imprisoning and murdering citizens without trials, and allowing thousands of Ethiopians to go hungry,— are ironically the same practices members of the Derg utilize to gain and maintain power.

The Hailu family serves as a microcosm for Ethiopia: Dr. Hailu, his ailing wife, Selam, their sons: Dawit, the younger revolutionary college student, and Yonas, the older college history professor, and their sons' lovers: Sara, Yonas' wife, and Lily, Dawit's girlfriend. Their varied responses to the chaos devastating Ethiopia divides their family, enabling Mengiste to use their discord to illustrate how a country once united began to war against itself.

"With books that come out about Africa or about revolution or civil war in Africa," Mengiste says, "there's a danger in people assuming that this violence — the chaos, the unrest — happens without any historical, political, or social context; that Africans are naturally inclined to fighting; that one day there's peace, and the next day they're turning in their neighbors and trying to kill them."

Mengiste's book challenges this misconception by detailing the individual and collective journeys of the women and men who fought with and against the Derg, each begging empathetic understanding:

"He made us tie them up and drive them away and shoot them." Mickey held his head, his voice was low, a trembling boy's cry. "They kept asking me not to do it." Mickey's hands were clasped tight around his head, squeezing so hard that Dawit was afraid he'd hurt himself. "They told me their wives' names and how many children they had at home. We know them. They went to our school. Some were so old." He was shaking.

Mengiste's time at VONA (Voice of Our Nations Arts Foundation) writing workshop for

writers of color equipped her to do this. “At VONA, people were very open about looking for things through the lens of a writer of color, and being able to say, ‘This may not work because you may be relying on stereotypical imagery.’ Those are things that you’re not going to hear in another workshop or MFA program where there are writers who are not of color.”

The eleven page short story that Mengiste brought to Junot Diaz’s 2004 VONA fiction workshop, (the first she ever wrote about her native country), evolved into the 384 paged book published in January 2010 by W. W. Norton & Company. Mengiste says, “I took the story to VONA. They had a lot of questions. I took it to my MFA classmates. They had a lot of questions. Eventually, I realized that I was actually writing a book.”

Mengiste joins a group of writers whose families fled African countries in the wake of numerous civil wars. They are piecing together their pasts by crafting stories that fuse countries’ shameful war wounds with hushed family histories.

“I’m writing stories that I want to read that I haven’t read yet. I’m writing about things that I feel are important to talk about, a part of my own history. I hadn’t read a book of fiction that dealt with this revolution to the extent that I was curious about,” Mengiste says.

Her and her classmates’ incessant curiosity culminated in a book *the New York Times* writes is “an important novel, rich in compassion for its anguished characters.”

That’s exactly what Mengiste hoped for when penning the novel. She adds, “I hope the book becomes just one way to start the dialogue between the children who remember parts of this time and their parents who hold all of the painful memories but don’t want to talk about it.”

You can learn more about Maaza Mangiste and order a copy of *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* at www.maazamengiste.com.

Meeting Faith Book Review
By Chanté Griffin
Written for *Beneath the Surface*

Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun

Hungry for a good read? *Meeting Faith* is two hundred eighty-one pages of deliciousness you don’t want to pass up. I now know why the book won the 2005 PEN Beyond Margins Award for Best Memoir and received an enthusiastic thumbs up from *O Magazine*. In it, the author does what good writers should. She takes me on a journey, shows me something beautiful, and makes me not want to come back.

Meeting Faith details the period of time in which the author, Faith, on the verge of flunking out of college, takes some “time off” from school. But unlike most students who travel to Paris or Italy, backpacks in tow, Faith Adiele travels to the Far East – to the remote areas of Thailand. A self-declared sociologist, she jumps head first (and hairless might I add) into a Thai wat seeking to understand Buddhism and women’s roles in the religion. (Are you sensing her ardent commitment?) She exchanges comfort, pleasure, and daily communication for a commitment to refrain from entertainment, touching money, all forms of entertainment, sleeping on soft surfaces, and consuming food at inappropriate times, which is most of the time. Sound fun?

The reader follows Faith as she attempts to live by seemingly impossible rules. (*You try not killing a single bug while living in a forest!*) Pushed by her teacher, Maechi Roongduan, she progresses, so that what once seemed impossible for Faith’s mind and body becomes customary.

Fusing together journal entries, detailed sociologist’s notes, classic Buddhist texts, and childhood memories, Faith weaves together a tale of her time with a group of Thailand’s maechi (Buddhist nuns) that is educational, yet extremely personal. Faith learns that while studying them, she must examine herself, and in discovering their faith, she must uncover her own as well.

Yes, this book is about faith, but it is just as much about identity: what defines us, what drives us. And whether you are a person of faith or one who is searching, I would definitely recommend meeting Faith because she writes with an honesty that is refreshing and challenging. With bravery and beauty, she bares her being:

“...The surprising decision to ordain and what I learned during my short, short tenure as a nun revised the very premises of my life. I’d been raised to believe in myself, in intellect, in the Western tenets of self and science, and I’d taught myself not to fail. Soon everything I knew and counted on would be stripped away. As it turned out, failure was the first step toward real life.”