

Wandering Star and Onitsha

Two novels by Jean-Marie Gustave LeClézio

Reviewed by Kristianne Huntsberger

J.M.G LeClézio's Nobel award may have been a deliberate snub of the solipsistic American literary world, but it is also a triumph for French literature, unrecognized with the prize for twenty years. Of course, LeClézio cannot be reduced to an icon of national pride. He links his own identity to Mauritius, the Indian Ocean Island where his British father was born and where LeClézio holds joint citizenship. Even French President Nicholas Sarkozy has admitted LeClézio is a son of the world, rather than merely of France. LeClézio spent portions of his childhood in Mauritius and Nigeria. On his own, he has moved persistently around the globe, living in England, the United States, and even for several years with a tribe in Panama.

As can be expected, LeClézio's writing reflects this nomadic element of his life. In Wandering Star, the last of his novels to be translated into English, he grapples with displacement and loss. "Is it ever really possible to retrieve what you've left behind?" his character Esther wonders when she is young and her mother still calls her Héléne to hide her Jewish heritage. It is World War II and the two women are forced to pack quickly and flee over the mountains toward Italy and across the sea toward Jerusalem. The terror of war and homelessness is not just experienced by Esther and her mother and the thousands of others on the same path through hostile Europe. LeClézio exposes also the hunger and heat of the refuge camp where Nejma, a young Arab girl, is confined after being similarly forced to flee her home right as Esther arrives in the newly formed and already conflicted state of Israel. As the two women pass one another on the dusty road, Esther approaching her new home, Nejma being turned out of hers, they come face to face and exchange names. This encounter manages to strip away the ideology of war and show us instead the human faces, inspiring each of the women to tell her story.

In his Nobel lecture LeClézio stated that, "if there is one virtue which the writer's pen must always have, it is that it must never be used to praise the powerful, even with the faintest of scribblings." As a model post-colonial author, his work has closely followed this prescription. He is concerned with the human lives caught in the power struggle. His semi-autobiographical novel Onitsha outlines the complicated balance of European guilt and paternalistic tribal envy expressed by the colonial family. The young and resilient boy narrator, Fintan, describes his acclimation to life in Africa, seeded with the country's own embodied resentment of white men. Fintan's mother, an untamable Italian, is trapped between propriety and her spirited nature. She, like the land and the native people, is dominated by the colonial rulers. Fintan's father is a hesitant member of the ruling British business class. More shadow than presence in his family's lives, he spends most of his energy pursuing an obsession with a mysterious queen and the savage Niger River. The three are bound together by their fascination for the wild and captivating native girl, Oya, who is as silent as the country they inhabit. LeClézio's characters spend less time impacting the place than being impacted by it. In Fintan's startling

reaggregation to life back in Europe, he is haunted by Africa and affected by how remote the country is to his own sister, who has lived her entire life in the South of France. He wonders, “Is Africa, for you, no more than a name, a land like any other, a continent one talks about in newspaper and books, a place that is mentioned only because there is a war going on? In Nice, in your room at the university with its angel’s name, you are cut off; there is nothing to keep the thread intact.” It is no surprise that LeClézio should be duly praised for how clearly he speaks to the condition of our time.