

BOOK REVIEW: GRACELAND BY CHRIS ABANI

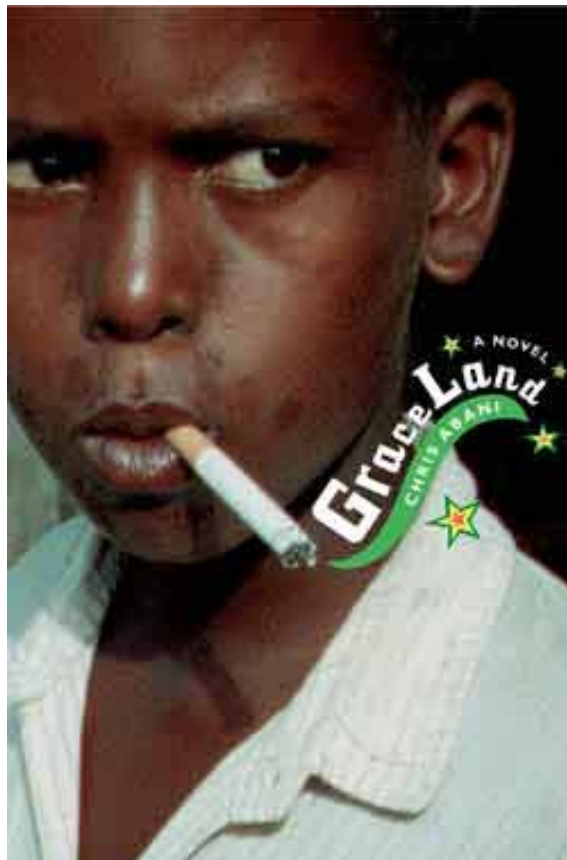
Elaine Moore¹

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“This is a journey to manhood, to life; it cannot be easy.”

Such pragmatism is the heart of Chris Abani’s novel *Graceland*. In the swamps and skyscrapers of 1980’s Lagos we meet Elvis Oke, a teenager living in the Maroko ghetto, who is attempting to earn a living as an Elvis Presley impersonator. Clad in a white shirt, a black wig and with his face covered in talcum powder, he spends his days dancing on the beach for rich tourists. His movements may be fluid as a wave, but his exertions are unappreciated: “He don’t look like any Elvis I know” is one ungrateful tourist’s typical reaction. Such an idealist way of life cannot last. In Lagos, where “though each square was distinctive, the city remained as



general as an insult shouted on a crowded street”, corrupt and sordid ways of making money abound, and it does not take long for Elvis to become embroiled in affairs which he has no way of extracting himself from safely.

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This is a coming of age novel – of an adolescent boy and a young and troubled country searching for direction. The teenage habits of swagger and posturing which both employ only serve to exacerbate their vulnerability. Nigeria is presented as a country rich in activity – its people are constantly talking, eating or moving; but also one steeped in casual violence, poverty and death. “Life in Lagos is a gamble,” says Elvis’ best friend Redemption, and not everybody is cut out for survival.

Nigerian writers have consistently defied intense persecution by the state to produce some startling work, and Chris Abani is no exception. He was held as a political prisoner three times before he left to live in the US, and cites these experiences as the reason he began writing poetry. His poems are startling for their ability to describe in graphic detail wrenching pain without resorting to mawkish sentimentality. His poem ‘Break a Leg’ begins: “His foot/ torn off at the ankle/Half wrapped in corrugated iron/Held the promise of a gift.” The dichotomy created between lyrical dexterity and nauseously detailed descriptions of suffering can catch the reader off guard, reaching them before they have had time to veil the experience behind their cynicism. Some of the most affecting episodes in *Graceland* are the descriptions of physical torture which rarely last for more than a paragraph, but which linger in the reader’s memory.

Abani is adamant that he is not just a product of these experiences and has repeatedly stressed in interviews that he is interested in the craft of writing, not just the impulses behind it. Though the reader can feel harried at times as they are pushed past episodes they might wish to linger on, the verve of the writing is captivating. A novel on such a large scale, encompassing different decades and a host of characters, is bound to lose some details, and in this case it is the characterisation which does not always feel complete. The novel is at its best when describing vignettes of daily life, which are affectionate and funny, the struggle of a boy and a country full of contradictions.

A constant theme in the novel, and one which covers both personal and political life, is conscience. How, Elvis repeatedly asks, can people stand back and do nothing as brutality unfolds around them. Why do they not change the country, when those who cause the trouble are in the minority? In the end it is his father who offers the most convincing answer: “It’s not because nobody tried” he explains, “but because de reasons are complicated”.