

Analysis

"De Zwarte met het Witte Hart"

English (literally): “the black with the white heart”

English title: “The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boachi”

by Arthur Japin

This book was written by Arthur Japin (1956), a Dutch author, who worked as an actor, before becoming a published author. His father, who committed suicide was a playwright, who was only marginally successful. His father is my grandmother’s cousin.

Author

Arthur Japin wrote some smaller books, but had his first big success in Dutch literature by writing the novel “De Swartz met het witte hart”. He has since become well-known for his historical fiction, which is detailed and very well researched. To write the underlying book, he had gotten funding to do research in the tropics. His works often explore themes of identity, cultural clashes, and people who either feel out of place or unwanted.

I have also read “een schitterend gebrek” (EN (literally): a glittering handicap; EN (title) “In Lucia's Eyes”) which also tells a story about a person feeling alone although there are many people around.

Genre

Historical fiction. Japin's novel blends historical events with fictionalized elements to create a captivating narrative.

Storyline

The novel follows the lives of two African princes, Kwasi and Kwame, who were taken from their homeland in present-day Ghana in the early 19th century and sent to Europe as part of a diplomatic mission. They are educated in the Netherlands and later sent to Indonesia, then a Dutch colony. The story explores their

experiences navigating between different cultures and their quest for identity and freedom.

Literary Style

The book is full of vivid, sometimes unconventional descriptions and detailed characterizations and dialogue. There is also symbolism involved.

Summary

The novel delves into the personal struggles and triumphs of Kwasi and Kwame as they confront racism, colonialism, and the complexities of their dual identity. It explores their relationships with each other, their European patrons, and the women in their lives. Against the backdrop of significant historical events, such as the abolition of slavery and the Indonesian independence movement, the protagonists grapple with questions of freedom, loyalty, and belonging.

Meaning and Themes within the Book

"De Zwarte met het Witte Hart" explores themes of identity, cultural heritage, and the impact of colonization on individuals and societies. Subthemes within the novel are obviously the abolition of slavery, the reign of King William I of the Netherlands, prejudice and the living conditions of those days, but the main theme seems to be fitting in and belonging. Through the experiences of Kwasi and Kwame, the novel sheds light on the complexity of human relationships.

Title

The title, "De Zwarte met het Witte Hart," refers to the contrast between the outward appearance (black skin) and inner qualities

(white heart) of the protagonists. It symbolizes the dichotomy between perception and reality, as well as the complexity of human nature.

Structure

The structure is interesting, because the novel has multiple timelines, which can sometimes be confusing. It interconnects characters with different times and countries. Interestingly, the book so much as begins with a man peeing.

The story is divided into sections that tell about the lives of the two main characters, the princes Kwasi and Kwame, who were born in Africa and are brought to Europe as small boys and later about living in Indonesia. You can experience their character development and experiences, expectations and disappointments as they go through life.

The structure of the narration is non-linear and often shifts between past and present occurrences, as well as between the perspectives of different protagonists. This adds depth and complexity and sometimes confusion to the story and is thought to enable a more multifaceted understanding of the characters and their time and experiences.

Real historical events and fiction are interwoven. Kwame and Kwasi lived and the princes were really born in Africa and transferred to Europe, but many of the occurrences in the book seem to have been constructed to provide an understanding of what it would have meant to live in that time and place as well as what it would have meant to have done so as an African prince who is uprooted from his homeland and although materialistically better off than many of his contemporaries either in Africa and the Netherlands, still has to cope with being the eternal “other” and not having an extended family, a real goal in life or a semblance of deeply fitting in.

This has interesting parallels with Arthur Japin’s own life, who has stated at some occasions to have always felt somehow left out and

not understood, although he seems to be doing well in his living arrangements with two men in a kind of three-person-relationship.