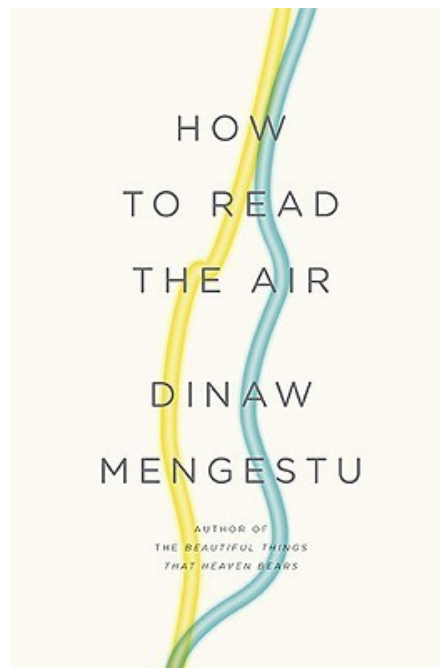




How to Read the Air

Dinaw Mengestu

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How to Read the Air Dinaw Mengestu

A heartbreaking literary masterwork about love, family, and the power of imagination, which confirms Mengestu's reputation as one of the brightest talents of his generation.

Dinaw Mengestu's first novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, earned the young writer comparisons to Bellow, Fitzgerald, and Naipaul, and garnered ecstatic critical praise and awards around the world for its haunting depiction of the immigrant experience. Now Mengestu enriches the themes that defined his debut with a heartbreaking literary masterwork about love, family, and the power of imagination, which confirms his reputation as one of the brightest talents of his generation.

One early September afternoon, Yosef and Mariam, young Ethiopian immigrants who have spent all but their first year of marriage apart, set off on a road trip from their new home in Peoria, Illinois, to Nashville, Tennessee, in search of a new identity as an American couple. Soon, their son, Jonas, will be born in Illinois.

Thirty years later, Yosef has died, and Jonas needs to make sense of the volatile generational and cultural ties that have forged him. How can he envision his future without knowing what has come before? Leaving behind his marriage and job in New York, Jonas sets out to retrace his mother and father's trip and weave together a family history that will take him from the war-torn Ethiopia of his parents' youth to his life in the America of today, a story - real or invented - that holds the possibility of reconciliation and redemption.

How to Read the Air Details

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From Reader Review How to Read the Air for online ebook

Debbie says

Surprisingly very good.

First let me say this book is getting a solid 4 1/2 stars and I mean this in the best possible way. I've had this book in my possession for a while. I've even started it a few times only to put it down but this time, it was as if the book was whispering to me from the shelf. With a wave of a hand a curling of its figurative finger it enticed me to come closer. Keep coming in a little deeper. Just a little deeper, I have a story about a story and some lies and truth to tell. That being said, my friends, pick up this book and don't put it down.

From my various quotes and posted thoughts throughout this book one can tell I was enamored by the prose, the depth and weight of this book. After the initial curiosity, I had no idea what I was getting into. This is a book you will want to spend some time with. This is a book that as you examine the questionable half truths, underlying truths and ultimate realities of these characters one can't help but to have moments of self reflection. What really is truth, when it comes to a history? When it comes to a life is the truth what we can stomach to tell? Are lies what we choose not to repeat but can't help but make themselves known through our silence, even oozing from the very pores of our skin. Are lies wrong when we need them to face ourselves another day?

Jonahs is a man who learned in childhood from his parents two very important lessons. First lesson is to tell lies and make it your truth. He learned to play happy family to those outside of his home where his father abused his mother. The first rule of a dysfunctional home is not to tell. His second lesson was to be very quiet, meld into your surroundings and maybe your angry at life father won't notice you. This is the story that bares witness to the fact that more often than not, one's broken home survival techniques flow into adulthood and can make for a hard struggle at a happy mature life. It also leads to the pondering question, can we really know who our parents are? The strange man and distant woman who come together to parent us looking back from adult perspective are not always who we thought them to be. Lastly, this is the sad story of Ethiopian emigrants risking their lives for freedom of an American dream but is the risk worth losing one's soul.

Really great book. I do recommend it to readers of contemporary literature, those who read African authors and in general those who can appreciate the depth. I read it pretty quickly but it is most likely one I would go back, read it again and probably contemplate more. That's what I would call it, contemplative. Very entertaining. There is an air of sadness or emptiness or loss.

It gets a ***Debs Good Stuff*** award. I will try other books by this author. Why then the lack of a perfect score? The slightly slow building start, a slight rambling in the middle and I wasn't enthused about the ending. Otherwise good!

Dee says

"Say America enough times, try to picture it enough times, and you end up with a few skyscrapers stuck in the middle of a cornfield with thousands of cars driving around." -p.6

"Without ever thinking about it, I had become one of those men who increasingly spent more and more of their nights alone, neither distraught nor depressed, just simply estranged from the great social machinations with which others were occupied." -p.17

"There were vast swaths of both city and normal life that I had failed to notice, if only for the simple reason that none of it, as far as I had understood, concerned me and the quiet discreet life I had been living. I had always suspected that at some early point in my life, while still living with my parents and their daily battles, I had gone numb as a tactical strategy, perhaps exactly at that moment when we're supposed to be waking up to the world and stepping into our own." -p.58

"We persist and linger longer than we think, leaving traces of ourselves wherever we go. If you take that away, then we all simply vanish." -p.92

"More important, however, is the shared sense that you can get at the start and close of each season--the tumult and confusion that comes when the air holds the distinct memories of two different times at once... On those occasions, when the wind is warm and smells vaguely of a rain that has recently fallen or is about to do so, I've found it better to simply pull my car off the side of the road, or if I'm walking, to cease and temporarily forget wherever it is I'm going in order to submit to the confusion of time and memory carried in by the breeze." -p.116

MomIsReading says

This was the most annoying book I have read in a very long time. I suffered through this book. I have read "The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears" by this author in the past. While I wouldn't give it rave reviews, it was ok. I purchased this book because I wanted to support an Ethiopian author, as my husband is Ethiopian.

This is not a novel – it is a 320 page essay of pure fluffy words. If, and when, there was dialogue between Jonas and his wife, it was stilted. The author never gives any character development which leaves the reader feeling absolutely nothing for the main character, nor his immigrant parents. The book jacket description is a false lure into a storyline that does not exist. How can Jonas "set out to retrace his parents steps" when he doesn't talk to either one of them? He just made up stuff he "thought" might have happened as he went along. What reconciliation? What redemption? How this book received such "high literary acclaim" is beyond my reach.

If you want to read books by literary talented Ethiopians, I suggest the following two books. They are brilliant.

Notes From The Hyena's Belly by Nega Mezlekia

Beneath The Lion's Gaze by Maaza Mengiste

Tara Chevestt says

What I was expecting: A novel about a married immigrant couple from Ethiopia and the trials they faced there and then and here and now.

What it is: A novel about the immigrant couple's son, his divorce, his retracing his parent's honeymoon.

I read a quarter and very little, maybe ten pages at that point followed the parents and what unlikeable people they are!!! I don't advocate spousal abuse, but I gotta be honest.. If I was the husband, I would slap that

woman into next year. She's got it coming, I'm sorry to say.

The book also goes on too long about ridiculous things. How long his mother chooses to lay on a bed, his dad's obsession with boxes.. but what I really wanted to know (but didn't want to wait till page 200 for the author to get to the point) was why his parents hate each other so much.

I won this thru Shelf Awareness and I thank the publisher for the chance to read it, but it is not for me.

Toni says

How to Read the Air is the parallel story of two marriages as the participants struggle to connect with each other and find truth in themselves. One couple, Yosef & Mariam, are immigrants from Ethiopia who embark on a road trip from their home in Illinois to Nashville. The trip highlights the fragility of their relationship and their inability (and unwillingness) to make it right. The other couple that the novel depicts are Jonas (Yosef & Mariam's son, still an embryo on the aforementioned trip) and his wife Angela. While they are a modern couple living in New York City, they are faced with the some of the same issues to overcome as Jonas' parents.

As someone who lives a relatively solo existence, the novel's depiction of "aloneness" and loneliness really resonated with me. Each person really kept a lot of themselves silent and secret and were unwilling to open up to their partner about who they truly were and what they were thinking. Then I heard an interview with the author about the theme of "home" in the immigrant experience and that made me think more about the book. None of the characters ever really felt at home with each other or with themselves.

This was the most literary thing I've read in awhile and after reading all those quick romances it was difficult for me to connect to this story at first. But when I did finally, I thoroughly enjoyed it. And I love that even a week after reading it, I'm still thinking about it and contemplating its meaning.

Ndeye Sene says

7 things I like about "How to read the air"

1-I like the title. See, "how to read the air" basically refer to the fact that when you live in some dangerous environment, knowing how to read the air is essential for your survival. You must possess a sixth sense that allows you to detect the change in the Air, which announces imminent danger. How do I know this? euhh... it's in the book. Yosef was at a rally in Addis Ababa, when the army descends on them. One nasty soldier was targeting him, that's when he read the air and duck a millisecond before a bullet fly past him and kill a 16-year-old boy straight out of the village.

2- The structure of the book. Very, very unusual. The story start with Yosef and Mariam getting ready to leave for a trip. Jonas was not even born. Then, just at the next chapter, the story has moved on to Jonas first day of school, next chapter it has moved on to Jonas's Job after university in a refugee center in New-York.

On the background, Yosef and Mariam hate each other, fight all the time and leave in poverty. The first part is quite confusing. After the first part, the story is mostly about Jonas and Angela, his Africa-American girlfriend. On the last parts, we then get to know the story of Yosef and Mariam! I love it, its was different from everything that I know!

3-The book is about Ethiopian immigrant yet a huge part of the book is happening in Sudan. I love to be surprised by a story. So I was expecting a big chunk of the story to happen in Addis-Ababa or at least a part of the story. Well, not quite. Most of the story happened either in the US or in Sudan.

4-Real or invented. Jonas does not know much about his parents. The little he knows is the bites he had scrapped here and there over the years. When, he retells the story of his parents, most of is invented. Now imagine being in the middle of a story, dying to know what next, instead at the next line, Jonas said that he does not recall his father saying that very thing. Ahahah. Shocker! I know....I call it Genius.

5-The principal themes. Jonas, a second-generation immigrant, narrates the story. You would expect things like identity, am I American or Ethiopian? Again, the author takes another route. What is highlighted in this novel is Jonas ineptitude to live a normal life because of his past. His past was a very lonely, sad and depressing one. His father was abusing his mother all the time, mainly because of the frustration he feels about his success as an immigrant. Obviously, it affected Jonas badly. I like the angle of identity that was covered though. Frustration, domestic abuse, insanity, bitterness are all linked together in the discovery of Jonas identity. These are the emotions that shaped him.

5-My favorite character Abdallah. I am not even sure he really existed as Jonas depicted him in Yosef's life. To know why go back to point 4. Why do I like him? He lives in a very harsh environment, yet he helps people. He also went to great length to ensure the safety of his daughter. He said he constantly lives in fear that something bad is going to happen to her. Isn't it awesome?

6-THE END! At one point in this book I had doubt about the story. But, all was revealed in the end. I adore it, and from that end I know why so many praises has been showered on this author.

That's it!

4 Things that almost made me go crazy

1-This novel was so depressing. really depressing!!I think the author did it on purpose, what else? All characters were sad to the point that you expect a suicide on every new chapter. Too much depression for me!

2-The structure of the book was pretty different. It didn't help me when I am was reading the novel. Most of the time, I was pretty confused. I love the novelty but do I really have to wait until P 200 out of 305 to understand things? The first time yes! another time no.

3-I was expecting more from Ethiopia. But it is mentioned very quickly here and there to talk about the time when Yosef got arrested but again the story was more about Yosef than Ethiopia.

4-The Back and forth between reality or invention. I commend the work of this author on this but it required a great deal of energy to keep up.

Bob Lopez says

After a while, I found the book sort of rote? It felt like it was written by an MFA graduate by which I mean it was well written, intelligent, but it lacked something. Spirit? Sincerity? The great impetus for the narrative wasn't that great, wasn't much of a narrative. The disintegration of the relationships were dealt with in manners I've read before: unexplainable ennui, boredom, random, for the sake of it.

I couldn't get into the perspective either. It worked when he was describing his relationship w/ Angela, and I feel the perspective and story worked particularly well when he was telling his students about his father. But when he was narrating his parents' story, their romance, their escapes, their dreams...I just couldn't get around it. All I could think was, "How does he know what they were thinking? Feeling?" I think if it had been written in third omniscient (or whatever it's called), it would have worked a lot better, given it the momentum I felt it lost otherwise.

Jeff says

My second adventure into Dinaw Mengestu's world was more engrossing, as this book is clearly more carefully constructed than his first novel. Again, it deals with the African immigrant experience after coming to the US, or growing up as the first born generation of a tortured and dysfunctional family of new arrivals. By telling the story of Jonas' parents as well as a few hints about his wife's unhappy upbringing, we're treated to unique but parallel perspectives on our current civilization.

It's a story about four people trying to maintain and build lives together, but realizing how far apart they really are, even from those they should be closest to. Beautifully written - Mengestu has a gift for language and its rhythms.

Rashaan says

What a flat tire of a read this turned out to be and with all the hype that ensued I shouldn't have to question why.

All the elements for a possible fantastic novel were omitted in exchange for a series of ridiculous hard to follow sub stories. It was just too many and really not necessary. Technically, it is well written and Mengestu uses every trick in the bag to spin this tiresome tale of his. Yes, I said tiresome because of it's lack of passion and spark. No life or soul could I find between these papers making it clearly mechanical and almost robotic like.

A few of the storylines such as Jonas relationship with his wife were believable as they both struggle with marital issues. I, personally loved the storytelling in his classroom about his father, all of which were lies. These stories were well executed.

In the end, "How to Read the Air" only made me aspire with disappointment.

Columbus says

After The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears, this was pretty dreadful to be honest. I won't rehash the story because it has already been done here and it will bring back bad memories of my reading experience. In

other words, I think the sophomore slump has hit Mengestu as well.

Jill says

Somehow, I missed Dinaw Mengestu's impressive literary debut – which garnered reams of ecstatic praise – so I'm a little late to this party. But after turning the last page of *How To Read The Air*, I can see what all the fuss was about. This is an exquisite multi-layered book, an extraordinary look at immigrant's identity, the downward spiral of violence, the power of story-telling, and the vision of redemption. It is rich, complex, and very, very good.

His protagonist, Jonas Woldemariam, is treading water at his position at a refugee resettlement center in Manhattan. In time, he is given the job of "editing out the less credulous or unnecessary parts of some of the narratives, while at the same time pointing out places where some stories could be expanded upon or magnified for greater narrative effect." While there, he meets his wife-to-be, Angela, an ambitious and upwardly mobile fellow African-American who craves stability, security, and the great American Dream.

Despite their mutual attraction, Angela is nearly immediately on to Jonas: "You don't have any idea of who you are, do you, Jonas." Jonas muses, "If I didn't know who I really was, then I could hardly be held accountable for not facing life as she expected me to. I was innocent if there was no person behind the skin that could be charged."

The story of Jonas and Angela is juxtaposed with one of Jonas's parents. Jonas's parents, Mariam and Yosef, left Ethiopia, a land of terror and uncertainty. Their marriage was defined by consistent violence, which Jonas observed over and over again. Jonas knew that his father developed a special sensitivity to "the abrupt and dramatic shift of the air that precedes any violent confrontation. Something vibrated, buzzed. If ever there was a way to narrate it, he would have described it as the tiniest particles that made up the air we breathe becoming suddenly charged and electrified with a palpable life of its own."

Dinaw Mengestu lays out, brick by brick, the legacy of violence when overlaid with the immigrant's experience. As Angela's cravings for reassurance – including expensive shopping sprees – increase, Jonas becomes increasingly distant and reserved. When Jonas hears of his father's lonely death, he begins to rewrite his own history in his new position as part-time teacher at a student academy. Soon, he falls under the spell of his own stories, reinventing narrative to make sense of his life.

He reflects, "While this part of the story wasn't true to anything, I, or anyone I knew had ever experienced, it had an air of serendipitous salvation that struck me as being so unlikely that one had to believe it had occurred that way."

This is a breathtaking astounding look into the retelling of truth in an effort to find oneself. It is about the price of honesty and the repetition of cause and effect. It is a book that will linger with you and get under your skin. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Rosa says

Tedious, so much so that I'm not sure how I even finished it. In fact, I actually fell asleep 3 times during the

last 40 pages. The book seems more intent on depicting a certain feeling or state of being than a 3-dimensional protagonist. That might work in a short story or even a novella, but not for 305 pages of navel-gazing inertia. None of the supporting characters were believable or consistent. There were some nice sentences here and there, but for the most part, the whole thing left me cold. The question may be whether a writer can depict a severely damaged, emotionally inhibited protagonist without constructing so big a barrier that the reader is ultimately indifferent to the character and to the story. I would point to Paolo Giordano's *Solitude of Prime Numbers* as successfully pulling off the tricky feat of making you care about a seriously closed off protagonist who can't begin to articulate one single emotion. So yes, it's possible, but not with this novel.

Christopher Jones says

Thought provoking and really quite brilliant ♥️?♥️?♥️?♥️?♥️?♥️?♥️?

Ron Charles says

The eerie calm in Dinaw Mengestu's new novel, "How to Read the Air," is almost never broken. There are flashes of violence -- a black eye, a broken lamp -- but those strikes interrupt an atmosphere of smothered despair. Named one of the *New Yorker's* best 20 writers under 40, Mengestu earned high praise for his 2007 debut, "The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears," about a lonely Ethiopian working in Logan Circle, and his new novel concentrates that theme of alienation even further.

The story contradicts our most cherished clichés of immigrant progress: We expect the parents to work hard, trapped between countries and languages, saving their pennies and toiling at every opportunity, chagrined by their children's disregard for the old values, their easy integration with American culture. But Mengestu complicates that oft-told tale with a peculiar, psychologically perceptive story that makes one wonder how a country of immigrants could ever survive.

The narrator is 33-year-old Jonas, born and raised in the Midwest. His father escaped from Sudan in a box on a cargo ship; his mother came over three years later. Once reunited in America, they maintained a dreadfully unhappy, abusive relationship, haunted by the trauma of their pasts, and in the process created a new series of traumas for their son, who spent his youth "finding new ways of numbing myself so nothing my parents, or by extension the outside world, did could touch me." Jonas grew into adulthood feeling pessimistic, emotionally closed down and reflexively dishonest. And that dishonesty provides the fabric of the novel, as he slides from devious lies to excusable fabrications to deeply moving fictions.

The chapters alternate between the story of his three-year marriage to a young lawyer in New York and the story of the chilling honeymoon his parents took 30 years ago from Peoria, Ill., to Nashville. Uninformed, except for a few basic facts about their trip, and uninhibited about imagining his parents' thoughts and actions, Jonas lays out their drive as a series of punches, resentments and escape fantasies. "The fights grew out of their own organic, independent force," he writes, "obliged only to their own rules and standards."

Jonas has no interest in assigning blame or even judging his father, despicable as the man was, a paranoid brute whom Jonas and his mother hoped to escape in the way you'd want to escape a bad storm. Every detail of Jonas's behavior is relayed with the same dispassionate, factual voice, which provides a harrowing diagnosis of the symptoms of such a home: "At some early point in my life, while still living with my parents and their daily battles," he writes, "I had gone numb as a tactical strategy, perhaps at exactly the moment

when we're supposed to be waking up to the world and stepping into our own."

Mengestu illustrates the crippling effects of that upbringing in the alternating chapters that take place in post-9/11 New York. Years of avoiding his father's wrath have trained Jonas in the art of invisibility, an ironic echo of Ralph Ellison's classic novel about a very different kind of black man in America. "I thought of my obscurity as being essential to my survival," Jonas writes. "Whoever can't see you can't hurt you."

Aimless and almost friendless 10 years after graduation, Jonas works a series of temp jobs before settling at an office that represents immigrants seeking legal status. His assignment is to help prepare the applicants' written testimonies about the abuse they suffered in their home countries. But he quickly begins exercising more editorial control: "I took half-page statements of a coarse and often brutal nature and supplied them with the details that made them real for the immigration officer who would someday be reading them. I took 'They came at night' and turned it into 'We had all gone to sleep for the evening, my wife, mother, and two children. All the fires in the village had already been put out, but there was a bright moon, and it was possible to see even in the darkness the shapes of all the houses. That's why they attacked that night.' "

He's good at this, and if he oversteps the truth now and then, well, it's for a worthy cause, right? What are more troubling, though, are the fabrications he begins telling about his own life. "History sometimes deserves a little revision," Jonas claims, with a nod to "The Great Gatsby." "I thought of this as a distinctly American trait -- this ability to unwind whatever ties supposedly bind you to the past and to invent new ones as you went along."

There's something slyly autobiographical going on here, of course: a young novelist making up a story about a young man who makes up stories. Mengestu is commenting on the life-giving properties of make-believe, as Jonas tries to save his parents, his job, his marriage with the drama and depth of his tales. He's a modern-day African American Scheherazade, striving to postpone the silence for just one more day. "If my fictional narratives lacked any veracity, it didn't really matter," Jonas claims. "I was making something of myself while I was still young, and even if that something was little more than an ever-growing lie, it was still something to which I could claim sole credit and responsibility. I was, however wrong it may have been, making a go of things."

By the end, "How to Read the Air" grows into a tragic and affecting paradox, a demonstration of the limits of fiction, the inability of stories to heal or preserve. And yet there it is, this novel -- wholly contrived -- offering up its wisdom about the immigrant experience with the kind of power mere facts couldn't convey.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...>

Kristen says

So maybe this isn't exactly five stars, it certainly has its flaws but for the few parts here and there where it drags there are dozens of other bits that sneak up on you and cut you, just cut the living shit out of you. Mengestu's alternating, gradually merging, story of an abusive immigrant father told (often invented) by his thirty-something son in midst of the dissolution of his marriage covers a range of themes but what is most striking is the brutally honest depiction of human isolation, the impossibility of people ever really knowing one another or making ourselves understood and how we all invent our own narratives as a way to make meaning in our lives and how that isn't ever simple or perhaps even possible.

"Without ever thinking about it, I had become one of those men who increasingly spent more and more of their nights alone, neither distraught nor depressed, just simply estranged from the great social machinations with which others were occupied. After the forced intimacy of childhood was over, I found I

had a hard time being close to others. The few friends I had made during college had all eventually moved on without me, not to different cities but to better lives within the same city where drinks and birthday presents, along with sex and intimacy, were casually exchanged”
