Red Dust Road by Jackie Kay --- Feedback--
Berlin Intercultural reading Groups
Meetings on Fri June 10th, Wed June 15th, Thur June 16th, Wed June 22nd

1960s Glasgow: poor, industrial and quintessentially Scottish.... Imagine growing up there black, gay and adopted and with Communist parents. The stuff of a grim memoir. That was Jackie Kay’s story. Yet her memoir is neither grim nor harrowing – but a celebration of a happy childhood and her wonderful parents. We really warmed to Jackie Kay. Her search for her birth parents is painful, but she copes with everything that life throws at her - with humour and grace and compassion.

The book opens with Kay, in her forties, waiting for the Nigerian father she has never met to turn up at a hotel in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria. Yet as soon as he arrives he whisks her off to her room and spends two hours trying to convert her to Christianity amid much "clapping and foot-tapping and spinning and reciting and shouting to God Almighty". It turns out that her father, a born-again Christian and preacher, wants to cleanse her of his past sin. "I realise with fresh horror that Jonathan is seeing me as the sin, me as impure, me the bastard, illegitimate." With characteristic humour, Kay quips, "He's like a bad poet who doesn't know when to quit, reading one poem after another to a comatose audience".

Kay's encounters with her fragile Scottish birth mother, Elizabeth, are less theatrical but no less poignant. It transpires that she too is born-again, a Mormon living in Milton Keynes, who believes "that adopted people cry out to be adopted while they are still in the womb". At their first awkward meeting her mother spends an hour talking about a neighbour's heart condition and Kay is unable to ask all the questions she's been harbouring for decades because "it seems ill-mannered... to drag Elizabeth back to a painful time in her past". Years later, although they only meet four times, they achieve a fragile bond. Elizabeth has Alzheimer’s and they spend an hour or two searching for Elizabeth’s church to have lunch together

“Out of our meetings this was the best. Somehow, her Alzheimer’s made her more open, more truthful. There’s a kind of odd poetry in dementia that picks out jagged, glittering pieces of truth, and makes you have to reassemble them. “You have an open heart” she’d said to me “You can sense things, I can sense things too.” It was the closest we’d ever been, and probably the closest we’d ever be. When I get home, I find a little pink heart-shaped post-it note stuck inside the zipped part of my purse, which reads “Jackie, Elizabeth loves you.”” Jackie is moved to tears because she doesn’t know if her mother is reminding herself or Jackie that she loves her. Her little habit of hiding secret notes surprises Jackie with this sudden gift.

While there is compassion for her birth parents, Kay writes with tremendous warmth, love and devotion for the adoptive parents who raised her. Active in the Communist Party, outspoken, principled, protective, Helen and John Kay come across as colourful, loving characters who filled their home with party guests, songs and visitors from abroad. Kay is emphatic that this couple are her parents, in all but genetics. They stopped her from seeing herself as someone who was rejected as a child. Helen would tell her, "We chose you: you are special. Other people had to take what they got, but we chose you."
Helen Kay is an exceptional mother. She surrounds her children with love and security and fosters Jackie’s vivid imagination. Helen tells her the little she knows about Jackie’s birth parents and imagines what she does not know: they were madly in love, but he was already betrothed to another, they were heartbroken to give her away. These moments are offered as shared reminiscences, and are interspersed with other memories taken from different times, mainly of Kay tracing and eventually meeting the real people behind her mother’s fairytales. Helen is remarkably unjealous when Jackie goes looking for her birth parents. Some of us were jealous of Jackie Kay for having such a fantastic mother!

“There are essentially two kinds of adopted people: the ones who never trace, who never want to, are not interested, or who are frightened of hurting their adoptive parents’ feelings; and the ones who want to trace, who are curious about their origins, who think that in tracing their original parents they will understand themselves better.”

The book is filled with questions about inheritance and belonging: Jackie is the the child who wants to fit in, but the child who is made to feel her racial difference by casual, caustic and institutional racism; the child who knows that "part of me came from Africa, part of me was foreign to myself". Yet the Africa that formed in her imagination was fed by the myths and stereotypes of colonial Britain taught in school. We agreed that not all but many of these stereotypes exist today:

“Africans lived in mud huts in appalling poverty, wore grass skirts and tribal makeup, were primitive, unsophisticated. Something about sex was hinted at but not spoken (Big penises, whisper, whisper. Africans could dance, they had natural rhythm. The people were very dark. Wild savages. When they were born they were put into an oven to make them darker so that their skin did not burn in the sun. There were bongo drums in Africa, witch doctors and lots of chanting and humming and squealing. Superstition was big in Africa. African people were not logical thinkers.”

Jackie Kay encounters many examples of racism. It is there in the crassness of a stranger who asks the Kays whether their two brown children speak English, of Kay being forced to eat mud by school bullies, of finding herself targeted by rightwing extremists at university, of being attacked by thugs on the London underground and pleading for help from a businessman who replies: "No, we support them." Kay sees the funny side of some of these. The old lady who says “Is that lady your daughter? Oh! Your daughter is awful tanned. Is she that colour every day?” A complete stranger who asks where Jackie is from. And Jackie replies “Glasgow.” “Is that right?” She says “Because I've got a friend from the Dominican Republic.” The humour emphasises how ridiculous these prejudices are.

The adult Jackie tries to convince herself it shouldn't matter who her birth parents are because she has the wonderful parents who raised her. But her mixed race origins do matter to her. Eventually she discovers that "you cannot find yourself in two strangers who happen to share your genes. You are already made, though you don’t properly know it, you are made up from a mixture of myth and gene. You are part fable, part porridge. Finding a strange, nervous, Mormon mother and finding a crazed, ranting, Born-Again father does not explain me. At least I hope not!"

It is her Nigerian connection she yearns for. The red dust road of the title has lived in her imagination for a long time. When her father Jonathan lets her down, it is the earth of her ancestral village which welcomes her and embraces her. “I take off my shoes so that the red earth can touch my bare soles. It’s as if my footprints were already on the road before I got there. I walk into them, my waiting
footprints. The earth is so copper warm and beautiful and the green of the long elephant grasses so lushly green they make me want to weep. I feel such a strong sense of affinity with the colours and the landscape: a strong sense of recognition....... The road welcomes me: it is benevolent, warm, friendly, accepting and for now it feels enough, the red, red of it.”

And, thank goodness, her half brother Sidney saves the day, he compensates for the cruel indifference of her father. Traffic jams and the total chaos of Lagos traffic means they have only forty five minutes together before her flight. He is forty five years old, they have spent a minute for every year, but by the time she leaves, they are firmly “senior sister and brother”.

“Sidney hugs me and waves me off. When I get to Lagos International airport Sidney is on the phone already. “Safe flight home” he says, “I don’t want to lose you already now that I’ve just found you.”

An excellent and moving memoir, Red Dust Road is written with the skill and flair of a novelist and poet. Characters come alive on the page, the language is lyrically and imaginatively rendered and there is real suspense. Even the structure is inspired, criss-crossing the decades back and forth, from Kay’s childhood voice through to middle-age. Memories are random and Kay creates a jigsaw of thoughts, impressions and feelings that eventually all fit together. Red Dust Road opened up fascinating discussions around adoption. Kay questions things many of us might take for granted: assumptions about love and family - and the right to know our parents. Many of us have adopted relatives. Our discussions included personal dilemmas and experiences.

Our Comments:

“My mother didn’t tell me until after he died, that my father was not my real father. It was a terrible shock. Now I’m angsting whether to find out more about my birth father. He is also dead but I want to know more about his history. My husband has advised me to not investigate the past.”

“Be careful. It may be better not to know.”

“My older sister is adopted. She has no desire to trace her birth parents at all.”

“I was especially interested in Red Dust Road. My brother’s children are adopted and I gained a lot of insight into how it must feel to be adopted.”

“I absolutely loved this book. I laughed out loud - I cried my eyes out. I loved her style - she is very honest. I could tell that she is a poet. The imagery is beautiful.”

“Beautifully written. How rounded a person Jackie Kay is!”

“I am interested in the topic of adoption plus the question of race. How well this can work. Red Dust Road was very encouraging.”

“Jackie Kay becomes empowered by her search for her birth parents. It doesn’t work out how she would have liked but she is in control of the situation and is able to be her own person.”

“I didn’t like the structure. I would have preferred the story to be told in chronological order. I got rather confused at times.”

“I liked the unravelling of the puzzle. It was so touching. She is so lucky to have her adopted parents. Her birth parents are both a bit crazy.”
“We have two adopted African children in our family. At first it was difficult for them but they are now well integrated into their Bavarian village. They were told from the beginning that they were adopted.”

“I loved the book very much. I’m an old lefty and I loved the positive image of her Communist parents. They are so lovely and so full of life. It’s not so often that one reads about a family like this. It made such a change from dysfunctional families.”

“I liked the poetic language very much so I can’t explain why I got a little bored halfway through. Maybe because I know very little about Africa and had trouble in empathising.”

“The hospitality of the African people was well drawn. I could see it in my mind.”

“I’m in two minds about the book. It didn’t fully keep my attention. Perhaps I wasn’t in the mood for this kind of book.”

“Lucid, a pleasure to read. The theme was excellent and absorbing.”

“Love came pouring out of the book- I was overwhelmed by love wrapping me up - I’ve never had this experience before. I loved this book very much!”

“I was gripped by it. I wanted to know more about her life. Please invite her to meet the groups!”

“Jackie Kay is very funny and very open about herself. A rare talent.”

“When I was a student in 2002/3 I worked at the Lufthansa call centre in Cape Town. It was amazing how often I was asked very racist questions – nearly every day. Jackie Kay’s examples of stereotypes are still alive today. The most common questions were about big penises, savages etc.”

“I felt jealous of Jackie Kay’s happy childhood, mine was so different.”

“I heard Jackie Kay read Red Dust Road on BBC on radio four. I lived in Nigeria for many years- my husband was Igbo, my children are mixed race. I wasn’t disappointed by her impressions of Nigeria-they seemed very accurate. African villages are very beautiful. I could understand her delight in the nature and the land.”

“The Nigerian custom of greeting people was very appealing. I haven’t anything negative I can say about the book. I thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Her Scottish aunts in Nairn were also very welcoming. It was sad that she hadn’t met her grandmother.”

“The section on reality Britain was tough to read but there is still a lot of racism all around us.”

“Meeting her Nigerian brother was very tense, I shared every moment. The amount of energy they both put into their short time together was impressive.”

“I was fascinated by the telling of the vacation stories- who was telling which one?”

“As a translator I’m aware how difficult the colloquial Scottish and Nigerian languages would be to translate.”

“Those parents of hers were amazing. Has she idealised them a little?”

“I liked the book but it didn’t leave a lasting impression. Discussing it now is bringing it back to me.”
“I can see myself in my mother’s face. My adopted sister doesn’t look like anyone in the family. It must be hard for her sometimes.”

“The feeling of love in the book is so strong. It’s unusual and heart warming to read about a family that works. And it isn’t the least bit sentimental.”

“I would have liked to know more about her adopted brother. I got the impression he hadn’t adjusted as easily as Jackie.”

“Nigeria definitely has many, many churches. The village I know has 65!”

“I was a little disappointed by the ending - it was too philosophical.”

“I thought the ending was very appropriate. Planting a moringa tree from Nigeria in the earth of Manchester, hoping it would take root and flourish.”

“It was a very worthwhile and interesting read. It painted a good picture of a socialist working class Glasgow family. Jackie Kay is determined to trace her birth parents and persists until she finds them.”

“Jackie Kay is very sincere, she doesn’t seem to invent anything.”

“I come from Glasgow and every little detail rang true. I really liked it a lot. I was so relieved when she was accepted by her brother.”

“I’ve been very busy reading for my work but found time to read this. I liked her style, it was a genuinely interesting story. How exotic she must have been in 1961!”

“She is very fortunate to have had such wonderful adopted parents. They have a very open and honest relationship with her. They made her feel very secure and loved.”

“Best of all is Jackie Kay’s great sense of humour. I really identified with her as I have similar non religious beliefs.”

“I quite liked it at first but then it became rather repetitive, especially towards the end. I felt very sad that her father didn’t call her when she was back in Africa and he didn’t want to see her again.”

“Everything has been said but not by me!” just like at a conference. I enjoyed reading it but felt Jackie Kay gets a bit carried away at times and goes off at a tangent.”

“I have second hand ties to the theme. My sister is adopted. We adopted her in Bolivia and she has made contact with her family there.”

“It’s a memoir in the style of a novel. I liked her writing, the humour, the real sense of urgency that she conveys and that it is hugely important to her to connect with her origins. But for all that, it didn’t touch me very much.”

“My cousin adopted two black children. The laws here in Germany make it more difficult for them to trace their birth parents.”

“Jackie Kay doesn’t decide to look for her birth parents until she becomes a mother herself. Her heritage became more important to her then. She realised she didn’t know potential medical problems and she also wanted to be able to tell her son more of his history.”

“It would have been more effective if it had been more condensed. Some of the writing has a feeling of a stream of consciousness - it should have been edited more.”
“It could have been a “poor me” story but it is the opposite - there is a real sense of optimism and empowerment.”

“Jackie Kay comes across as a very likeable, self confident and amusing person who would be great company. I’d love to have a beer with her!”

“Childlessness can be very depressing, Jackie’s adopted parents show how this can be overcome in a very positive way. They are a glowing example of making the best of a situation.”

“I was expecting racism to be hammered home from the start. Instead it is tackled much later in the book. This was very effective.”

“I couldn’t resist bringing along some examples of the cartoons of The Broons and oor Wullie mentioned in the book. They were so much a part of my childhood.”

Highly Recommended –

A heart-warming and amusing memoir, very well written. An excellent blend of Scottish and Nigerian cultures. The many themes in *Red Dust Road* led to fascinating discussions.