

Prayers of an Igbo Rabbi

Richard Cummings

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This is a mixed bag mystery story that rolls past and present, Brazilians, Nigerians, Yankees, Southerners, cops, villains, ghosts, conjurers, sacrificial lambs, and long-dead sinners into a big calabash and shakes with gusto. Richard Cummings, an author of both fiction and nonfiction, has chosen a venue rich in history and mystery for this latest effort: the island of St. Simons off the coast of Georgia, once a plantation owner's paradise and a slave's hell, today a posh tourist resort.

It is to St. Simons that Cummings's antihero, New York lawyer Roger Westerfield, goes to write a spy thriller. Very soon after arriving, Roger is approached by a shady realtor who shows him a charming house for sale at a tremendously low price. He happily dreams of using the cottage as his writing aerie and then, perhaps, reselling it for a profit. Unfortunately our protagonist is easily confused because he tends to drink or smoke whatever is offered to him once he starts to relax into island life. He says of himself, "Whenever I got loaded, I went to Google and just stared until an idea came to me." Roger is quickly seduced by Claudia, a gorgeous and elusive Brazilian artist and, almost as quickly, finds he is being charged with the murder of the old black conjure woman who lived in the house he planned to buy. Roger was the last person to visit her hospital room and he is a Yankee outsider. He is placed under house arrest and tries, but not very diligently, to exonerate himself.

From there, as Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (who gave rare praise to this unusual novel) might say, "things fall apart." Roger is stalked by the ghost of a tremulous old white man and shadowed by a large, at times menacing African named Oba. He gets embroiled in current racial issues that still divide the local area and investigates the history of St Simons, which includes the mystical tale of a group of Africans (Igbo, or Nigerian, people) who drowned themselves there rather than be enslaved. The seemingly intelligent Roger keeps acting against his own best interests, as when he goes along to a white supremacist rally with some drunks and stoners he meets at a bar. Roger learns that the ghost who is pursuing him is Thomas Spalding, a prominent slave owner who caused much suffering on St. Simons, and he examines the many facets of racism against the backdrop of the American political scene (in the run-up to the election of President Barack Obama). Roger finds that he is distantly related to Spalding and learns from many supernatural sources that he will now be required to expiate the evildoings of his ancestor.

Prayers of an Igbo Rabbi is both funny and fascinating at times, but is burdened by too many awkward jumps from past to present, from folklore to reality. The lengthy and sometimes repetitive passages on regional history and the strained diatribes about racism make this novel a less than ideal read.

BARBARA BAMBERGER SCOTT (March 5, 2012)

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