

## Professor Schiff's Guilt

**Agur Schiff**

**Jessica Cohen, Translator**

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An aging Israeli academic reckons with his family's crimes—and his own—in Agur Schiff's novel *Professor Schiff's Guilt*.

Professor Schiff is in no way proud of the fact that his ancestor made his fortune as a slave trader. But when the wreck of that ancestor's ship is discovered off the coast of Africa, he also has no qualms about trying to claim the ship's contents. This act leads to his swift arrest. He soon finds himself before a West African tribunal, grappling with how—and if—the people of the present can atone for the unresolved horrors of the past.

Detained in a sumptuous villa/prison in an unnamed African nation, Schiff, despite the accusations against him, is treated with obscene, humorous amounts of courtesy by the highest authorities. Only an uncompromising special investigator dares to challenge Schiff's perceptions about Africa and his place within it. Though he is in many ways the stereotypical bumbling, absent-minded professor, Schiff possesses profound, dangerous naïveté that manifests as arrogance. This leads him to believe that he understands Africa and Africans, and that he is entitled to tell their stories for his own gain.

The more Schiff learns about his family's history, the more defensive he becomes about their crimes, and the more his true character is revealed. Through flashbacks reconstructed by Schiff himself, history repeats itself: generations of his ancestors and in-laws find themselves too weak to resist the temptation to impose their wills, desires, and religion on Black bodies and minds. Their attempts to make amends only highlight the appalling nature of their crimes—and, years later, threaten the future of the descendant who's forced to make amends for them all.

*Professor Schiff's Guilt* is an incisive novel in which deep-rooted prejudices lurk behind good intentions and pleasant words.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May / June 2023)

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