

Under Our Skin: A Journey

Joaquim Arena

Jethro Soutar, Translator

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Acclaimed journalist Joaquim Arena traverses the hidden byways of Portugal's slave trade while reconstructing his own fractured identity in his evocative book *Under Our Skin*.

After receiving news of his stepfather's death in Portugal, Arena left Cape Verde and returned to the land where his family emigrated when he was a child "to reclaim my other life." A chance friendship with Leopoldina, an amateur historian descended from eighteenth-century African slaves, steeped him in the nation's legacy of slavery. From his childhood bedroom in his mother's Lisbon apartment, Arena set off on a peripatetic trip through multiple layers of history, weaving Leopoldina's ancestry and his own experiences into the long story of other Africans in Europe.

Pensive and erudite, the book peers into overlooked periods—walking into the small towns of Portugal's interior to find the malaria-ridden rice fields that Africans tended in the nineteenth century; recounting the stories of slaves who rose to improbable heights of power in early modern Europe. From the Black French military general Thomas-Alexandre Dumas (father of the famed writer Alexandre Dumas and competitor to Napoleon) to the Congolese-born João de Sá Panasco, who rose from a slave and court jester to become a distinguished Portuguese knight in the sixteenth century, Arena reveals the contradictions and the atrocities imprinted on Portugal's medieval streets.

This ambitious, polyphonic text moves between travel writing, deep observations of Renaissance art, and searing reflections on the meaning of home, as with "I'm sometimes taken by a strong urge to be a part of this natural balance... [to] simply belong without questioning." Quiet and somber scraps of evidence and memories are drawn into a glittering whole that evokes history's forgotten voices.

Under Our Skin is an enigmatic story about how pain and struggles reverberate through the generations.

WILLEM MARX (November / December 2023)

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