

*Lara*, Bernardine Evaristo, Bloodaxe, 2009. £8.95 ISBN 978-1-8522483-1-4



photo by  
Katie Vandyck



*“It is a rich and evocative book and one I could not put down as the story unfolds in chapters”*

This powerful verse-novel is one of the finest books I’ve read to date in this genre. It is a semi-autobiographical novel-in-verse based on Evaristo’s own childhood and family history. The story spans seven generations and travels back over 150 years. It is the story of Irish Catholics leaving generations of rural hardship behind and ascending to a rigid middle-class in England; of German immigrants escaping poverty and seeking to build a new life in nineteenth-century London, and of proud Yorubas enslaved in Brazil, free in colonial Nigeria and hopeful on post-war London. *Lara* explores the lives of those who leave one country in search of a better life elsewhere, but who end up struggling to be accepted even as they lay the foundation for their children and future generations.

The language is extraordinarily beautiful. It is a rich and evocative book and one I could not put down as the story unfolds in chapters each through the eyes of the different players. We grow to know, love, respect or dislike each person as their character evolves. Taiwo, one of the main players who leaves his mother and twin sister in Nigeria and never returns learns of his sister’s death months after she died. In Chapter 10, he thinks “Today I search my sister’s eyes like pebbles in a lake.” There is a letter from his mother that describes Kehinde’s death in child-birth and says: “Son, there are plenty nice Nigerian girls here / Come home soon to look after your poor mama.” I found this letter particularly moving as the old mother has lost two of her children and has no hope of visiting England herself. Claire Crowther’s article, *Journey Into the Herebefore*, written for Issue 1 of the *Long Poem Magazine* struck resonances here; the plight of the grandmother and her place in social history and the family is played out by this heart-broken woman left in Nigeria.

And then there is Louis emigrated from Germany and never accepted in London, “When I see Gladys at dance in golden gown with frills / like curtains with bustle, tight bodice, moving bosoms / chestnut hair all curled up like pastry rings / I know this comely girl will make healthy babies with me.”

The reader is spared no punches. There are vivid descriptions of children being given the belt by an angry father as Lara daughter of Taiwo and Ellen reports: ““Discipline”, he growled, “Disss-i-pp-aaa-lin.” / Buckle wrapped around knuckles, arm raised, / the first lash left my palm numb and smarting...”

The time scale of the story is interesting because we work through the generations and then the final chapters go back to Nigeria in 1931 and work through to the ending of the story with Lara visiting Rio de Janeiro in 1995. The piecing of the story together is masterfully managed.

The language throughout is poetic. There isn’t a word that is out of place. I’ll end with a description of London: “Dawn released London from anonymous night, / spires, bridges/monuments, a silver flash of Thames.”

The reader is transported across continents and time. It is a very different type of novel and there is something in this book for every one of us to take away and think about.

**Wendy French**