



Mount Pleasant

Patrice Nganang , Amy Reid (Translation)

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In Cameroon in 1931, Sara is taken from her family and brought to Mount Pleasant as a gift for Sultan Njoya, the Bamum leader cast into exile by French colonialists. Just nine years old and on the verge of becoming one of the sultan's hundreds of wives, Sara's story takes an unexpected turn when she is recognized by Bertha, the slave in charge of training Njoya's brides, as Nebu, the son she lost tragically years before. In Sara's new life as a boy she bears witness to the world of Sultan Njoya--a magical yet declining place of artistic and intellectual minds--and hears the story of the sultan's last days in the Palace of All Dreams and of the sad fate of Nebu, the greatest artist their culture had seen.

Seven decades later, a student returns home to Cameroon to research the place it once was, and she finds Sara, silent for decades, ready to tell her story. In her serpentine tale, a lost kingdom lives again in the compromised intersection between flawed memory, tangled fiction, and faintly discernible truth. In this telling, history is invented anew and transformed--a man awakens from a coma to find the animal kingdom dancing a waltz; a spirit haunts a cocoa plantation; and a sculptor re-creates his lost love in a work of art that challenges the boundary between truth and the ideal. The award-winning novelist Patrice Nganang's lyrical and majestic *Mount Pleasant* is a resurrection of the world of early-twentieth-century Cameroon and an elegy for the men and women swept up in the forces of colonization.

Mount Pleasant Details

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Tien says

Too confusing to be totally enjoyable. Firstly the shift of perspective were rather random; I understand that they were telling past stories and there'd be bits of conversations between current characters but did that really have to be inserted in the middle of the 'stories'? There were at least 3 strands of past stories and because of the identity overlap, sometimes it confuses me at the beginning of the chapter as there is no indication of change in povs etc.

Kathryn says

At 250 pages in, the female narrator has recounted the story of the young man she is replacing, and of the male leaders. Her own story has at best been glossed over. After Homegoing I was hoping for another perspective on colonialism, but it's buried deep in this and not worth the effort.

Wade says

This is different sort of novel about colonialism and culture than I've read before. Rather than focusing on what happened in a literal sense, this story circles around the early impacts of German, British, and French colonialism in what would become Cameroon. By focusing on the stories of Sara and Nebu, I got a different view of the rather nonsensical way that colonialism forced its way into the lives of ordinary people who were influenced by cultural exchanges and shifts between their own communities (as well as by Christian missionaries who are also described with a rather bemused eye).

The Sultan's story is also revealing in the way that Cameroonian leaders might have tried to adapt or weather the Europeans' insertion of themselves where they didn't belong - and the sometimes tragic ways that leaders tried to adapt to something they expected would be over soon enough.

The frame story - a historian interviewing the elderly Sara - provides the anchor and a level of joy and sadness in the discovery lost history, culture, and art. And the primary stories are told with a sort of nostalgic, sort of magical tone that memories might have when they are rarely spoken out loud.

Finally, another great thing about this book is that it describes historical figures like Sultan Njoya and Charles Atangana, even as it spins a fictional story instead of an exact historical account.

Karen Ashmore says

A student goes to Cameroon and interviews 95 year old Sara who tells her story of almost becoming the sultan's 681st wife at the tender age of nine years old, when Bertha, the wife trainer, transforms her into a boy to replace her dead son. From there the story catapults to Sara's myriad life experiences which are heavily tinged with magical realism and closely correspond to Cameroon's historical march through

colonialism to become a free nation.

Lauren says

Very ambitious novel about a particular era in Cameroon's history told by a old woman who as a child, lived in the Sultan's court. It's more Salman Rushdie than James Michener - history by way fables, gossip and old wives tales - literally. For me, it fell apart at the end - but I appreciated what it was going for.

BECKY ROE says

I began with the same enthusiasm I try to apply to any book I read. I must admit I was not able to finish it. I just couldn't absorb any of the details necessary to enjoy a book. The writing just wasn't enjoyable. I felt as though I read for hours and had zero recall of what I read, which is contrary to the real me. It was repetitious; I tried so VERY hard to love it, I just couldn't.

Lindsey says

DNF at about 40%. The plot device wherein we hear the main character's story through a narrative being told to another person (in this case, the first person narrator of the book) does not work in print. It just doesn't. In movies it can be an appropriate plot device because the filmmaker can actually transport you rather than having you watch one person tell another person a story (Titanic is the best example I can think of at the moment - it's Rose's story, which she is narrating to another person, but we don't see her narrating, we simply see her story acted out). In Mount Pleasant, and in every other novel I can think of where this plot device is used, it doesn't work that way. The flow is awkward and clunky, the dialogue is flat, the characters are flat, the story doesn't come alive. And ultimately it's unnecessary. Why use that plot device? Why not just cut out the middle man and either have the main character tell us the story herself in first person or simply narrate the story?

There were additional problems with this novel that kept me from being able to finish. Most of what I did read barely even touched on the main character's story at all. If the reader had been given the story promised by the blurb then I at least might have been able to suffer through the poor narrative plot device. However, so many pages were dedicated to the narrator telling us how interesting the MC's story was, and how much she had to tell, and how many things she had witnessed, and how many important people she met. These types of phrases were used repeatedly without ever really telling us anything about her life or her story. It was like listening to a Trump speech. "I have a plan and it's the best plan you've ever heard of before." Yes, but what is it. "Just trust me, it's an amazing plan and you will be so happy about this plan." You get the idea. The story could have been interesting but it just wasn't well written.

I received an ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Betsy T. says

I feel guilty saying I read this book because I only got about 35% through. I had to give up because I felt like I was plowing through it just to make it to the end, but not retaining anything. There is some really lovely writing in here, interesting storytelling with a lot of magical realism, and some interesting history about Cameroon. But for some reason the narrative just did not propel me forward, and I lost interest in the characters.

The main characters are Bertha, an American historian, and Sara, an old woman who was married off to a sultan but somehow ends up passing as a boy in the sultan's household. Bertha and Sara switch as storytellers throughout, telling seemingly unrelated stories about the sultan and Sara's father, an activist named Joseph. Other characters are featured in their stories and I'm sure more show up on later pages I didn't get to, but I couldn't figure out why any of them were related or mattered.

If I were reading this as part of a post-colonial literature class, I'm sure someone much smarter than I am could have pointed out themes to deepen my appreciation of the book. But, I'm just a Philistine reading for pleasure, so anything deeper eluded me. I'd definitely recommend that others read this book and give it a chance, especially those that enjoy magical realism (which I generally do not).

Valeria Spencer says

Maybe I did not give it a fair shake, but I quit after 50 pages. The story was not compellingly told and was very repetitious. I do not recommend spending your time on this tale.

Fran Mason says

I didn't finish it. I didn't think it was well written.

Shelli says

There are books that are inevitably going to be polarizing to their readers, not for their content, but rather for their style. *Mount Pleasant* is one such book, complicated by the fact that it is about a time and place (colonial-era Cameroon) not familiar to most Western readers. Therefore, it takes more effort than most modern consumers of fiction are used to expending on trying to comprehend and appreciate the novels they read, but I for one am glad that I did.

Mount Pleasant is a metaphorical novel, with layers impossible to count; which layers are inside which – not to mention what elements are the metaphors versus the actual root truths – are purposely indecipherable. On the surface is a story about a young Cameroonian girl, Sara, kidnapped as a tribute to the sultan at an early age, who unwittingly winds up standing in as the pseudo-reincarnation of a passionate artist, ripped too soon from his devoted mother, his adoring community, and the aforementioned sultan whose service he was in. It is also the story many others, in particular of two Berthas – one the caregiver of young Sara and the devastated mother of Nebu, the dead artist in whose image she remakes Sara, and the other, a modern-day

American historian of Cameroonian origin who, nearly accidentally, meets the 100-year-old Sara in the present day. Bertha (the American one) has so many questions to ask of Sara, so much she wants to learn about the colonial days of Cameroon, specifically regarding Mount Pleasant, the palace/community-in-exile of the wise and kind yet pacifistic sultan trying desperately to fit his people into the rapidly-changing political landscape that was Cameroon in between the two world wars, where no fewer than three European powers were, in turn, its overseers. Yet Bertha also has access to information Sara craves – the truth behind her father, who was gone from her life when she was very small, and his role in historical events as well as his true disposition and honor.

And I think this is where and why the book loses people. Sara and Bertha's meetings are narrated by Bertha, not in a well-organized and structured way for easy digestion for us, the readers, but in actual, linear time, the way it would have happened, replete with non-sequiturs, tangents, gaps of memory, emotional shutdowns, interruptions by eavesdropping bystanders, and Bertha's own internal reflections. This is the most overarching of the book's metaphors: memory is imperfect (especially if you are 100 years old); it meanders, it fills in some gaps inaccurately, it flows in fits and starts, it fixates on some details and ignores others, it is bound inextricably to emotions, it is repetitive, it jumps around in time.

So at its heart, *Mount Pleasant* is about memory – Sara's, the Bertha of yore's, Nebu's, the sultan's – and what can be gleaned from it by those doing the recounting, as well as contemporary/American Bertha, the youths listening in, modern Cameroon, us the readers, and the world at large.

This is indeed a challenging book in which to follow events of the story, but you will be rewarded by absolutely magical, lyrical writing – sparkling, poetic prose with quotes worth remembering on nearly every page. You'll also learn not just facts but also the flavors of Cameroonian history, skillfully evoked through detailed description, dialogue, and storytelling. The ending – or rather I should say endings, since there are so many individual threads that make up the fabric of this book – are dramatic, exciting, surprising, and in just the right places, sublimely delightful. It's not a book for all types of readers, but if you are not averse to investing some effort and patience into an unusual novel, you will find *Mount Pleasant* a profound treat.

I received a copy of this book courtesy of Goodreads Giveaways.

Beverly says

thoughts coming shortly
