

FICTION

It Was Supposed to Be a Fun Night Out. It Led to a Criminal Underworld.

In Akwaeke Emezi's latest novel, "Little Rot," two exes trying to recover after a breakup inadvertently stumble into a dark, disturbing and dangerous side of Nigeria.

By Chelsea Leu

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LITTLE ROT, by Akwaeke Emezi

There's an art to depicting things going seriously wrong very quickly, and Akwaeke Emezi's latest novel, "Little Rot," is a masterwork of the form.

The story takes place over the course of roughly 28 hours, during which a man flees an assassination attempt, another has a knife plunged into his kidney, and yet another is strangled to death while having sex. Astonishingly, none of these events feel gratuitous. Instead, they're conveyed with an inexorable precision, even an elegance; the reader feels like an unwilling witness to the world's dark truths. The effect is mesmerizing.

Emezi — who has produced three previous novels, a memoir, a poetry collection and two young adult books since 2018 — has a gift for melding polished prose with the delectable urgency of a page-turner. This latest novel begins, mundanely enough, with a breakup. Then ... well, then the situation deteriorates with irresistible speed.

After moving home from Houston to New Lagos, Nigeria, Aima rediscovers her Christianity and demands a proposal from her boyfriend, Kalu, who refuses. To distract themselves from their heartbreak, each seeks solace in a Friday night out with a best friend: Kalu is cajoled by Ahmed into attending one of the sex parties he organizes, while Aima cuts loose on a drunken, debauched evening with Ijendu. The narratives of their respective nights run parallel, eventually radiating out, as the next day dawns, to include the perspectives of Ahmed and two sex workers connected to him, Souraya and Ola. As the novel progresses, the threads of this entangled cast are pulled taut around the shadowy, spider-like Thomas Okinsho, or “Daddy O,” a wealthy pastor with a flock of millions and an untold influence in New Lagos’s murky underworld.

This underworld has its own unnerving presence — characters refer to its corrupting force as “rot.” “You think you’ll never be a part of things you hate; you think you’re protected somehow, like the rot won’t ever get to you,” a woman tells Kalu at the sex party. “Then you wake up one day and you’re chest deep in it.”

Her words are prophetic. Shortly after the exchange, Kalu barges into a locked backroom at the party and finds a horrific scene: a naked, bound teenage girl surrounded by eager men. The sight traps him in a world of coercion and brutality in service of humanity’s darkest desires — the decay that forms the novel’s focus.

The subject matter does not make for easy reading. Hovering nightmarishly throughout the book are pasts warped by traumatic sexual abuse and men who force themselves on 12-year-old girls. “There was a time when she’d been angry about it,” one sex worker thinks with icy practicality, “but then she’d become rich instead and the anger had set into something cold and untouched.” One can’t expect justice, she continues, only a fight for survival and even success, which was possible “if you knew how to work the rot, if you weren’t afraid to touch it or use it. The rot could give you power.”

What gives “Little Rot” its vitality are its overlapping love stories, its characters’ longing, their acts of devotion and tenderness in defiance of a world in which a soft heart is a liability. But any sweetness is snatched from the darkness, and the love

the characters bear for one other becomes impossible or is eventually compromised, curdled by the rot.

There are no redemptive happy endings here. If Aima's story loses its urgency by the end, with her religious conviction and her naïve hopes of "a life in the light," it's a testament to how complete a sense of contamination Emezi creates in the rest of the novel, particularly in the stomach-turning and dramatically perfect final twist that drags even the reader into complicity. We come away troubled, unsettled — and in some subtle way changed.

LITTLE ROT | By Akwaeke Emezi | Riverhead Books | 276 pp. | \$29