

Homegoing, Yaa Gyasi (2016, now Vintage Books)

Although Homegoing is not a new book, and although it won a PEN/Hemingway Award and a National Book Critics Circle Award, I heard of it only recently, so perhaps it's new to you as well. It's a fictional account of eight generations of an African family, starting about 1760 with half-sisters unknown to one another. One sister stays in Africa, sold by her greedy stepmother as a 'bride' to a married British officer in charge of a trading post, while the other is captured by a rival tribe, sold as a slave, and shipped to the American south. In alternating chapters, we follow one person from each subsequent generation, ending early in the present century when descendants of the two sisters meet as American graduate students, unaware of their family connection.

The finely written narrative is full of interesting stories about very different individuals, lightly drawn. The African part is set in the land that became Ghana, and because Ms. Gyasi was born there and clearly also has put a great deal of research into the book, it's full of customs and folklore as well as historical events. The American part includes stories of the well-known horrors of slavery, but also places some of its protagonists in historical situations that are not well known—for example, a coal-mining settlement where whites and people of color lived and organized together after Reconstruction. Some of the protagonists are slaves, while some (in Africa) are slave-owners. They're intelligent people, often loving, often traumatized, surviving, sometimes thriving. Themes recur and link the different stories. Fire is both an event and an image, and water—the ocean—is feared, yet sometimes a release.

All this is packed into a mere 300 pages. The book's recounting of so many different lives breaks it out of the mold of many novels about Black suffering, which tend to deprive their characters of agency or depth. I think you would find it a fascinating read.