

## SPLIT IDENTITY AND SHADES OF LOCAL COLOR WRITING

a review by Charles Duncan

Jacinda Townsend. *Mother Country*. Graywolf Press, 2022.

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**JACINDA TOWNSEND** took creative writing workshops in the Duke English Department while she was enrolled in the Duke University School of Law. After a few years as a lawyer and journalist, she earned an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her novel *Saint Monkey* (W.W. Norton, 2014) won the 2015 Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for best fiction written by a woman and the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for that year's best historical fiction. *Mother Country* was the 2022 winner of the Ernest Gaines Award for Literary Excellence. She has recently finished work on a third novel, "James Loves Ruth," and excerpts from the novel have appeared in *Auburn Avenue*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Transition*.



*Mother Country*, a new novel by Jacinda Townsend, is actually a book about multiple mothers and quite a few countries, including the United States and several in Africa. The story focuses on two mothers in particular: Shannon, an African American woman who, because of a physically and emotionally scarring car accident, cannot conceive; and Souria, an African girl (when we first meet her) who escapes enslavement and travels essentially alone to set up a new life in Morocco. Souria eventually gives birth to a girl she names Yumna. The naming of the child becomes an important plot point with profound thematic resonance.

*Mother Country* examines multiple examples of split identity, primarily of the daughter of Souria (Yumna) and Shannon (renamed Mardi), but also in the book's structure. In fact, the novel in many ways functions as two overlapping and overarching narratives. The first half of the novel traces the routes to adulthood for both Shannon and Souria, and both journeys impose significant trauma on the women. For Shannon, the journey mostly involves an upbringing without love, a catastrophic accident and an unhappy marriage. When her father finds a report card she has unsuccessfully tried to dispose of, for example, she clandestinely overhears him saying,

"Waste of a child" (36). (He later apologizes but not with a whole lot of sincerity.) Her mother, too, lacks the profound empathy we often associate with motherhood. After the car accident that renders Shannon unable to give birth, her mother makes this comment with her daughter present: "They're going to fix her. . . . But she has no business being anyone's mother. No business at all" (43). That's one ominous piece of foreshadowing.

Townsend's rendering of Souria's even more harrowing plight is nothing short of terrifying. Kidnapped and enslaved as a child, she grows up without any family at all and faces neglect at best and much worse at worst. In one of the powerful early passages in the novel, Souria escapes her captivity in a horrifying scene that includes an unforeseen natural phenomenon killing every member of the tribe that has enslaved her:

The tribe hushed itself in awe as poisonous gas darkened the lake, whose surface rippled there and here with the hot dioxide rippling from its depths; they were quiet enough to hear the earth beneath them make a hissing sound, as though it were being cooked in a steel pan. . . . It was a scene so powerful that she knew she'd retain it in every cell of her body. Men, chicken[s], women, goats, camels – all the living things of the camp – felled to the ground without so much as a chance to protest. (19)

This passage demonstrates Townsend's compelling eloquence even when describing apocalyptic misery and death. Indeed, creating powerful, often beautiful descriptions – not always of happy things – defines her writing in the novel.

What binds these two mothers together occurs more than

midway through the novel: Shannon impulsively kidnaps Yumna, the twenty-five-month-old daughter of her biological mother Souria, and, through the indifference and inaction of multiple figures in the book (including her husband, Vlad), transports the child back to Louisville, KY. Once in the US, the child lives the mostly "normal" – if not especially happy – life of a young American girl.



As the daughter of both an African mother and, once stolen, an American one, Yumna functions as the moral axis of the novel. A child of two mothers (and two cultures), she understandably exhibits an essential duality – she's both Yumna and, later, Mardi, the name she's given in her life in Louisville.

In fact, Townsend's novel reads, in many ways, like an updated (and internationalized) version of local color writing, a genre of American literature widespread in the late nineteenth century that interwove depictions of specific venues with fictional plots. Local color authors, such as Mark Twain (focusing on the Mississippi River and the West), Kate Cho-

pin (Louisiana), Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sara Orne Jewett (New England), and George Washington Cable (Georgia), made this type of writing popular in the United States.

Like those writers, Townsend's novel offers rich detail about local customs, speech patterns (in this case including multiple dialects and languages), geography, and other distinguishing features of a given locale. The book offers fascinating and deeply specific descriptions of several distinct settings and the cultural particularities of those real places, most interestingly African cities in Morocco such as Essaouira, Marrakesh, and Rabat; parts of Mauritania; and small towns and villages near or in the Western Sahara, the desert serving as a character all its own. In addition, we get a brief glimpse of Sarajevo (in Vlad's background), and, finally, a substantial part of the narrative takes place in Louisville, although the descriptions about it lack the power of Townsend's depictions of the African venues.

Townsend, who teaches creative writing in the MFA program at the University of Michigan, tells the women's (and eventually the child's) stories through multiple perspectives and with a non-linear narrative progression. Most of the novel reflects the perspectives of Shannon, Souria, and Yumna/Mardi, and does so by jumping back and forth between time periods in their lives, a style that can be both compelling and confusing – a reader has to pay close attention to keep track

of the complex set of stories. (I say most of the novel is filtered through the perspectives of the three main characters, but Townsend uses a series of surrogate narrators to comment briefly on Yumna's abduction and departure from Africa.)

The novel offers a compelling and often heartbreaking story – both of the adult women suffer enormously, and of course Shannon inflicts on Souria what at times seems unendurable pain. Townsend writes powerfully of the suffering, and there's little joy for either of them in their ultimate relationships with (and without) men.

As for Mardi (the American version of Yumna), her naming makes me wonder if Townsend is invoking Melville's third novel, *Mardi*, a book that begins as a travelogue like his first two works but then becomes deeply philosophical. When the book received much less critical success than his earlier work, he responded to the criticism



by writing, "But Time, which is the solver of all riddles, will solve Mardi."\* In her novel about mothers and countries, Townsend's Mardi, too, asks to be solved. ■

ABOVE Duke Law School alumnus Jacinda Townsend reading for National Library Week in the Goodson Law Library, Durham, NC, 14 Apr. 2016

\* Qtd. From a letter to Lemuel Shaw, 23 Apr. 1849, in *Herman Melville, Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth, vol. 14 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Northwestern UP, 1968–93) 130.