



Reading the Ceiling

Dayo Forster

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Ayodele has just turned eighteen and has decided, having now reached womanhood, that the time is right to lose her virginity. She's drawn up a shortlist: Reuben, the fail safe; a long-admired school friend; and Frederick Adams, the 42-year-old, soon-to-be-pot-bellied father of her best friend. What she doesn't know is that her choice of suitor will have a drastic effect on the rest of her life.

Three men. Three paths. One will send Ayodele to Europe, to university and to a very different life - but it will be a voyage strewn with heartache. Another will send her around the globe on an epic journey, transforming her beyond recognition but at the cost of an almost unbearable loss. And another will see her remain in Africa, a wife and mother caught in a polygamous marriage. Each will change her irrevocably - but which will she choose?

Reading the Ceiling Details

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Author : Dayo Forster

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From Reader Review Reading the Ceiling for online ebook

Mike/ says

I read it at a point in my life when I had to make life-changing decisions without the benefit of foresight....very influential....I like the books-in-book format.....took me back to Jeffrey Archer, RL Stine and the rest.

Should be made a recommended book for high school girls.....tackles scenarios with great sensitivity and grace.....a magnificent book.

Friederike Knabe says

On her eighteenth birthday, Ayodele decides, she will not only have a great party at the best disco in town, she will also choose a one-off mate to take her from childhood to womanhood. It is an empowering feeling and the choice is hers, not common in her society at that time. First-time Gambian novelist Dayo Forster has written a lively, fast paced and delightful novel built around an intriguing concept: three different scenarios unfold for her life, depending on the man she chooses for that fateful night...

As she runs through the list of potentials, the reader is given a first glimpse into her life and world. Ayodele, or Dele for short, lives in Banjul, the capital of Gambia, that small costal nation hugging the river Gambia and sandwiched in between Senegal. It is an English speaking country in the sea of francophone ones. Dele is an intelligent girl and has already decided to move on to university either in Dakar, Senegal or, if she can get a grant, to England or elsewhere. She is dreaming of the wonderful life as an adult. Maybe, even her strict mother will finally respect and recognize her for who she is. Her mother, abandoned by the father of her three girls, struggles to make ends meet. She is one of the constant characters in the three versions of Dele's life, very traditional in her outlook and a stark contrast to Dele's favourite aunt, the unconventional Aunt Kiki. The younger siblings have an important role to play as have Dele's circle of girlfriends. Their own future could also be affected by the heroine's actions.

Forster develops each of the three life options with great enthusiasm, imagining three different futures, each leading her to late middle age: She could marry the chosen one, settle down and struggle not to repeat her mother's life; she could pursue her studies abroad, see the world and become successful; she could deeply fall in love... or live through a combination of those and other options. As we follow the three life stories, we build a very rich picture of not only life in Gambia, but also learn of the many challenges young women all over Africa still face today.

Dele is, not surprisingly, the strongest developed character in this mosaic of people. From one scenario to the next, we come across other characters again and again, providing the novel a certain level of continuity and cohesion. Forster has a refreshing style full of fun images that are, while unusual, easy to understand. A very enjoyable read indeed.

Sally says

"I can choose to be the hunter or the lion. What will my story be?", 7 Feb. 2016

This review is from: Reading the Ceiling (Paperback)

As the novel opens on narrator Ayodele's 18th birthday, I thought this was going to be a YA tale. Discos, the opposite sex and deciding on a future occupy the young people:

"We knot ourselves into a drift of conversations, starting and ebbing. University crops up again. And what we intend to do with our lives. We talk about the moon, about whether mermaids will come this far up the river, about crocodiles and oysters."

Ayodele is planning to take a lover and is preparing a short-list of likely candidates....

The fascinating structure of this work is that Forster gives us THREE stories of how Ayodele's life turns out, long-term, depending on the choices she makes; the men, the career options, religion, motherhood... And of course, much of life is down to fate and extraneous events.

As the stories move on to Ayodele's middle age, I found this quite a moving and thought-provoking novel.

An easy-read but enjoyable and worthwhile.

Kinga says

This is a good book if you are doing one of those Around the World challenges and you are struggling to find a book from the Gambia (did you know it was THE Gambia?).

It's a perfect book for this sort of thing - a perfect mix of the exotic and the familiar, not too challenging, giving you just enough of insight into the culture without making you uncomfortable. It meshes the European with the African, the traditional with the modern and shows African women dancing on the fine line between the two.

The main character is Ayodele who on her 18th birthday decides that she would have someone pop her cherry. The emphasis is put on the fact it is her first very own choice and she will make the most of it. Organised as she is, she draws up a list of four potential candidates and gives herself till the evening to decide who to do 'the Deed' with.

Then the narrative splits in three and follows the consequences of each choice in different alternate universes. The weird thing about Ayodele is that she was so insistent on making this independent choice, yet that seems to be the only choice she ever makes. After that in all three stories she just lets life happen to her. The only other choice she seems to make is just the opposite of what her mother wants and she appears to be making it only to spite her mother.

Ayodele is a very frustrating first person narrator as she offers no insight into her thoughts and feelings. Her motives remain obscure to us and when grief strikes her we are taken aback because we had no idea she cared.

Only in the last story things seem to start taking shape, and I had a feeling it had less to do with Ayodele and more with Dayo Forster finally taking a better grip on her own writing.

I was struggling to nail the final conclusion this book was trying to make, but perhaps it is that if you had no daddy around when growing up, you're going to end up with an older dude.

Calzean says

The premise of the book was interesting. A girl turns 18 and decides to lose her virginity on that night. She has a list of 3 possible partners.

The book then tells her story in a Sliding Doors manner; what happens depended on which partner she went with.

The three parts of the story have some common threads but the writing is quite of a different standard. The last part "The un-Named" was probably the best written but by this time I had lost interest.

V C Willow says

I thought the idea for the book outshone the execution. The retelling of the story and the blandness of a lot of the narrative made one story mingle pretty much into the next retelling. Clearly Dayo Forster is a talented writer and a capable story teller but I simply found the style not to my personal taste. Lots of subjects were touched upon but I felt we never really got to explore the depths of any of the characters or the stories, which was a shame as it felt we were forever only skimming the surface.

Easy to read and undemanding, I would neither rave nor rant about this book. If you happen upon a copy and have nothing else in your TBR pile its not an unpleasant read.

Andrea says

Set in Gambia, this novel traces a young woman's choices through three alternative lives. The author catches the tone and attitudes of Ayodele as a teenager and then young and middle aged woman well. All of our choices determine both create and limit the subsequent paths of our lives. Forster explores this idea with rich characters and vivid writing.

Julia says

Interesting concept - we all know that the whole life can take a really different take based on one spur-of-the-moment decision and thus the author evolves this novel from three different parting points in the life of 18-year-old Ayodele. I really liked the end of the book and the legend of the mermaid which might have been the author's parting point to start writing this book. I also enjoyed the details on Gambian life, food, dress, etc. very much. Unfortunately I never really cared for any of the characters. It might be the fact that the reader from a certain point knows that the author is only playing with puppets, but probably it also has to do with the rather detached writing style. Dayo Forster is definitely a talented writer and follows the very sensible concept "show, not tell", but sometimes I just felt very much left out of the inner world of the main character. Her feelings seldom find big expression on the pages of the book and sometimes the stories of her life sound more like an enumeration of biographical facts and anecdotes. If not for the ending, I would have given this book only two stars as it didn't have much of an impact on me, but still it's a fast and entertaining read. A nice change after Jelinek's "Piano Teacher".

Deborah Pickstone says

I had higher hopes but it is still an interesting read; we don't get so much fiction out of the African continent that we can afford to misprize it. As the book developed, so did the writing. I would expect growth as a writer in the future and look forward to reading more.

Verena Annette says

Not a bad book, not a really good book either.

I picked it up, to get an insight into the life in the Gambia, where part of this story takes place. That curiosity was satisfied.

The story itself is split into three plot lines - Ayodele decides, she wants to loose her virginity. She makes a list of men and the book tells three ways in which her life unfolds after choosing one of the guys. This idea of course isn't new or revolutionary, but it is entertaining enough. After each of the three decision we visit her life in little stop-overs, giving us an idea how her life evolved or stagnated.

I will mention what others have mentioned here in other reviews too: This is a first time novel. You can tell. It is good, but grows a lot better by the end of the book!

A good editor could have helped here, I think.

Now that Dayo Forster has found her literary voice, I would love to read more from her.

Abdelrahman says

It is very interesting yet not deep enough. Dele's reactions in the second story are very overrated comparing to Dele of the first story, as if it were a different person. The third story is the best, I enjoyed it so much. As she said; the moral of the story is: If you want something don't half-want it, want it properly and get it.

ElenaSquareEyes says

Reading the Ceiling is told in three parts, each one starting on the night of Ayodele's birthday and then spanning the next fifty or so years of her life. You get to see how one choice can shape Ayodele's life but at the same time there are many things that are outside of her control. For instance, things that happen to characters around Ayodele, like tragic accidents or the choice of a university, generally happen no matter who she chose to sleep with.

The interesting thing was that while her choice set Ayodele on three very different paths, she herself was still the same person deep down, no matter where life took her. She's headstrong with a good work ethic, she's smart and capable of being both independent and in a relationship. She's content being by herself or being with friends and she tends to clash with her mother no matter where life takes her.

Seeing Ayodele's three different lives play out, I find it difficult to choose which one I feel was best for her, or which one showed her to be the happiest. It's clever because all three lives had highs and lows, joy and

sadness – just like anyone's life.

Reading the Ceiling was a quick read, especially as it spanned a woman's lifetime three times over. I enjoyed seeing how life in The Gambia may or may not change over fifty years and seeing more of the various countries Ayodele lived in during her three lives. I also enjoyed seeing Ayodele grow as a person, and how her experiences shaped her and may have affected those around her.

Jama Jack says

The author is Gambian!

Yes, that matters to me as much as the stories she has weaved together in Reading the Ceiling. Growing up and understanding the power of representation and writing our own stories has pushed me into a year of reading works from (female) African authors only for a year.

This book is one I wished I had read in my teenage years, as I struggled to place my feet on solid ground while navigating the pressures of growing up as a teenage African girl.

Ayodele's story mattered. Forster's craft is greatly appreciated, as she gives us THREE stories, each weaving a possibility of what Dele's life could be. A reality that many of us face. As a reader, I loved this breaking down of the plot, and appreciated the three stories as gifts that will keep on giving, each one sending its own meaning. The author's vocabulary is timeless! I've mentioned this twice in my Twitter thread on the book, so it's truly marked me.

Reading through the pages and recognizing familiar places in the land I call home made for an even better experience. My imaginative mind painted the pictures that brought these stories to life, making them more than just fiction, and planting them as the reality for me and many other young women I know who've walked that path.

I would recommend Reading The Ceiling for anyone looking for an easy, yet insightful read, guided by the beautiful craft of a Gambian woman writer. That matters.

My Twitter thread with favorite quotes and other comments: <https://twitter.com/thejamajack/status...>

Megan says

"I am on the other side of knowing, yet the answer to the mystery of how to make my life has been in me all along."

A little like My Real Children and a little like *Community's* "Remedial Chaos Theory" episode, but the device is used for more literary rather than speculative purposes. (Or, I guess, the device is more a literary tool than a heavyhanded thought generator, as in MRC, or a framework, as in RCT.) Forster creates three possible lives for her protagonist Ayodele, all diverging from her decision to lose her virginity on her eighteenth birthday. The premise is more male-centric and salacious than the execution is; the book is a

poignant collage about grief, regret, aging, and discovering different types of love (family, romantic, friendship, spiritual, etc.). It's certainly not plot driven, and the prose itself is uneven at times, but the magic is in the exploration of Ayodele's possibilities, in affirming her agency against all the systemic forces that are often antagonistic against a woman.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

I agree with the other reviews that this is a fine option if you are doing a world books challenge and need a book from the Gambia – this is why I read it, and it's certainly readable – but there isn't much to recommend it beyond that.

Reading the Ceiling has an interesting premise: the narrator, Ayodele, is turning 18 and determined to get initiated into the mysteries of sex, so she needs to choose a partner with whom to do the deed. The three sections of the book follow alternate versions of her life as it unfolds along three different trajectories depending on whom she chooses: Reuben, an awkward classmate who likes her much more than she likes him; Yuan, a friend of Chinese descent in whom she is interested; or Frederick, the sexually experienced father of her best friend.

I was curious to see how the different stories played out, and there is a sense of place, though oddly for African fiction, Ayodele lives a middle-class life in terms of both values and material comforts, and there's not much of a sense that she and her classmates are better off than those around them. Tracking the similarities and differences among the stories and the different ways characters relate to each other based on different lives and choices was interesting, and the author does a good job of showing different sides of those events that occur in multiple stories, avoiding repetitive content. I didn't always believe the author's choices, though: a character will die in a motorcycle accident in multiple stories despite having lived two different adult lives, or Ayodele will get a scholarship for London in one story but only for Dakar in another even though she submitted the applications before making her choice.

More to the point, though, the book is on the dull side. Ayodele's feelings about events are often left unclear; instead we get bland descriptions of her surroundings, lacking in emotional content. And she's not a particularly interesting character or one who inspired much emotion in me. While a character doesn't need to be pleasant to be compelling, Ayodele doesn't balance her lack of resilience or less-than-admirable choices with a strong or complex personality to keep readers engaged. In two of the stories she folds emotionally at the first blow, allowing an early failure or tragedy to shape and define her life, while in the final one she chooses to carry an unexpected pregnancy to term, though it derails her life, apparently just to spite her mother. She doesn't seem destined to be happy regardless of her choices, though it's hard to tell when the last two end without reaching a conclusion, leaving readers wondering what happens next.

Overall, this isn't one I would recommend, though if you too have reason to read a book from the Gambia, then go for it. I've certainly read worse.
