



## Beneath the Lion's Gaze

*Maaza Mengiste*

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**Beneath the Lion's Gaze** Maaza Mengiste

**An epic tale of a father and two sons, of betrayals and loyalties, of a family unraveling in the wake of Ethiopia's revolution.**

This memorable, heartbreaking story opens in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1974, on the eve of a revolution. Yonas kneels in his mother's prayer room, pleading to his god for an end to the violence that has wracked his family and country. His father, Hailu, a prominent doctor, has been ordered to report to jail after helping a victim of state-sanctioned torture to die. And Dawit, Hailu's youngest son, has joined an underground resistance movement—a choice that will lead to more upheaval and bloodshed across a ravaged Ethiopia.

*Beneath the Lion's Gaze* tells a gripping story of family, of the bonds of love and friendship set in a time and place that has rarely been explored in fiction. It is a story about the lengths human beings will go in pursuit of freedom and the human price of a national revolution. Emotionally gripping, poetic, and indelibly tragic, *Beneath The Lion's Gaze* is a transcendent and powerful debut. .

## Beneath the Lion's Gaze Details

Date : Published January 11th 2010 by W. W. Norton & Company (first published January 1st 2010)

ISBN : 9780393071764

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Format : Hardcover 308 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Africa, Eastern Africa, Ethiopia, Historical, Historical Fiction, War, Literature, African Literature

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## From Reader Review Beneath the Lion's Gaze for online ebook

### **Beth says**

Beneath the Lions Gaze is the story of the Ethiopian Revolution in the mid 1970s, from the point of view of multiple characters. It opens with a doctor operating on another gunshot victim, while reflecting on his youngest son's involvement in the war, and his wife, dying of cancer in the same hospital. The son gets caught up in the resistance, and the doctor euthanizes a torture victim of the regime.

It took me a long time to get into this book; I picked it up and read about 20 pages of and put down, and tried to go back to it, twice, before slogging through it. I did think Mengiste was able to convey the political situation without a lot of long involved history, and there were certainly many exciting moments, but on the whole I was bored. And then, about halfway through, I was very worried for the characters and found myself genuinely caring for Dawit. The torture scenes were hard to read. I liked the twist on the significance of the girl Hailu euthanizes (this is defined as a key plot point on the book jacket, so I don't think it's a spoiler). In fact, I was surprised that this even, foreshadowed on the jacket, took so long to get to (2/3 of the book!).

I thought the writing in Beneath the Lions Gaze was superb but it's not an easily accessible novel. I especially loved the transitions in early chapters that introduced the characters, and again around chapter 20, when chapter 19 ends with a mention of pebbles, and chapter 20 opens with pebbles. The motifs (pebbles are only one; the heart, old tough trees, and themes of family and fluidity/flexibility are others) and the symbolism are masterful. Beneath the Lions is not consistently engaging, although the characters are relatable, specifically, the young person who is caught up in fighting for what he believes, and the friendship between two boys, one who goes to soldier and another who joins the resistance.

Certainly, the issue of euthanasia is a meaty topic for discussion; Beneath the Lion's Gaze has potential for book clubs.

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### **Zanna says**

This book has a tone and the best word I have for it is sombre. I felt Mengiste's Ethiopia to be grand, dignified, ancient, steeped in its rich mythopoesis. The graceful prose seems to move glacially from idea to idea, image to image, never becoming fevered or fragmenting as its subjects do. The segments from the viewpoint of Haile Selassie seem entirely appropriate in this mood. What I'm saying might sound like distance, the vertical perspective of a strategy game, but the texture here is also intimate, full of physicality and feeling. If this book hadn't been so agonisingly difficult to read because of the graphic scenes of torture, I would be giving it 5 stars.

Even before things start to go really horribly wrong as the revolution progresses, life is pretty grim for expert surgeon Hailu, whose wife is severely ill in hospital, and whose younger son's involvement with student activism worries him more or less constantly. As if things needed to get worse, the older son Yonas' young daughter suddenly becomes critically ill too. The girl's mother, Sara, distraught, shuts out those around her and bargains with an apparently cruel and blood-hungry god to save her daughter, crawling around the church on broken glass, creating a red ring that Mengiste uses as a (cheesy??) filmic scene transition to the

image of a cigarette, perhaps to suggest the furnace of violence that will enclose the city.

This reminded me why I've never got on with Christianity – I refuse to be forced into an abusive relationship with this sadistic jerk. My favourite character in the book, Emama Seble, a witch/wise-woman of sorts, is indignant when she sees Sara's self-inflicted injuries: 'what god would want this?!' I have no prior knowledge of either Ethiopian Orthodox or Coptic beliefs or practices, but apart from the obsession with hair-shirt style weird self-sacrifice, the role of religion in people's lives here is written attractively, with thoughtful devotion, both mutual and personal, providing social glue and contemplative sanctuary, in a way that reminded me of novels set in Muslim communities. Emama Seble's place in the community shows that religion is not used against others.

I have described Emama Seble as a witch, but Mengiste does not do so. She wears black long after the prescribed period of mourning for her husband, lives alone, and is known or rumoured to have many sexual partners. Her healing techniques, as far as we see, are extremely simple and practical; she uses relaxing aromatherapy and steam, massage and a bit of psychology. The community fears her and believes so strongly in her power they bring her the corpse of a child to resurrect, but they do not attempt to persecute her.

Hailu's politically active younger son, Dawit is perhaps the main narrative centre, compellingly written and complex despite his taciturn temperament. The young man's uncompromising idealism is written in the toughness of his face; both Hailu and Yonas remember being fired with political fervour in their youths, but they have become pragmatic and mellow. Whether Dawit's native temperament is different or whether his hard fighting spirit is conditioned by the harsher times, his mother Selam has always known he is the 'strongest'. His character develops significantly through the novel and he gains self-knowledge as he witnesses and judges the behaviour of others, but he retains some naivety to the end. One of the most disturbing moments of the story is when Solomon, a resistance fighter whom Dawit is following orders from, hints that the group they belong to also uses torture. Just as Dawit's personality is still maturing, the book ends before the story it is telling.

There are interludes in Selam's consciousness as well as Selassie's. Selam's interjections have a mystical quality, mapping a poetic imaginary that counterpoints the increasingly unbearable hallucinatory horror of reality, holding out the hope of escape or an end to the nightmare. I would have loved more background, more imaginary rooted in this land; I will have to read more books from the region.

The central family here belong to a relatively privileged class, but most of the peripheral characters do not. I was slightly confused that one of the housekeepers, Sofia, is so poor she sent her children out to work in the street instead of to school. I thought this reflected pretty poorly on Hailu & family, but I guess it would be considered normal and 'safe' if it weren't for the eruption of violence. Nonetheless, this handling of child soldier recruitment seemed uncharacteristically clumsy to me.

One intriguing and enjoyable character is the kiosk owner Melaku, who is a friend and former lover of Emama Seble. Occasionally his worldly wisdom is conferred upon Dawit. He asks 'didn't Marx enjoy himself?' which reminded me of the crucial question in *The Name of the Rose* of whether Christ laughed – perhaps it is equally important. I am currently reading *Almanac of the Dead* in which Native American resistance fighter Angelita La Escapia gives a life-changingly brilliant lecture on Marx that I may have to copy out and blog by itself. This new reading is causing me to get more and more food for thought out of Melaku's seemingly throwaway comment.

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## Alfonsina says

Es un libro fuerte, violento. Presenta la revolución etíope desde la perspectiva de una sola familia. Una familia, como muchas otras, al inicio tiene muchos problemas de comunicación, divisiones, y cada una de esas divisiones se incrementa hasta el punto de inflexión en el que la vida te enseña que no hay absolutamente nada más importante que el amor, la felicidad y la tranquilidad de tus seres amados. El libro hace que te preguntes ¿qué es el ser humano al final? ¿Una masa de células frías, salvajes o un ente con alma, amabilidad y fe?, ¿se puede ser ambas cosas o una vez que eres un monstruo lo serás por siempre? Dicen los sabios "que la esperanza es lo último que muere" y resulta cierto en esta novela, pues ¿a qué Dios podrías rezar para que te cobije y consuele de tanto sufrimiento?, ¿a qué deidad se debe invocar, cuando la culpabilidad también aniquila, pesa, casi lo mismo que un arma?

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## Dagio\_maya says

★★★½

Etiopia 1974: un colpo di stato militare e armato dall'Unione Sovietica mette fine al governo di Hailé Selassie e instaura una dittatura spietata.

Un romanzo che comincia in una sala operatoria e determina la linea di una storia intrisa di sangue.

Una lettura in cui si prova vergogna per i riferimenti ad un'Italia colonialista con tutti connotati negativi del termine.

Il fulcro del racconto è la famiglia del chirurgo Hailu ma le pagine accatastano una serie di personaggi che compongono il quadro di un periodo storico in cui si dovevano compiere ineluttabili scelte di campo.

Nel marasma di un Paese in rovina i conflitti sono sia famigliari che generazionali.

Un romanzo molto bello nel suo contenuto che pecca, secondo me, di armonia in quanto ci sono cambi repentini di scene e voci addirittura da un capoverso all'altro mettendo in seria difficoltà la lettura.

Non so...è come se non ci fosse stato un lavoro di revisione.

Peccato però perché il romanzo si sviluppa in un contesto che merita di essere maggiormente conosciuto e che in ogni caso consiglio.

*” A dispetto dei condizionamenti esterni, l’Etiopia pareva destinata a rimanere un miscuglio di antico e moderno dove il progresso e i riti erano costretti a convivere, come gli ideali del comunismo e le credenze copte.”*

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## Anetq says

I want to like this book, but I think Half of a Yellow Sun ruined me...

I wanted to like this, and the first book was good, but in the second book, as we shift from the close family drama to the broader political scene the characters seem stiff and cliché to me. Historically this is interesting, but I think I'm struggling with two things: 1) I'm not really into "historical family drama"-novels 2) Sorry to say, but having just read the awesome Half of a Yellow Sun - this just seems like a weak attempt at the same thing. But with shallower cliché characters, and more pompous style in drama and language. I spot the same

roles, but not done as elegantly. Also so far no interesting speaking parts for women in this play (dying or worried about family) - 160 pages in not passing a Bechdel test. On the good side the story made me read up on the strange story of Emperor Haile Selassie and his god-like status to the rastafarians.

As a tale of the Ethiopian revolution, civil war and/or horrific regime it is very efficient. As the tale of a family struggling through a war is not as wellformed. Somehow it seems a little schematic to me: One for, one against, one who ends up shooting the emperor, one who is the centre of a rebel attack... all rolled into a family of 4 - more or less. So while the portrayal of the horrors of war, and the unmerciful randomness of who lives or dies in the chaos is very good (if good is an appropriate word here), the storyline of the novel does not capture me. And to be honest; I might have been a lot more impressed if I hadn't been so taken with Half of Yellow Sun - making this seem to me like a vague attempt at the same, but less successful.

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### **Mwalimu Oduol says**

I Had this book for a really long time but never got round to reading it. Now that i'm done im kinda wondering why it took me so long.

The book is about the Ethiopian revolution as seen though the eyes of a fictional family in the time period. The author goes to great lengths to get the reader to understand what each of the characters are going through before , during and after the revolution.i really felt like i was going through the struggle with the characters in the book and the decisions they made all seemed to make sense to me(you know how you read some books or watch some movies and think....ahh if that was me i wouldn't have done that..well this doesn't happen in this book decisions just seem to make sense..irrespective of whether they are good or evil..which i think is a good thing.)

All in all a pretty good book that you shouldn't read if your feeling depressed(its got some sad moments in there...im pretty sure some peeps cried while reading this book)

My rating:a proper awesometacular!!!!!!

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### **Jim Fonseca says**

This novel is set in Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa, in the late 1970's. It's the last days of Christian Emperor Haile Selassie who successfully led the fight against Mussolini's soldiers - spears vs. tanks. Ethiopia today is still two-thirds Christian (Coptic) and one-third Moslem. But now a military takeover has occurred and the communists are in power, a group known as the Derg. Cuba, East Germany, USSR and North Korea become their allies, sending financial and military aid.

At first the military leaders put the emperor under house arrest and force him to sign their decrees; later they kill him (1974). People watch TV to see if their name is mentioned as one of those required to "come in for questioning." Usually that means you will never be seen again. This period became known as the Ethiopian Red Terror. Perhaps as many as 750,000 people were killed just in the years 1975-77. .

As backdrop to all the political goings on, there is famine, (with vultures used for symbolism in the book), profiteering from food aid, corruption.

Before I get into the story, I must say this: the portrayal of violence, graphic torture and sheer terror means you need a strong stomach to read this book. I can only think of one other book I have read that is so graphic: *Yalo* by Elias Khoury set in the civil war turmoil of Beirut. In this environment, no one is spared: children, old men, and women and girls are tortured and killed. The government charges a “bullet fee” for families to collect bodies of dead prisoners.

The story follows a fairly well-off family. They have cars and maids. The father is a doctor and his wife is dying in a hospital as the book begins. They have an older son and his wife who live with them as well as younger son.

The brothers are at opposite ends of the political spectrum. The older one spends much of his time praying; the younger practices his warrior dance in front of a mirror. The college-age younger son is causing panic in the family with his involvement in anti-government activity. At first this is surreptitiously handing out leaflets and newspapers. By the end of the book he is a full-fledged armed guerrilla.

As a doctor, the father is well-placed. Many of the government ministers are his friends and he hears names announced on TV of people he knows. He doesn't have to wait to hear his own name. One day a young woman is brought in to the hospital under military guard. She has been so brutally tortured that she is in a coma and near death. While she makes some recovery at first, he realizes that they want her back to torture her again. He poisons her and he is in turn arrested and tortured to find out why he did this.

In another tragic scene a beautiful, well-dressed young woman arrives at the prison, overnight case in hand, knocking on doors to try to get in because she has been called in for “questioning.” The crowd milling about screams at her “get out, run, don't go in” but a door opens, arms reach out to pull her in, and she is never seen again.

The younger son eventually recruits his sister-in-law in the anti-military effort. They go out at night to collect mutilated bodies that the military have dumped in public places as a warning to others.

There is not a lot of plot; the story follows the lives of this family and a few other people such as a street vendor and a childhood friend of the young son who joins the other side and becomes an army officer. The military force the family to take in an informer who lives in their compound. The daughter-in-law pays beggars to spread broken glass on the path around the church so that she can crawl on her knees to help her daughter get better from an illness. One of the beggars joins her.

The book is translated from the Ethiopian. One of the sections leads off with an old Ethiopian war song that says it all:

Mother of the strong boy, tighten the belt around your waist.  
Your son is for the vultures only,  
Not for burial by your relatives.

Image of Emperor Haile Selassie from animalia-life.club

Photos of Derg leaders and the author from Wikipedia

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### **Abraham Gudissa says**

“A farmer plows a land that isn’t his, that was never his father’s, which was never his grandfather’s, and will never be his son’s.”

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### **Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says**

First, the cover is not doing this book any favors. I assumed it was a memoir, probably of a child soldier or something.

Even once I realized this was a novel, I didn’t have high expectations for it: I was expecting another earnest but poorly-written book published on the strength of covering awful events in a time and place most Americans know little about. As it turns out, I did like the book more than expected.

Beneath the Lion’s Gaze is set in 1970’s Ethiopia, a time of enormous upheaval: following a devastating famine and governmental inaction, student protests led to a revolution, overthrowing the hereditary monarch. The revolution was quickly co-opted by the military, which, claiming to set up a communist government, ushered in a period of terror and repression. This book covers about four years and mostly follows one extended family--a father, two adult sons, daughter-in-law and granddaughter--along with some of their friends and neighbors. The married son just wants peace, while the single one becomes a high-profile dissident; meanwhile, their father, a doctor, faces a terrible dilemma when the military demands that he treat a torture victim.

The story is interesting and the short chapters move it along relatively quickly. If you’ve read other books about life under oppressive regimes, you know what to expect here: there are some ugly scenes, including violence against children. But Mengiste balances the bloody parts with scenes dealing with family relations and everyday life; the book never feels like a simple news report. It is, however, far from a light read; the characters’ attempts to do good consistently make things worse, and there’s little hope in the inconclusive finish.

Neither the characterization nor the writing style is anything to write home about, but even so, I rather liked the book. The author’s observations and imagery ring true, and the plot kept my interest. If the characters often seem more like representatives of various opinions and experiences than actual people, it’s still nice to have a range of them represented, from dissidents to soldiers to collaborators. Even the less sympathetic characters are believable and treated fairly.

As for the historical aspect, the book certainly piqued my interest in Ethiopia; I might have liked a more in-depth look at events, but can’t complain with the book’s focusing primarily on the family. There’s a decent sense of place, with some good descriptions of the country.

Overall, this isn’t among the best civilians-in-wartime books I’ve read, but nor is it among the worst. A

decent choice if you're interested in Ethiopia, African fiction generally, or civilian life during revolutions and military dictatorships.

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### **Loops Wuadaloops says**

Generalmente me preguntó si quieren quitar a Peña Nieto, a quién podrían? Las Revoluciones sirven cuando se sabe quién es el siguiente, cuando hay un líder que busca el bien común, la historia nos ha enseñado que eso no pasa y que desgraciadamente el Poder hace olvidar las "buenas intenciones" y corrompe al sistema y a las personas en él. Este libro ilustra perfecto cuantas vidas puede costar una mala decisión, recomendado más en estos tiempos de incertidumbre y próximas elecciones electorales.

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### **Nnedi says**

I loved the characters and the setting was highly compelling. But I needed more plot. I really really needed more of a plot. You've got to have something happen, and that has to be shown as it's happening. Too many time whenever there was movement in the plot it was shown as FLASHBACK. 8-|. No.

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### **Terryn says**

Let's be real here – a lot of what we (Westerners) know of Ethiopia is based on those late night aid commercials soliciting support for starving children with distended bellies and flies swarming their faces. This is incredibly problematic. Maaza Mengiste's "Beneath The Lion's Gaze" flies in the face of that monolithic stock image of the country and gives a richly drawn description of Ethiopian life before the 1974 revolution that many people know little or nothing about.

This is the story of a family set against the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie, and is easily one of most gripping books I've read in a very long time. It looks baldly at the beauty of Ethiopian culture (a strongly family, community, and faith centered way of life), Ethiopian history (Ethiopia proudly off Italian forces and was the only African nation not colonized by Europeans), and the political machinations that tore at the fabric of that society. Main characters include Hailu, a medical doctor and the father and head of the household; Selam, his ailing wife, Yonas, their eldest son, Dawit the younger, more rebellious son, and Sara, Yonas's wife. There are a number of ancillary characters that weave in and out of the narrative to tell a story that is about family, love, war, and convictions.

For me this novel renewed my interest in Ethiopian history. As a black American I already had some idea of Ethiopia's rich contribution to black history, and knew of Haile Selassie's importance to Rastafarianism, but this book made me think about the ramifications of deifying political leaders, black or otherwise. The torture/death scenes in the book were hard to bear because you realize how both fragile and resilient human life can be. This book is definitely worth the read.

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## **Sheryl says**

I've had this book for years and finally got around to reading it, though, I admit, it took me awhile to feel connected to the story and the characters. However, I'm so glad I stuck with it. The setting is Ethiopia in the 1970s during the beginning of the Red Terror period of history there, in which a military government promising change and equality essentially terrorizes the civilian population and massacres any dissenters. This story focuses mainly on a father and his two sons, which was intriguing to me, as few novels have male protagonists. Mengiste develops these characters in rich detail, bringing to life their hopes, fears, shame, and family loyalty. The character development and change from the beginning to the end is especially well done, as we see unexpressed feelings spoken, unappreciated moments cherished, and family ties once stretched to the near breaking point binding the family back together. There are some extremely difficult torture scenes in this novel, a few that I can't yet erase from my mind. Yet, I don't think it's a bad thing to have to face the reality of the brutality man can inflict on one another, as it reminds why we must work tirelessly to end or prevent situations in which this kind of treatment is allowed to happen (even as it is currently happening in countries such as Sudan today).

There was one line in this book that made me stop and reread it, and then fold down the corner of the page, because of its truth and applicability to current events, both here in the US and elsewhere, where people suffer and those in power pay no attention or expect them to just get over injustices visited upon them.

"Dawit saw that this small boy could grow into a full-blooded adult menace, a destructive force borne of grief that had been treated as inconsequential." (P.278). May we have the wisdom necessary to recognize the validity of others' grief and as a society, help heal those wounds in our brothers and sisters, even if their experience is not our experience, their story not our story.

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## **Marsha says**

"Beneath the Lion's Gaze" begins in 1974 during the last days of Emperor Haile Selassie's despotic rule of Ethiopia. Told through the fates of members of a well educated family it conveys the chaos, contradictions and violence that beset the country.

As the story starts, the people of Ethiopia are literally dying of starvation as an aged and aloof Emperor goes about business as usual. Then seemingly overnight Emperor and officials are seized, murdered or detained and a new struggle begins. The new "socialist" military regime releases undisciplined, uneducated, and mostly untrained troops upon the civilian population resulting in looting, stealing, reassigning real estate, false imprisonment, violence against women, and murder. Merciless and paranoid, the new government, backed by the Soviet Union, adds its death grip to the misery of this starving people.

Moving and enraging, we follow Hailu, a respected doctor in Addis Ababa try to save his family and his patients. He has a surgeon's eye view of the injury leveled on civilians as he attempts to save them in the local hospital while also trying to reign in members of his family who are singled out or court trouble by their actions.

A fascinating aspect of this slice of Ethiopian history is its description of the blending of Christianity and long held local beliefs. Maaza Mengiste, the author, born in Addis Ababa, has an insider's knowledge of the cultural underpinnings beneath this all too familiar story of ruthless abuse of political power, disregard for the rule of law, and contempt for the lives and aspiration of others; unfortunately the universal hallmarks of violent government takeover.

I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in learning about life in other parts of the world.

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### **Jayesha says**

Mengiste writes skillfully, her words gliding over allusions to god, war, magic, dreams, and hopelessness, all on one page. While I would say the book is a bit slow to pick up, I feel-- in slight agreement with the Guardian's review on the back cover of the paperback edition published by Vintage-- that that's because she works hard to describe the Ethiopia of the 1970s while also fleshing out her wide range of characters, giving us insights into their fears, prayers and emotions. I also think that her many characters, all set against the backdrop of (fictionalised, she tells us) military socialism, forced disappearances, state control and torture, do disorient the reader slightly, in having to keep track of each character's motivations as well as their current situation in relation to the regime; I think this is especially true for the second half.

However, this book drew me in and earns a good review from me because the world Mengiste creates for us in three hundred pages is enough to make us think hard about the tough choices people must make about choosing to submit to or resist oppression, protecting their families or being part of something far larger than themselves, and the place of morality and humanity in an old friendship-- all in un-hackneyed, determined and beautiful words, unlike how I have expressed myself here. Her book is enough to make one gasp and sigh at the helplessness of the people tethered to these contradictions, mad with fear and love, during a bloody, tumultuous time in a dazed nation. Or perhaps I am just the kind of reader who gasps and sighs while reading.

An interesting, honest book, which is worth the effort it takes to read it. 3.5-star rating bumped up to 4-- read it.

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