



Even in Paradise

Elizabeth Nunez

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Peter Ducksworth, a Trinidadian widower of English ancestry, retires to Barbados, believing he will find an earthly paradise there. He decides to divide his land among his three daughters while he is alive, his intention not unlike that of King Lear, who hoped "That future strife/May be prevented now." But Lear made the fatal mistake of confusing flattery with love, and so does Ducksworth. Feeling snubbed by his youngest daughter, Ducksworth decides that only after he dies will she receive her portion of the land. In the meantime, he gives his two older daughters their portions, ironically setting in motion the very strife he hoped to prevent.

Beautifully written in elegant prose, this is a novel about greed, resentment, jealousy, betrayal, and romantic love in the postcolonial world of the Caribbean, giving us a diverse cast of characters of African, Indian, Chinese, Syrian/Lebanese, and English ancestry.

"*King Lear* in the Caribbean--except in this novel, the flattery and deceit of Glynis (Goneril) and Rebecca (Regan) lose out to the principled, honest love of their younger sister, Corinne (Cordelia).

Nunez's latest novel follows widower and Barbados retiree Peter Ducksworth, who tests the love and loyalty of his three daughters. Like Lear, things fall apart for Ducksworth when he fails to realize that his youngest daughter truly loves him while the older two are simply using flattery to obtain their inheritance. It all takes place on sumptuous white Caribbean beaches and lush gardens."

-- *New York Post*

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-- *O, the Oprah Magazine* , 10 Titles to Pick Up Now

Named a Must-Read Book by the *New York Post*

"An epic tale of family betrayal and manipulation couched in superbly engaging prose and peopled with deftly drawn characters. In a story structure as rhythmic as the ebb and flow of the water surrounding Trinidad and Barbados, this revisiting of the classic story of *King Lear* becomes a subtle, organic exploration of politics, class, race, and privilege. A dazzling, epic triumph."

-- *Kirkus Reviews* , Starred review

"[Narrator] Émile remarks on parallels to *King Lear* repeatedly, but there is much more to unpack here. The issue of racism is woven throughout, as are regional problems such as access to Barbados's beaches and poverty in Jamaica's Tivoli Gardens. This is also a celebration of the arts, culture, and natural beauty of the islands. Shakespeare's work is a tragedy, but for Émile 'the future shimmers before [him] full of wondrous possibilities.' Nunez treats her source material with a deft touch, making this story impressive in its own right."

-- *Publishers Weekly*

"Nunez's textured and engaging novel explores familial discord, along with questions of kinship and self-identity....With a nod to *King Lear*, Nunez crafts an introspective tale as her vividly drawn characters navigate complications of heritage, race, and loyalty."

-- *Booklist*

"Even if you're not familiar with *King Lear*, William Shakespeare's great tragedy, you will still enjoy *Even in Paradise* by Elizabeth Nunez...The author's drama heads to a new place: the Caribbean. We meet Peter Ducksworth, a widower of English ancestry, who retires to beatific Barbados...Ducksworth's plan to divide his land evenly among his three daughters goes horribly awry when he cuts off his youngest. Having been deceived by the older two, he sees his dreams of a heaven on earth turn hellish. Nunez inspires with this one."

-- *Essence Magazine*

"Nunez has written a Caribbean reimagining of *King Lear* that adds colonialism and racism to the story of three sisters, the men they love and their battle over the deed to their father's beloved property. Themes of greed, jealousy and resentment play out after their father confuses flattery with love and disowns his favorite daughter."

-- *Ms. Magazine*

"*King Lear* in the Caribbean.

Even in Paradise Details

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Michael says

Hugely disappointing. *King Lear* is one of the most majestic and challenging works ever penned, plumbing the depths of human cruelty and depravity, precariously balancing against those forces our capacity for love, loyalty, and forgiveness, doing so in language that pushes the very limits of what words can express. What's the point of writing a contemporary novel based on such a tragic monument if you're not going to at least take a stab at some of that? Elizabeth Nunez's *Even in Paradise* settles for just cribbing its plot and its character list (going so far as to have the narrator comment on the parallels several times, even grad-studentsplaining them to other characters), in language that barely ever rises above the pedestrian. Even where the novel does something interesting and original — transposing the story to modern-day Trinidad, Barbados, and Jamaica, with their varied and troubling legacies of colonial exploitation and the persistence of white privilege — it doesn't so much explore those themes as tentatively allude to them, then back away to focus more on the soap-opera of the plot's domestic conflicts. That plot unfolds so ploddingly that it never gains momentum (in contrast with its source, which plunges us into the disastrous division of Lear's estate, his rejection of Cordelia, and the machinations of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund within the first scene, the novel doesn't get around to that plot point till about 2/3 of the way through), and caps it off with a meek little plot twist that you can spot a mile away. I sure hope I'll be more impressed by Edward St. Aubyn's and Preti Taneja's takes on the material.

Robert Guttersohn says

4.5

David Dacosta says

Even in Paradise is an ambitious undertaking. Not content with simply setting the novel exclusively on her birth island of Trinidad, Nunez incorporates both Barbados and Jamaica, along with aspects of Shakespeare's *King Lear* into the narrative. Peter Ducksworth, a well-to-do white Trinidadian of British lineage, and his three daughters, provide the thread of drama that runs through the story. While Emile, an African-Trinidadian, and his Lebanese-Trinidadian friend Albert, are mostly spectators to the Ducksworth's theatrics. Lies, greed and tragedy ensue.

Nunez blows a perfect opportunity to provide real insight into life in Barbados and Jamaica. Her impressions of Barbados and its tourist-centric philosophy are mildly interesting. A more probing look into the island's social and political makeup would have better served the story. And her assessment of Jamaica is primarily stereotypical. The constant references to violence, corruption and poverty became frustrating, as I happen to live on the island. Even Nunez' take on Reggae music came off critical.

As a citizen of Jamaica, I am naturally biased to an extent. But that doesn't prevent me from being objective. Jamaica, like other tropical climate countries, has its issues with crime due to a thriving global drug trade. That is not the totality of the country's identity, though. Jamaica possesses a highly complex society, with a myriad of ideologies and a layered class structure, its people are far from a monolith. Nunez' thinly veiled

condemnation of the island was a definite turn off. Jamaica remains one of the top tourist destinations and one of the most culturally influential countries the world over. I'm convinced that a certain amount of island envy was at play here.

I personally like Elizabeth Nunez. Last year I had the opportunity to interview her via Skype and found her to be passionate, outspoken and generally friendly. I admire her dedication to literature, particularly as it relates to the Caribbean experience in the diaspora. But. There's always a but. The book could have done without the Jamaica storyline. It hurt an otherwise inventive tale.

Heather(Gibby) says

This is a wonderful tale surrounding three sisters from a wealthy white family in the Caribbean. It loosely retells the classic tale of King Lear, and is a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of greed and selfishness. The author showcase's the beauty of the islands of Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados, but also brings the reader's attention to the inequalities of racism. The two oldest daughters try to further their own interests at the expense of their youngest sister.

Janine says

An interesting modern interpretation of King Lear set in the Caribbean. The parts that worked best were the description of issues in Trinidad, Jamaica and Barbados springing from their colonial past. The characters were a bit flat but a worthwhile read.

Diane says

This is an easy read.

Liz says

The cultural details were interesting, but this was really just Lear set in Trinidad and Barbados. I wanted to like it more than I did.

Sophy H says

Fantastic book. Nunez is a skilled descriptive writer who has filled this King Lear inspired tale with juicy, ballsy characters, dramatic landscapes, realism and modern day referencing of age old character flaws. I loved this story, it felt like a journey of discovery and the references to colonialism, slavery and submission were sensitively handled as part of the story line as opposed to a soap box preaching session. Highly recommendable, I would read this story again.

Kathryn Mattern says

I really enjoyed the writing style of this book which was spare yet warm. I felt a sympathetic resonance with the narrator, Emile Baxter, the literary-minded 22 year old son of a Caribbean doctor, with his personally warm, reflective tales of a girl who becomes a woman, a 'Syrian' (Christian) friend who falls in love with a schemer, three sisters and their father, and his own odyssey through three Caribbean Islands: Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica, as well as a perceptive experience of a first job and all that goes with that stage in life: youth. I found it all believable, authentic-feeling, even though I agree with another commentator that some of the characters are drawn primarily with lines rather than shading (Rebecca, Douglas, Glynis).

They say this book is a sort of 're-telling' of King Lear, one of the Shakespearean plays I have not yet seen, and I appreciated that aspect of it (as it's a familiar story), but mostly I simply enjoyed 'hearing' the perspective of the islands. I have ancestry from this part of the world on one line of great-grandparents, and while some readers may think the local emphasis on color is racist and perhaps a bit extreme, I have to say this is the way my relatives on this branch of the family tree did think. Maybe they brought these attitudes with them, or maybe it's just an unacknowledged part of being 'American,' but they had their categorizations fine-tuned, and it IS the direct result of 'people of color' having to live in the shadow of white-supremacist culture. It all seems like a part of the past in my own experience, but maybe that's only because my generation is self-identified as 'white,' or because I live on the West coast rather than the East coast, but I don't come across these attitudes in my own life now. (If anything, racial attitudes seem more boldly expressed today compared to the careful 'stepping around' people used to do). I felt the author introduced historical themes and the varied ethnicities of the islands with taste and an easy flow of story-telling. Overall, I found her writing style engaging and effortless to read, really a pleasure. I loved her characterizations, especially the intimate style of the narrator. I look forward to reading more of this author.

If you liked this book or want to read another novel set in the Caribbean, I recommend Alice Hoffman's "The Marriage of Opposites." It's set in the past, however, and one of the things I particularly appreciated about 'Even in Paradise' is that it addressed the issue of tourism in island communities: Hawaii, Bali, the Caribbean, and how the heritage (of the land) is being stolen all over again from the native people. Another commentator mentioned how it's like another 'Conquest' only this time quite legal, but equally tragic. This book doesn't leave you there, though, for which I was grateful. In the end, this is a book about Emile and his life.

Oceantide74 says

I enjoyed this book although at times it read like a period piece and the modern reference would jolt me back into reality of the present tense. I would've liked to read more about the girls and their father growing up. I also would've liked to see more about Emile and his father's relationship towards the end.

Cate says

Read for Read Harder 2018: book of colonial or post colonial literature. I thought this category was going to be a downer, but this was really interesting. I liked the original story, the King Lear connection, and I learned

a lot about the people if the Caribbean.

Amy says

i was looking for some fiction set in puerto rico to read while i was there and couldn't find anything at my local library. the closest i found was *even in paradise*, which is primarily set in trinidad and barbados. the setting was my sole reason for picking up this book and it turned out i rather enjoyed this contemporary, caribbean-set version of *king lear*. i'll definitely check out other books by nunez.

Steph says

I'm chagrined to admit that this is the first book I've read by a Trinidadian author and, moreover, set in Trinidad. On the whole, I enjoyed this book as I found it a fairly quick and easy read, and I did appreciate the insight that I gained into contemporary Caribbean culture. Increasingly I find myself enjoying books that place me somewhere utterly foreign to myself and I liked learning some bits and pieces of Trinidadian history as well as the post-Colonial battles/issues the locals still face. I thought it was an interesting juxtaposition to consider that in these "idyllic" former British colonies, they have already had their land stolen by foreigners (at least) once previously, and now the same issue continues to plague locals—albeit this time with the encouragement and/or tacit approval of their government—as desirable bits of land are snatched up and made inaccessible by resorts and rich foreigners. I hadn't considered this parallel before and thought it an interesting line of thought to explore.

As for the main story, that of the Ducksworth family, I thought it was fine, though I did find it rather simplistic and many parts of it obvious, even without considering the obvious homages to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I was disappointed that the characters didn't feel very well or deeply developed; indeed, many of them (particularly Glynis & Douglas) felt rather cartoonish in their villainy. I personally didn't find the underlying motivations or the overarching plot very complex, and the whole novel—even the sociopolitical aspects—just felt rather simplistic and superficial in its approach. I kept hoping there would be more meat for Nunez to sink her teeth into, but this reading experience really felt like I was a stone skipping along the surface of a pond, never to know any real depth. That's not to say the story wasn't engaging or absorbing (it was!) only that I wish it all had more heft to it rather than coming across as a rather obvious cautionary tale.

I also REALLY did not like all the mentions within the book of how a given relationship or situation in *EVEN IN PARADISE* paralleled the original material in *KING LEAR*. I think most people reading this book would be smart enough to pick up on the similarities/allusions (and, if you aren't, pointing out how something in EIP mirrored KL probably wouldn't mean much to you, regardless), and I thought it was so inelegant and awkward for Nunez to "show her work" as it was. We get that you used *KING LEAR* as the inspiration for this novel, that you might even consider it a modern-day retelling of *KING LEAR* in a Caribbean setting... no need to explicitly remind us within the text itself! Let the story and themes you develop speak for themselves!

Overall, a fine book, but nothing spectacular. I do want to read learn more about this part of the world and intend to read more Caribbean authors. Perhaps I was expecting too much from Nunez but I was ever-so-slightly disappointed that this book felt so slight. That said, I would read more by her in the future, though I think I will make it a priority to try other Caribbean authors first.

Chrissie says

If you have not tried any of Elizabeth Nunez's books, you must!

This one as well the other I have read by Nunez, that being *Anna In-Between*, are both well written. Her books are set in the Caribbean and they weave in the history, culture and feel of the islands. This one is set in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. When? In the last decade. The drug trafficking and social unrest of Tivoli Gardens in Kingston, Jamaica, and the extradition of Jamaican drug lord Christopher Coke to the US are woven into the story. The extradition occurred in 2010. Colonization, multi-ethnicity, racial discrimination, tourism and a burgeoning art community are topics cleverly woven into the story. The story is a modern retelling of Shakespeare's (view spoiler). If you don't know the story, wait until after reading the novel to check it out. There is one simple reason why I cannot give the book more than three stars. That is because it is a retelling of another story, a story that already existed. Yeah, I liked it, but heck it's not new! The author has taken an old story and put it in modern clothing.

I do think you should read it, to see how the author draws the Caribbean. Not just its historical past but also its physical presence. The sea and the sky and the sand, the blues and the greens, the vistas. Read it to discover the seductive draw of Nunez's Caribbean women. There is a love story here, but it is not gratuitously drawn. The movement of a limb, a voluptuous pout, full lips, a torso, the sheen of skin – all are enticingly drawn.

I very much like how the story ended.

I definitely recommend this book to those wishing to learn more about the Caribbean and to those who value well written lines.

The audiobook is narrated by Corey Allen. It is simple to follow and read at a good speed.

Diane S ? says

4+. King Lear, three daughters, greed and manipulation, and a mentally disintegrating father. Nunez takes this to the Caribbean, Trinidad and Barbados and uses a family named Duckworth, a widower with three daughters to tell her story. Moving from Barbados from Trinidad, Mr. Duckworth has a beautiful house on some gorgeous land, land his two, elder daughters desperately want. They are also jealous of the youngest, Corinne who is apple of her Father's eye. Into this mix is Emilie, the black son of Duckworth's physician and his friend Alfred, who is of Lebanese descent and becomes engaged to the eldest Duckworth daughter.

Amazing writing, absolutely gorgeous, very addicting story told very well. The manipulations and greed of the two eldest sisters plays out against a backdrop of racial discrimination and a politically charged time in Trinidad. The Tivoli Garden massacre is part of a young activist's poem and Tivoli Gardens itself will be used to construct the attempted downfall of the youngest sister. But greed is I believe is the unifying theme, greed of country rulers and the greed within a family. Well played out juxtaposition.

First book by this author for me, but it will not be my last.

ARC from publisher.
