



Emanuel School

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

THURSDAY 12TH OCTOBER 2023

SENIOR BOOK CLUB: OPENWATER

BY CALEB AZUMAH NELSON

Mr A Maskell

It has become an annual tradition for the Senior Book Club to discuss works by writers of colour in conjunction with Black History Month. Of course we aim to explore a diverse range of literary voices in any given month, but the occasion always gives rise to important discussions about race, representation, and experience. In 2021 we discussed James Baldwin's 1974 classic, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and last year we dissected Natasha Brown's 2021 novella, *Assembly*. This year we remain contemporary in our selection, analysing Caleb Azumah Nelson's award-winning *Open Water*.

Having won the Costa Book Award for First Novel, *Open Water* has been ubiquitous in bookstore displays for the past two years. I was reminded of it when reading about Azumah Nelson's follow-up, *Small Worlds* (2023), which has already set the literary world ablaze. At 145 pages, *Open Water* is an extremely slender work (a blessing during term-time!), but it still packs a punch. Upon choosing it for the Book Club, I've been informed by a few students that it's one of their favourite novels. Others who have since been reading it for the first time have mentioned how much they are enjoying it.

The narrative concerns the coming together (or not coming together) of two unnamed young protagonists. Both are black artists (he's a photographer; she's a dancer) hoping to make it in London, and we chart their relationship

as it wrestles to define itself from friendship to romance and everything in between. The most significant stylistic feature is Azumah Nelson's decision to tell the story via a direct but expressionistic second-person narrator, addressed solely to the male protagonist. The effect of this seems to be to frame us, as readers, as stand-ins for the photographer, forced to confront and come to terms with his explicit trauma. At times it reminded me of Ocean Vuong's debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), which also takes a poetic approach to second-person narrative, though Azumah Nelson's prose isn't quite as lyrical. Another towering influence is of course James Baldwin, whose words are alluded to and kept close by the photographer, and Barry Jenkins' cinematic adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* in fact features on an important date between the would-be lovers, ominously foreshadowing the photographer's own encounter with police brutality.

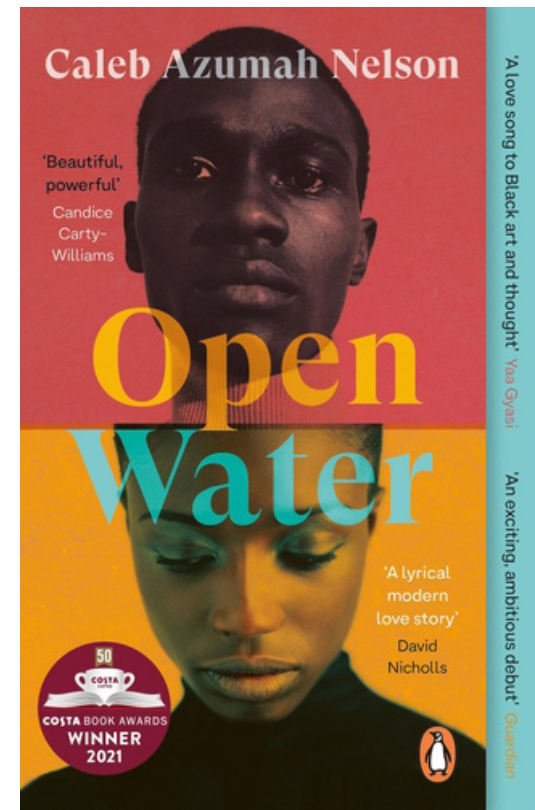
Like Baldwin's novel, this is a love story. It's about a meeting of minds and bodies. Both protagonists achieved scholarships to independent schools (he to Alleyn's, like Azumah Nelson himself), and they bond over their shared experiences as isolated black individuals in overtly white spaces, struggling at once with the simultaneous visibility and invisibility that comes from being a minority. 'It's one thing to be looked at,' says the narrator, 'and another to be seen.' Larger social issues threaten to keep the protagonists apart. While the dancer is comfortable in her own skin, prejudiced police surveillance and a lifetime of witnessing racist attacks lead the photographer to feel separated from his own body – a body which he fears has

'long been marked for destruction'. The narrator repeatedly reminds the photographer of the weight he carries: 'You are a Black body, container, vessel, property'.

But this is perhaps predominantly a tribute to black artistry. Beyond the protagonists' own creative careers, Azumah Nelson's pages are littered with black artists, from Zadie Smith – whose *N.W.* is frequently cited as a favourite of the protagonist, and Smith herself (affectionately known as 'Zadie' here) even has a cameo in a dizzying flashback to a memorable book-signing – to Kendrick Lamar. There is a reference to John Singleton's 1991 drama *Boyz n the Hood* to mirror the protagonist's internalised detachment after being stopped by police. Spike Lee also makes an appearance, but not – as one might expect – with *Do the Right Thing*; instead it's the television remake of *She's Gotta Have It*, binged by the two young artists as they navigate their burgeoning feelings for one another.

Like Zadie Smith, Azumah Nelson is interested in the topographical buzz of London as much as he is in character; the narrator employs vascular tube-line imagery to suggest the connections between the protagonists (a slightly heavy-handed metaphor, but it's typical of the style here), with numerous other London-centric hallmarks, from Battersea Bridge to Notting Hill Carnival. Southeast London is described with particular affection.

Then there's the eponymous water – a recurring motif symbolic of the precarity and peril of diving headfirst into romance, forever at risk of drowning. After the dancer tells the photographer that she loves him, the narrator reflects: 'She has swum out into open water, and it is not long before you join her.' It's anything but subtle, but this unusually sensitive exploration of romance against the mounting weight of racial profiling and crippling discrimination is worth a read. Dive straight in.



CAMEROON

CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

Mr and Mrs Odigie

Cameroon, on the Gulf of Guinea, is a Central African country with varied terrain and wildlife. Its inland capital, Yaoundé, and its biggest city, the seaport Douala, are transit points to ecotourism sites as well as beach resorts like Kribi – near the Chutes de la Lobé waterfalls, which plunge directly into the sea – and Limbe, where the Limbe Wildlife Centre houses rescued primates.



The country is nicknamed “Little Africa” as geographically, Cameroon consists of coastline, mountains, grass plains, forest, rainforest and desert, all of the geographical regions in Africa in one country. This also contributes to its cultural diversity as ways of life and traditional food dishes and traditions vary from geographical region to geographical region.

HOLIDAYS

Religious holidays in Cameroon include:

- Christian: Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Pentecost, Ascension Thursday and Palm Sunday
- Muslim: Eid ul-Fitr, Eid ul-Adha and Ramadan

RELIGION

Cameroon culture consists of numerous religions including Christianity (about 79%), Islam (about 21%), and many other indigenous religions. The citizens of Cameroon are entitled to freedom of religion, as it is stated within their constitution. Therefore, citizens are free to practise any religion they choose, without harassment or forceful conversion. The northern part of Cameroon is heavily occupied by the Fulani people (Fula: Fule; French: *Peul* or *Peulh*; also known as Mbororo, though this has sometimes been seen as pejorative). The Fulani are mainly Muslims because Islam is the dominant religion in the northern region. The western region is home to the Batum people, an ethnic group that also practises the Islamic religion. The French-speaking people are often inhabitants of the southern and western regions and the majority of them are Catholic, while English-speaking citizens more to the west tend to be Protestants.



A musician plays traditional African music on a horn trumpet in Douala, November 2006

FASHION

Cameroon's relatively large and diverse population is also diverse concerning its contemporary fashion. Climate, religious, ethnic and cultural belief systems as well as influences from colonialism, imperialism and globalization are all reflected in the clothes worn by modern Cameroonians.

Notable Cameroonian articles of clothing include Pagnes, a sarong worn by Cameroon women, Chechia, a traditional hat, Kwa, a male handbag and Gandura, traditional male attire. Wrappers and loincloths are used extensively by both women and men but their use varies by region with influences from Fulani styles more present in the north and Igbo and Yoruba styles in the south and west.



Imane Ayissi is one of Cameroon's top fashion designers and has received international recognition.

Cameroonian fashion is varied and often mixes modern and traditional elements. Note the wearing of sunglasses, Monk shoes, sandals, and a Smartwatch.

CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

Cameroon has 250-300 distinct groups and an estimated 300+ languages. These languages include the Akoose language, the Gbaya language, the Fula language, the Gyele language, the Koonzime language, the Mundang language, the Ngiemboon language, and the Vengo language. Others include Ewondo, Bassa, Bamileke, Duala, and Arabic in the North and Far-North regions.

Cameroon is divided into several provinces, which are dominated by specific ethnic or religious groups. Ethnic divisions often correspond to geography, which is also widely varied. Religious differences often correspond to colonial or other historical influences.



Bamenda traditional attire

To conclude, partly through the influence of colonialism, there is a national culture, and two distinct regional cultures: the Anglophone and Francophone regions, which primarily speak English and French and use different legal systems. The national culture is established through public institutions such as schools, the multiparty political system, a shared history of colonialism and a national love of football.

Two of Cameroon's best football players of all time, are Roger Milla and Samuel Eto'o. Roger Milla scored a goal during the 1990 World Cup against Argentina which shocked the world and left the late Diego Maradona in tears.



Roger Milla (left) & Samuel Eto'o' (right)