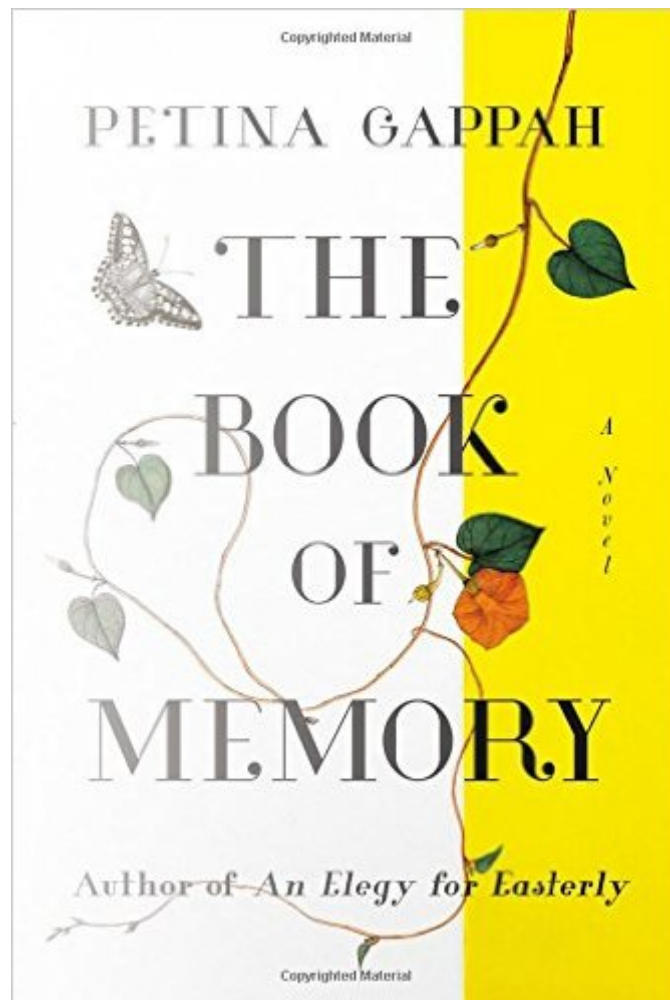


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The Book Of Memory: A Novel



Synopsis

The story that you have asked me to tell you does not begin with the pitiful ugliness of Lloyd's death. It begins on a long-ago day in August when the sun seared my blistered face and I was nine years old and my father and mother sold me to a strange man. Memory, the narrator of Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory*, is an albino woman languishing in Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison in Harare, Zimbabwe, after being sentenced for murder. As part of her appeal, her lawyer insists that she write down what happened as she remembers it. The death penalty is a mandatory sentence for murder, and Memory is, both literally and metaphorically, writing for her life. As her story unfolds, Memory reveals that she has been tried and convicted for the murder of Lloyd Hendricks, her adopted father. But who was Lloyd Hendricks? Why does Memory feel no remorse for his death? And did everything happen exactly as she remembers? Moving between the townships of the poor and the suburbs of the rich, and between past and present, the 2009 Guardian First Book Award-winning writer Petina Gappah weaves a compelling tale of love, obsession, the relentlessness of fate, and the treachery of memory.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When we meet Memory, the narrator of this novel, she is in Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison in Zimbabwe, having been found guilty of murder. From the start, we are told that she did not murder her adopted father, Lloyd Hendricks, and she is writing down her life story as part of her appeal against her death sentence. In effect, Memory's life has two parts – the first nine years of her childhood, spent at 1486 Mharapara Street and then the next nine years of her life, spent with Lloyd Hendricks; the white man that she claims her parents sold her to. As we read of the unfolding life of

Memory, we move between past and present and gradually unravel what really happened to lead her to a life in prison. The author of this novel first became successful through a volume of short stories, *An Elegy for Easterly*. "I have to admit that short stories have never been a favourite of mine" but I now regret that this author did not come to my attention earlier, as I loved this book. From the first moment Memory begins speaking to the reader, I was completely enthralled. We begin with her life in the busy and chaotic life on Mharapara Street, which Petina Gappah brings totally to life with an exuberant cast of characters. Unlike most of the inhabitants of the street, Memory lives a slightly outcast life "her parents seem to lack the endless relatives that visit most of her neighbours and she is set apart by the fact that she is an albino. Of course, children's memories are often uncertain and there are things that they do not fully understand, but we see everything from Memory's perspective, while also being aware that there are undercurrents beneath the facts that are related to us.

Memory, an albino Zimbabwean woman, is the only female prisoner on death row in the notorious Chikurubi prison in Harare. The law of Zimbabwe restricts her to a single appeal for a change of her sentence, to save her own life. She is accused of murdering a white man, to whom she was sold as a child. As a murungudunhu, I am a black woman who is imbued not with the whiteness of murungu, of privilege, but of dunhu, of ridicule and fakery, a ghastly whiteness. Gappah has been called (to her dislike) "the voice of Zimbabwe". Rather than being pigeonholed as an African author, or given the impossible task of being a single voice for a diverse population with diverse and opposing beliefs, we should regard Gappah as an author from Africa who writes for Zimbabwe. Memory's white skin, and her sale to Lloyd, results in her receiving a white upbringing of privilege, while her childhood on Mharapara street gives her memories of growing up in modern Zimbabwean black culture, and in poverty. She is too white for the township and too African for the rich white farm community. Memory is an outsider who watches and reflects on both sides of the growing Zimbabwean conflict. The whole thing had been reduced to the simple matter of blackness versus whiteness. White people stole the land. Black people took farms and ruined them. Black people took control and ran things down. White people stole. The Book of Memory is a bilingual book, as Shona phrases appear without translation. However, I never felt that I couldn't understand what was going on; why should English be the only written language for a society that is anything but homogenous?

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