

> FICTION



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Flight attendant Dessie, the central character in *Daughters of Silence*, makes an unplanned stop in her birthplace, Ethiopia.

# Reconciling culture with grief

Novel weaves themes of family estrangement, Ethiopian history, after-effects of abuse, culture

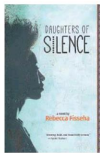
**PIALI ROY**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Coming to terms with the death of a parent is difficult, more so when the relationship has become estranged. Even more so when one is not even completely familiar with the rites and customs of the parent's original culture, as in the case of many diasporic person. Rebecca Fisseha tackles this subject in her first novel, **Daughters of Silence**. Dessie is a flight attendant from Toronto who is grieving over the very recent death from cancer of her mother when the ash of an Icelandic volcano grounds planes flying through Europe in 2010. Her flight, travelling from Toronto to Johannesburg is forced to make an emergency stop in, of all places, her birthplace, Addis Ababa.

Out of obligation, she ends up at the home of her imposing grandfather, known as the Shaleqa for his anti-colonial activities against the Italians during their Ethiopian occupation in the 1930s. Now, though, he is in the midst of preparing for the Forty — the Ethiopian



*Daughters of Silence*, Rebecca Fisseha, Goose Lane, 304 pages, \$22.95.



practice of marking the fortieth day of mourning — when he confronts Dessie for deciding, with her father and adopted brother Le'ul, to bury his only remaining child in Canada.

Fisseha uses extensive flashbacks to create her narrative, hinting again and again at the dark secrets dogging the family. Her habit of holding back obvious plot points is sometimes frustrating, particularly in the first half of the book, when Dessie does her best to avoid Le'ul. It ends up as no surprise when it is revealed that he had previously sexually abused her midway through the novel.

As Dessie tries to mollify her grandfather and his household before the Forty, including Gela, the Shaleqa's proud housekeeper who is more entangled

with their shared past than expected, she recalls her own complicated relationship to her family. Her mother left Ethiopia as a diplomat, eventually sacrificing her chance to become an ambassador to the U.S. so she could keep her loved ones together in Toronto. But it is her mother's attempts to persuade Dessie to forgive Le'ul's unforgivable transgressions that leads to their virtual estrangement.

If the secrets and lies that hold a family together and threaten to tear it apart are at the core of this story, an examination of the nature of familial love is its corollary. Dessie ultimately recognizes that, despite their troubles, there "was a simple, timeless kernel of love that obliterated the petty clutter" of the relationship between mother and daughter. The novel is particularly touching when the Shaleqa and Dessie are able to reconcile despite their initial differences.

*Daughters of Silence* weaves together the themes of Ethiopian history, the after-effects of abuse, and the sometime stumbling of the diaspora in the culture of their birth.

Fisseha presents the life of an independent woman as she finds a new road for herself beyond grief.

Piali Roy is a Toronto writer.

> GRAPHIC NOVELS **MIKE DONACHIE**

**Grass**  
By Keum Suk Gendry-Kim  
Drawn & Quarterly, 480 pages, \$34.95

Sometimes graphic novels can be perceived as a little frivolous. There are many exceptions, such as *Persepolis* or *Maus*; the story of a Korean girl presented in *Grass* joins those prestigious titles as one of the most powerful and moving in sequential art.

It's the biography of Okseon Lee, one of the thousands forced to become "comfort women" by the Japanese military during the Second World War. Her experiences, before and after her sexual slavery, are presented in matter-of-fact terms by Gendry-Kim with an honesty that's unique to this serious sort of cartooning.

with its simplified, direct depiction of people, their emotions and their environments. And Gendry-Kim takes it further by examining her own experiences as she interviews Lee, showing herself and her self-doubt as part of the story.

This is an important book, which should be read widely.

**Mars Attacks**  
By Kyle Starks and Chris Schweizer  
Dynamite Entertainment, 132 pages, \$26.50

Everybody's heard of *Mars Attacks*, right? The movie based on trading cards that's a big ol' joke about destruction caused by aliens that shout "Ack! Ack! Ack!" Right? Well, yes, but it's also

emotional stories in the guise of comedy. It's about a father-and-son relationship that isn't going so well. Spencer's a feeble loser who wants to borrow money from his dad ... when aliens start blowing the hell out of everywhere. So, with gigantic explosions and torched humans all around, the pair head for the hills, bickering all the way, and get ready to show the invaders what they're made of.

Kyle Starks' past work, especially *Sexcastle*, is possibly the most underrated material in comics and it's only a matter of time before everybody's talking about him. Pair Starks with the superbly talented Schweizer and the result is explosive.



**King of King Court**  
By Travis Dandro  
Drawn & Quarterly, 460 pages, \$34.95

Memoirs drawn in pen and ink are becoming almost as common as podcasts these days. So, when it starts to feel like everybody's got one, this type of memoir needs to stand out — and that's what *King of King Court* manages to do.

It's based on the author's experiences with his biological father, a charismatic figure struggling with drugs and, eventually, prison



sent events starkly, and it's often shocking to see a little boy (Dandro draws himself as a cute kid with messy hair and round, eyeless glasses) having these experiences. It adds extra sensitivity. The pace of the book is always crucial in comics, and this one, focused throughout on images more than words, is a page-turner, even if the subject matter isn't an easy read.

**Hotel Dare**  
By Terry Blas and Claudia Aguirre  
BOOM! Studios, 144 pages, \$19.99

There's a ton of fun in *Hotel Dare*, which is one of a series of tremendous books for middle grade and younger readers produced by the KaBOOM! imprint, as other comics publishers struggle to create appropriate stories for this demographic.

It has a lot of layers. There's a tale of family conflicts centred on adopted siblings Olive, Darwin and Charlotte, extended to the difficult nature of their grandmother Mama Lupe and her own past. Then there's the fantasy/science-fiction layer, as a boring summer of chores at the family's creepy hotel turns into a dimension-hopping adventure. And there's a cultural element, too, with magic and mythology from a Mexican tradition that's sorely under-represented in comic books. Most importantly, it's really fun. Expect wizards, space pirates, creatures made from cotton candy, and swashbuckling battles to keep you entertained.



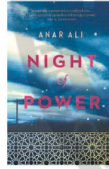
> ARRIVALS

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

These new books take us into several neighbourhoods in the global village.

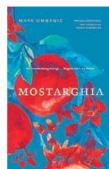
**Night of Power, Anar Ali**

Anar Ali's poignant first novel concerns the Visrams, an Ismaili family in Calgary who fled Uganda 25 years before, in 1972. We meet blustery patriarch Mansoor, his deferential wife, Layla, and unhappy son, Ashif, who works at a Toronto multinational and rarely visits. These three are generationally and culturally at odds, bound together through habit and tradition. Their lives are about to be upended on the Night of Power, *Lailatul Qadr*, the holiest night of Ramadan, when the devout Layla explains to the goddess Mansoor, "Allah seals our fates for the coming year." Prophetic words.



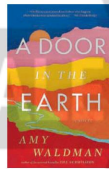
**Mostarghia, Maya Ombasic, trans. Donald Winkler**

Maya Ombasic addresses this memoir, at once tender and unsparring, to her father — irascible, contrary, brilliant. For her, he is an embodiment of culture, history, the past and the future, at once a burden and encompassing shelter. Writing this fragmentary remembrance in the second person effectively creates an intimate universe of two, though others come and go, first in Mostar, the capital of Herzegovina, then safe-haven Switzerland during the Bosnian war and finally resettlement in Montreal. The title is a melding of Mostar and nostalgia, central themes of this deeply felt memoir.



**A Door in the Earth, Amy Waldman**

Parveen Shamsa leaves college and her Afghan-American community in California and embarks on a pilgrimage to her homeland, her destination a remote village made famous through the memoir of a U.S. humanitarian who provided help to the local people. The lamentable conditions she discovers raise moral contradictions and unresolvable questions. Waldman reported on Afghanistan for *The New York Times*. Her first book, *The Submission*, about Muslims in the U.S. after 9/11, won critical praise.



**Refugees & Forced Migration: A Canadian Perspective; an A-Z Guide, Catherine Baillie Abidi, Shiva Nourpanah**

The editors assembled 19 experts to provide essays for this alphabetical guide to talking about the refugee experience — academics, human rights lawyers, refugee activists and front-line workers, all based in Atlantic Canada. This useful primer takes us from A (activism and advocacy) to Y (youth and second generation), explaining terms, raising our consciousness and providing historical context. The goal, the editors write, was to capture "the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the refugee experience."



**Take It Back, Kia Abdullah**

Here's a thoroughly modern courtroom drama involving East London's large South Asian community, by an author-journalist who specializes in issues involving Britain's Muslim population. On one side of this novel, a he-said-she-said story, is 16-year-old Jodie, a white girl with a serious facial deformity. On the other are four Muslim teens. Jodie claims the boys sexually assaulted her after a party; they insist nothing happened. Both sides appear to be telling the truth. In Jodie's corner we meet Zara Kaleel, a Muslim lawyer who

