

Bitter Fruit

By Carmela Ciuraru

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In 1976, Dr. D. Carleton Gajdusek won a Nobel Prize for identifying a fatal disease in a remote tribe in Papua New Guinea. By the time of his death in 2008, Gajdusek had achieved another kind of notoriety, having been imprisoned for sexually abusing one of the dozens of native children he had adopted. Hanya Yanagihara's suspenseful first novel, "The People in the Trees," is based loosely on this true story, with a number of horrifying twists. From the start, she sets her narrative dial to creepy, and challenges to the extreme the notion that a protagonist needs to be "likable." Yet thanks to her rich, masterly prose, it's hard to turn away from Dr. Norton Perina, her antihero inspired by Gajdusek. Some might say he's a sociopath, and not even the charming kind (see Tom Ripley).

In a voice at once baroque and chilly, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist tells the story of his ignominious downfall via an obsessively crafted "memoir." After being convicted in 1997 for the rape of one of his adopted children, Perina finds himself "living a strange kind of life, a life in which I have no one." His account, written from prison, has been meticulously transcribed and edited by Dr. Ronald Kubodera, his former lab assistant. Kubodera's sycophantic and often bizarre footnotes accompany the text. He serves as Smithers to Perina's Mr. Burns, a role made even more explicit at the end.

In 1950, at the age of 25, Perina graduates from Harvard Medical School, where he "rather enjoyed killing the mice." He is invited to join a Stanford anthropologist, Paul Tallent, on an expedition to the fictional Micronesian island of Ivu'ivu in search of a lost tribe. (In a meta-twist, Tallent publishes a "landmark" book, "The People in the Trees: The Lost Tribe of Ivu'ivu.") Perina finds Tallent's physical beauty an immediate and unwanted distraction; he recalls being "disgusted by the ache I felt yet enjoying it too."



Hanya Yanagihara Sam Levy

The team tracks down the primitive Ivu'ivuan tribe, but even more extraordinary is the discovery of a group of forest dwellers ("the dreamers") who live for hundreds of years while suffering progressive brain damage. Their condition is both an affliction and a gift — a "parody of immortality," Perina says. He is awestruck as he witnesses a dreamer for the first time: a woman whose movements are human, "but somehow poorly practiced, as if she had once, long ago, been taught how to behave as a human and was slowly, steadily forgetting." They name her Eve.

The dreamers seem to achieve longevity by consuming the flesh of a sacred, enormous turtle called the opa'ivu'eke. While Tallent and his associate dutifully record the Ivu'ivuans' daily habits, recording the shape and texture of their feces, Perina has grander ambitions. Aware that he has struck scientific gold, he's eager to fully solve "the riddle that has preoccupied every culture since the beginning of time." He kills an opa'ivu'eke, smuggling the precious turtle meat back to America, and kidnaps some of the dreamers for extensive testing in his lab.

Perina's cruel act will lead, predictably, to his ruin and to the tragic devastation of Ivu'ivu. The novel examines issues of moral relativism, Western hubris, colonization and ecological disruption in the name of science as it charts the disappearance of the wondrous flora and fauna and the grievous harm done to the indigenous people. Pharmaceutical companies pillage the island, creating turtle breeding farms in their quest to bottle the secret to longevity. But Perina is unrepentant about his role. "I did what any scientist would have done," he insists.

Provocative and bleak, "The People in the Trees" might leave readers conflicted. It is exhaustingly inventive and almost defiant in its refusal to offer redemption or solace — but that is arguably one of its virtues. This is perhaps less a novel to love than to admire for its sheer audacity. As for Yanagihara, she is a writer to marvel at.

THE PEOPLE IN THE TREES

By Hanya Yanagihara

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