

We don't want to tell you what happens in this book.  
It is a truly special story and we don't want to spoil it.

Nevertheless, you need to know enough to buy it so  
we will just say this:

This is the story of two women.

Their lives collide one fateful day, and one of them has  
to make a terrible choice.

Two years later, they meet again  
– the story starts there...

Once you have read it, you'll want to tell your friends  
about it. When you do, please don't tell them what  
happens either. The magic is in how it unfolds.

'Totally believable'

*Daily Express*

'It would be hard not to romp through it'

*Financial Times*

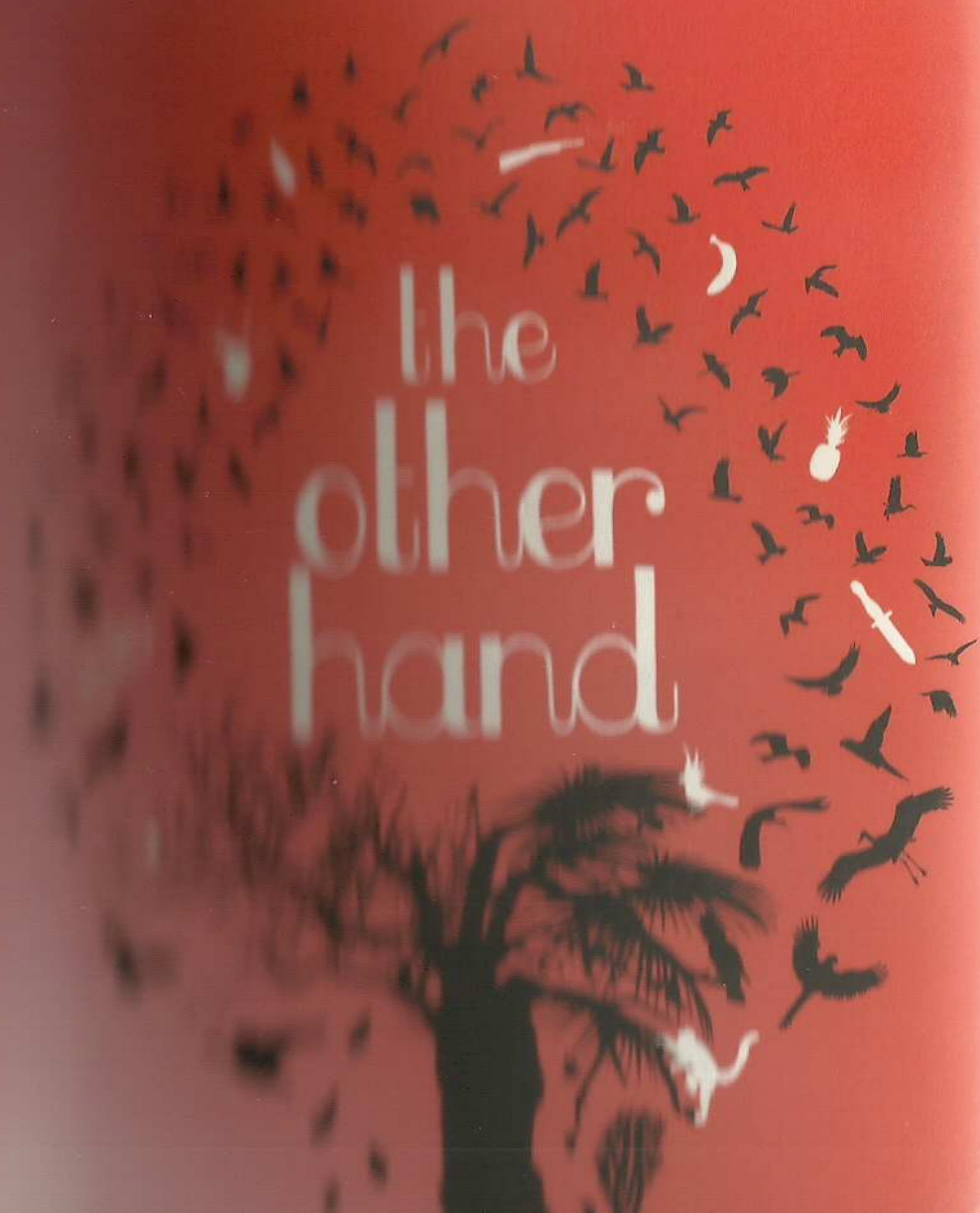
'Impresses as a feat of literary engineering...  
the plot exerts a fearsome grip'

*Daily Telegraph*



NUMBER ONE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# the other hand



Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeing [sic] persecution and conflict.

From *Life in the United Kingdom: A Journey to Citizenship* (UK Home Office, 2005)



I

Most days I wish I was a British pound coin instead of an African girl. Everyone would be pleased to see me coming. Maybe I would visit with you for the weekend and then suddenly, because I am fickle like that, I would visit with the man from the corner shop instead – but you would not be sad because you would be eating a cinnamon bun, or drinking a cold Coca Cola from the can, and you would never think of me again. We would be happy, like lovers who met on holiday and forgot each other's names.

A pound coin can go wherever it thinks it will be safest. It can cross deserts and oceans and leave the sound of gunfire and the bitter smell of burning thatch behind. When it feels warm and secure it will turn around and smile at you, the way my big sister

Nkiruka used to smile at the men in our village in the short summer after she was a girl but before she was really a woman, and certainly before the evening my mother took her to a quiet place for a serious talk.

Of course a pound coin can be serious too. It can disguise itself as power, or property, and there is nothing more serious when you are a girl who has neither. You must try to catch the pound, and trap it in your pocket, so that it cannot reach a safe country unless it takes you with it. But a pound has all the tricks of a sorcerer. When pursued I have seen it shed its tail like a lizard so that you are left holding only pence. And when you finally go to seize it, the British pound can perform the greatest magic of all, and this is to transform itself into not one, but two, identical green American dollar bills. Your fingers will close on empty air, I am telling you.

How I would love to be a British pound. A pound is free to travel to safety, and we are free to watch it go. This is the human triumph. This is called, *globalisation*. A girl like me gets stopped at immigration, but a pound can leap the turnstiles, and dodge the tackles of those big men with their uniform caps, and jump straight into a waiting airport taxi. *Where to, sir?* Western civilisation, my good man, and make it snappy.

See how nicely a British pound coin talks? It speaks with the voice of Queen Elizabeth the Second of

England. Her face is stamped upon it, and sometimes when I look very closely I can see her lips moving. I hold her up to my ear. What is she saying? *Put me down this minute, young lady, or I shall call my guards.*

If the Queen spoke to you in such a voice, do you suppose it would be possible to disobey? I have read that the people around her – even Kings and Prime Ministers – they find their bodies responding to her orders before their brains can even think why not. Let me tell you, it is not the crown and the sceptre that have this effect. Me, I could pin a tiara on my short fuzzy hair, and I could hold up a sceptre in one hand, like this, and police officers would still walk up to me in their big shoes and say, *Love the ensemble, madam, now let's have quick look at your ID, shall we?* No, it is not the Queen's crown and sceptre that rule in your land. It is her grammar and her voice. That is why it is desirable to speak the way she does. That way you can say to police officers, in a voice as clear as the Cullinan diamond, *My goodness, how dare you?*

I am only alive at all because I learned the Queen's English. Maybe you are thinking, that isn't so hard. After all, English is the official language of my country, Nigeria. Yes, but the trouble is that back home we speak it so much better than you. To talk the Queen's English, I had to forget all the best tricks of my mother tongue. For example, the Queen could

never say, *There was plenty wahala, that girl done use her bottom power to engage my number-one son and anyone could see she would end in the bad bush.* Instead the Queen must say, *My late daughter-in-law used her feminine charms to become engaged to my heir, and one might have foreseen that it wouldn't end well.* It is all a little sad, don't you think? Learning the Queen's English is like scrubbing off the bright red varnish from your toenails the morning after a dance. It takes a long time and there is always a little bit left at the end, a stain of red along the growing edges to remind you of the good time you had. So, you can see that learning came slowly to me. On the other hand, I had plenty of time. I learned your language in an immigration detention centre, in Essex, in the south-eastern part of the United Kingdom. Two years, they locked me in there. Time was all I had.

But why did I go to all the trouble? It is because of what some of the older girls explained to me: to survive, you must look good or talk even better. The plain ones and the silent ones, it seems their paperwork is never in order. You say, they get repatriated. We say, *sent home early.* Like your country is a children's party – something too wonderful to last forever. But the pretty ones and the talkative ones, we are allowed to stay. In this way your country becomes lively and more beautiful.

I will tell you what happened when they let me out of the immigration detention centre. The detention officer put a voucher in my hand, a transport voucher, and he said I could telephone for a cab. I said, *Thank you, sir, may God move with grace in your life and bring joy into your heart and prosperity upon your loved ones.* The officer pointed his eyes at the ceiling, like there was something very interesting up there, and he said, *Jesus.* Then he pointed his finger down the corridor and he said, *There is the telephone.*

So, I stood in the queue for the telephone. I was thinking, I went *over the top* with thanking that detention officer. The Queen would merely have said, *Thank you,* and left it like that. Actually, the Queen would have told the detention officer to call for the damn taxi himself, or she would have him shot and his head separated from his body and displayed on the railings in front of the Tower of London. I was realising, right there, that it was one thing to learn the Queen's English from books and newspapers in my detention cell, and quite another thing to actually speak the language with the English. I was angry with myself. I was thinking, You cannot afford to go around making mistakes like that, girl. If you talk like a savage who learned her English on the boat, the men are going to find you out and send you straight back home. That's what I was thinking.

There were three girls in the queue in front of me. They let all us girls out on the same day. It was Friday. It was a bright, sunny morning in May. The corridor was dirty but it smelled clean. That is a good trick. Bleach, is how they do that.

The detention officer sat behind his desk. He was not watching us girls. He was reading a newspaper. It was spread out on his desk. It was not one of the newspapers I learned to speak your language from – *The Times* or the *Telegraph* or the *Guardian*. No, this newspaper was not for people like you and me. There was a white girl in the newspaper photo and she was topless. You know what I mean when I say this, because it is your language we are speaking. But if I was telling this story to my big sister Nkiruka and the other girls from my village back home, then I would have to stop, right here, and explain to them: *topless* does not mean, the lady in the newspaper did not have an upper body. It means, she was not wearing any *garments* on her upper body. You see the difference?

– *Wait. Not even a brassiere?*

– *Not even a brassiere.*

– *Weh!*

And then I would start my story again but those girls back home, they would whisper between them. They would giggle behind their hands. Then, just as I was getting back to my story about the morning they let me out of the immigration detention centre, those

girls would interrupt me again. Nkiruka would say, *Listen, okay? Listen. Just so we are clear. This girl in the newspaper photo. She was a prostitute, yes? A night fighter? Did she look down at the ground from shame?*

– *No, she did not look down at the ground from shame. She looked right in the camera and smiled.*

– *What, in the newspaper?*

– *Yes.*

– *Then is it not shameful in Great Britain, to show your bobbis in the newspaper?*

– *No. It is not shameful. The boys like it and there is no shame. Otherwise the topless girls would not smile like that, do you see?*

– *So do all the girls over there show them off like that? Walk around with their bobbis bouncing? In the church and in the shop and in the street?*

– *No, only in the newspapers.*

– *Why do they not all show their breasts, if the men like it and there is no shame?*

– *I do not know.*

– *You lived there more than two years, little miss been-to. How come you not know?*

– *It is like that over there. Much of my life in that country was lived in such confusion. Sometimes I think that even the British do not know the answers to such questions.*

– *Weh!*

This is what it would be like, you see, if I had to stop and explain every little thing to the girls back home. I would have to explain linoleum and bleach and soft-core pornography and the shape-changing magic of the British one-pound coin, as if all of these everyday things were very wonderful mysteries. And very quickly my own story would get lost in this great ocean of wonders because it would seem as if your country was an enchanted federation of miracles and my own story within it was really very small and unmagical. But with you it is much easier because I can say to you, look, on the morning they released us, the duty officer at the immigration detention centre was staring at a photo of a topless girl in the newspaper. And you understand the situation straight away. That is the reason I spent two years learning the Queen's English, so that you and I could speak like this without an interruption.

The detention officer, the one who was looking at the topless photo in the newspaper – he was a small man and his hair was pale, like the tinned mushroom soup they served us on Tuesdays. His wrists were thin and white like electrical cables covered in plastic. His uniform was bigger than he was. The shoulders of the jacket rose up in two bumps, one on each side of his head, as if he had little animals hiding in there. I thought of those creatures blinking in the light when he took off his jacket in the evening. I was thinking,

Yes sir, if I was your wife I would keep my brassiere on, thank you.

And then I was thinking, Why are you staring at that girl in the newspaper, mister, and not us girls here in the queue for the telephone? What if we all ran away? But then I remembered, they were *letting* us out. This was hard to understand after so much time. *Two years*, I lived in that detention centre. I was fourteen years of age when I came to your country but I did not have any papers to prove it and so they put me in the same detention centre as the adults. The trouble was, there were men and women locked up together in that place. At night they kept the men in a different wing of the detention centre. They caged them like wolves when the sun went down, but in the daytime the men walked among us, and ate the same food we did. I thought they still looked hungry. I thought they watched me with ravenous eyes. So when the older girls whispered to me, *To survive you must look good or talk good*, I decided that talking would be safer for me.

I made myself undesirable. I declined to wash, and I let my skin grow oily. Under my clothes I wound a wide strip of cotton around my chest, to make my breasts small and flat. When the charity boxes arrived, full of second-hand clothes and shoes, some of the other girls tried to make themselves pretty but I rummaged through the cartons to find clothes that

hid my shape. I wore loose blue jeans and a man's Hawaiian shirt and heavy black boots with the steel toecaps shining through the torn leather. I went to the detention nurse and I made her cut my hair very short with medical scissors. For the whole two years I did not smile or even look in any man's face. I was terrified. Only at night, after they locked the men away, I went back to my detention cell and I unwound the cloth from my breasts and I breathed deeply. Then I took off my heavy boots and I drew my knees up to my chin. Once a week, I sat on the foam mattress of my bed and I painted my toenails. I found the little bottle of nail varnish at the bottom of a charity box. It still had the price ticket on it. If I ever discover the person who gave it then I will tell them, for the cost of one British pound and ninety-nine pence, they saved my life. Because this is what I did in that place, to remind myself I was alive underneath everything: under my steel toecaps I wore bright red nail varnish. Sometimes when I took my boots off I screwed up my eyes against the tears and I rocked back and fro, shivering from the cold.

My big sister Nkiruka, she became a woman in the growing season, under the African sun, and who can blame her if the great red heat of it made her giddy and flirtatious? Who could not lean back against the doorpost of their house and smile with quiet indulgence

*Nkiruka, beloved one, you must not smile at the older boys like that?*

Me, I was a woman under white fluorescent strip lights, in an underground room in an immigration detention centre forty miles east of London. There were no seasons there. It was cold, cold, cold, and I did not have anyone to smile at. Those cold years are frozen inside me. The African girl they locked up in the immigration detention centre, poor child, she never really escaped. In my soul she is still locked up in there, forever, under the fluorescent lights, curled up on the green linoleum floor with her knees tucked up under her chin. And this woman they released from the immigration detention centre, this creature that I am, she is a new breed of human. There is nothing natural about me. I was born – no, I was reborn – in captivity. I learned my language from your newspapers, my clothes are your cast-offs, and it is your pound that makes my pockets ache with its absence. Imagine a young woman cut out from a smiling Save the Children magazine advertisement, who dresses herself in threadbare pink clothes from the recycling bin in your local supermarket car park and speaks English like the leader column of *The Times*, if you please. I would cross the street to avoid me. Truly, this is the one thing that people from your country and people from my country agree on. They say, *That*



That girl is a halfling, a child of an unnatural mating, an unfamiliar face in the moon.

So, I am a refugee, and I get very lonely. Is it my fault if I do not look like an English girl and I do not talk like a Nigerian? Well, who says an English girl must have skin as pale as the clouds that float across her summers? Who says a Nigerian girl must speak in fallen English, as if English had collided with Ibo, high in the upper atmosphere, and rained down into her mouth in a shower that half drowns her and leaves her choking up sweet tales about the bright African colours and the taste of fried plantain? Not like a storyteller, but like a victim rescued from the flood, coughing up the colonial water from her lungs?

Excuse me for learning your language properly. I am here to tell you a real story. I did not come to talk to you about the bright African colours. I am a born-again citizen of the developing world, and I will prove to you that the colour of my life is grey. And if it should be that I secretly love fried plantain, then that must stay between us and I implore you to tell *no one*. Okay?

The morning they let us out of the detention centre, they gave us all our possessions. I held mine in a see-through plastic bag. A Collins Gem Pocket English Dictionary, one pair of grey socks, one pair of grey briefs, and one United Kingdom driver's licence that was not mine, and one water-stained business card

that was not mine either. If you want to know, these things belonged to a white man called Andrew O'Rourke. I met him on a beach.

This small plastic bag is what I was holding in my hand when the detention officer told me to go and stand in the queue for the telephone. The first girl in the queue, she was tall and she was pretty. Her thing was beauty, not talking. I wondered which of us had made the better choice to survive. This girl, she had plucked her eyebrows out and then she had drawn them back on again with a pencil. This is what she had done to save her life. She was wearing a purple dress, an A-line dress with pink stars and moons in the pattern. She had a nice pink scarf wrapped around her hair, and purple flip-flops on her feet. I was thinking she must have been locked up a very long time in our detention centre. One has to go through a very great number of the charity boxes, you will understand, to put together an outfit that is truly an *ensemble*.

On the girl's brown legs there were many small white scars. I was thinking, Do those scars cover the whole of you, like the stars and the moons on your dress? I thought that would be pretty too, and I ask you right here please to agree with me that a scar is never ugly. That is what the scar makers want us to think. But you and I, we must make an agreement to defy them. We must see all scars as beauty. Okay? This