

## Teju Cole, *Open City* (Faber and Faber, 2011)

On reaching a scene near the end of Teju Cole's novel I had to reassess what I thought I knew about the narrator Julius, a young psychiatrist of Nigerian and German background. He has an encounter with a friend who tells him something startling and disturbing, to both him and the reader. It was on the second reading of this absorbing and satisfying novel, with this scene in mind, that I began to see his central character a little better, and to understand the multiple layers of meaning and the myriad interplays between identity, literature, culture, race, suffering, and death. It is one of those books that contains worlds.

New York is the 'open city', one that Julius walks around, and observes in detail. Or should I say, detail as *he* sees it, because the only point of view the reader has is Julius', so we do not know what he is not seeing, and not telling us. He sees a lot, both present and past, including the memorial for an African burial ground that reminds him of the thousands of enslaved bodies under his feet. History, skin, identity, 'white' and 'black', they all clash continuously, every day. Boundaries are blurred, it seems, and everything is open to discussion and interpretation.

The character reads books by authors such as Roland Barthes and Tahar Ben Jelloun, and listens to the music of Mahler. He has, or had, a girlfriend, who is now in San Francisco. Julius' father died of tuberculosis when he was not quite fifty, and his only son fourteen; one chapter describes the funeral and the relief of children unable to stop laughing at spilled rice:

it is impossible for me, even now, to think of the events of that day, wreathed as they were in sorrow, without feeling a certain gratitude to those children, all younger than eight, who fell under the momentary spell of mirth and let air into a room that the rites of death had been asphyxiating. (227)

Death and suffering recur throughout, in references to his patients, to birds, to other people both as individuals and groups, and to his revered old teacher and mentor, Professor Saito, who taught early English Literature and is now ill with cancer. Julius tells us he learnt 'the art of listening' (7) from him, but strangely he also seems to suggest that his mind wanders when with Dr Saito. Remembering and forgetting feature strongly, both collective and individual. Finally, Julius is unable to face his mentor's death, and even feels disappointed that the old man was unable to give him any 'words of wisdom' from the threshold. It is a somewhat banal stance, and commented upon by a friend, who says 'I wonder why so many people view sickness as a moral test' (180). But Julius, of course, is suffering himself, and somewhat alone – estranged from his mother after leaving Nigeria, father dead, girlfriend gone, mentor dying.

On a plane flight to Brussels, a vacation he takes supposedly to find his maternal grandmother, he meets a retired surgeon, Dr Annette Maillotte, who tells him all manner of things about her own life and that of others, and they later meet for a meal. He tells her of two men he has become friends with in Brussels, Farouq and Khalil, both originally from Morocco, with whom he has intense discussions about politics and culture. But when he tells Dr Maillotte of Farouq's disgust with the university's rejection of his Master's thesis (issues of post-9/11 sensitivities), she is dismissive: 'if you're too loyal to your own suffering, you forget that others suffer, too' (143). It is a jarring statement, given that she has suffered tragedy herself, but it also has implications that spread through the arc of the novel.

Book reviews: *Open City* by Teju Cole. Sue Bond.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

There is a section in which Julius describes the city as a palimpsest. He is in view of the wound of the twin towers, walking on an overpass – ‘the one that once connected the World Financial Center to the buildings that stood on the site’ (57) – and notes the destruction and construction, repeated over and over through time, ‘as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten’ (59). Teju Cole has presented not only the city as a palimpsest, but his character Julius as well, and that of the lives of others around him. We learn about him gradually, not knowing his name until the twelfth page, and continue to encounter layers of his personality. There are no answers, no neat endings, because the questions are ongoing: identity, race, relationships, sex, power, atrocity, death.

The idea of the self is crucial here, too. In encountering the revelation towards the end of the story, the reader sees clearly how Julius’ perception of himself is rudely altered, even shattered. Cole preempts this moment with his character commenting on the need for us to use the self as a ‘calibration point for normalcy’ (243), to see ourselves as ‘not the villains of our own stories’. Julius has, earlier on, ‘fallen in love with’ the idea of ‘the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle’ (70) after he had visited a detention facility for undocumented immigrants with his girlfriend Nadège as part of her church group. Julius is not a ‘do-gooder’, and distrusts the impulse in himself and others most of the time. Even in listening to the young man from Liberia, Julius cannot fully trust his story, thinking it a ‘natural’ impulse to disbelieve it (67). But what he does believe in is perhaps a mystery to him as well. Underlying all of this is the memory of a dead father and a grieving teenage boy; perhaps of grief unfinished.

Teju Cole’s writing is elegant, fluent, and seamless. His characters, major and minor, are exquisitely developed. He has published one previous book, a novella called *Every Day is for the Thief* (only available in Nigeria at present), but he has written essays for numerous publications and is at work on a non-fiction narrative of Lagos. He is also an art historian and photographer. Clearly, observation is something he has developed keenly, and it shows in *Open City*.

**Sue Bond**