



Book Review: *Lightseekers* by Femi Kayode. Saliha Haddad
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***Lightseekers* by Femi Kayode (Mulholland Books, New York, 2021)
Reviewed by Saliha Haddad**

Lightseekers is a superbly gripping debut novel and the first in a series by Nigerian writer Femi Kayode. At first glance, the novel might appear to be a conventional crime novel, with a murder at its centre waiting to be solved. However, it is much more than that, whether with the question it poses about the crime it attempts to investigate or the larger themes it evolves into as the story takes shape.

Told in a first-person voice, the story is about the investigation into a cold case by psychologist Philip Taiwo and his assistant and driver Chika in a fictional town located on the southern border of Nigeria. As stated on the front cover of the book, this cold case is not about who is behind the murder of three university students—a video showing the lynching of the three victims by a mob is all over the internet.

Dr Taiwo, the psychologist turned investigator, establishes from the beginning that “why?” is his main question in his quest to solve the case: “I’m not solving anything. I’m investigating why what happened, happened” (16). This is something he repeats throughout the story. But as he and Chika gradually dig into the crime’s key elements, they are soon confounded by more dilemmas. The author Femi Kayode, himself a trained clinical psychologist, was inspired by the true events of a lynching of four university students in Nigeria. As in the book, the perpetrators were known and videos of the murders widely shared on social media. It was the unanswered questions in this real life case that led the author to write his psychological investigative debut as he tells fellow Nigerian author Oyinkan Braithwaite in an interview for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2021):

Anyway, it really made me wonder: what could drive people to do this to another human being? I wondered how the parents of the students are feeling. It was one thing to know your child died, but to have graphic and on-the-loop evidence of how, must be unbearable. Then, of course, I thought of the mob: neighbors, friends, colleagues, fellow tribesmen, family, and more. How did they see themselves the next morning after the incident? Did they high-five each other and congratulate themselves on a killing well executed? Or did they pretend nothing happened and go about their businesses?

And so, Dr Taiwo and Chika are confronted with more impasses, because trying to rationalize a mob murder was never going to be an easy task. While the two men learn to accept the extreme difficulty of the case, other characters show their frustration at the lingering investigation, such as when Emeka Nwamadi, the father of one of the victims and the person who involves Taiwo in the case, confronts him about the lack of outcomes: “Progress raising more questions than providing the answers I asked you to find” (221).

When the investigation develops and more revelations are made, they seem at times to be leading to multiple valid answers, rather than to one or none. It does not help the investigator and his assistant that those they seek to gain help, answers and cooperation from, hide and refuse to collaborate, seemingly justifying the actions of the mob. The Paramount Chief Kinikanwo Omeriji of Okriki, for example, justifies the murders as the anger of the town’s people who are just trying to protect themselves: “You came here to look for ways to punish people who were only protecting what is theirs” (139). But, eventually, that justification only exposes Omeriji’s inability to see why his fellow citizens’ actions, driven by anger and external manipulations, are indefensible. The book uses these circumstances to make a point about the repercussions of vigilante justice. For, while it may have eliminated a possible threat, the town now suffers from economic and social repercussions as the rest of the country looks with contempt at the incident.

In the acknowledgments, Kayode asserts that it is his hope that the novel can stir a discussion about mob crimes and ways to prevent them, not only in Africa but around the world. *Lightseekers’* power lies in this ambition, and also in the larger themes it explores.

As Dr Taiwo and Chika endure life threatening danger to uncover the reason behind the horrible death of young men at the hands of a whole community, the many problems facing contemporary Nigeria are exposed. Indeed, the novel raises questions about the country’s state (economic, social and political) by revealing the existent religious tensions, the corruption of politicians, police and justice workers, the lack of opportunities for the population and, finally, social media’s powerful influence on people, especially when sowing lies for particular agendas. Femi Kayode discusses these themes masterfully through the eyes of Dr Taiwo, because as the investigator learns about Nigeria’s many troubles, we learn about them alongside him. Dr Taiwo is presented as someone who is naïve from the start, as his wife points out when she warns him about the dangers of accepting this investigation. And, although he is grounded, empathetic and recognizes his mistakes, he is indeed quite inexperienced when it comes to Nigeria; inexperience he reveals time and again when he constantly compares the United States’ standards and regulations to Nigeria’s. For example, during the investigation, when they find the murder weapon, a gun, he suggests they try to trace its original owner. Chika of course mocks him and reminds him of where they are.

While Dr Taiwo serves as a tool to learn about Nigeria, Chika, his street-wise and courageous assistant, is one of the examples of how the dire circumstances of the country affects its people and how the disillusionment that strikes its youth can lead them to take undesirable paths.

About his past Chika explains: “I come from a family of traders. I was the first to attend university but I might as well have been invisible. I was special at home, but just one of over tens of thousands of undergraduates. I wanted to stand out, to be someone to reckon with, to have power” (229).

The novel is a successful hard-hitting debut and a gritty mystery that shows the wide range of Femi Kayode’s talents in screenwriting, and psychological reading, as well as in questioning and understanding the wide research he did for the book. He brings contemporary Nigeria and the actions of the novel to life in a series of scenes resembling a cinematic experience, and he has masterfully crafted a dialogue that drives the plot forward and reveals more about the characters.

The novel also shows the writer’s expertise in clinical psychology and the legitimacy of the questions about the real murders that inspired the book: the difficulty in answering them is shown not only throughout the story, but also in the form in which Femi Kayode writes it, composed of four acts with titles referring to light as a metaphor for truth and its perception.

In many ways, *Lightseekers* proves to be a strong, original and page-turning opener for the upcoming series. It has all the elements of a traditional crime novel, which are brought together masterfully, and uses those elements to ask difficult questions that affect a whole community. The book’s triumph lies in its story, as much as in the way it gives readers a look into contemporary Nigeria’s struggles.

Works cited:

Braithwaite, Oyinkan. “Groping in the Dark for Answers: An Interview with Femi Kayode.” *Los Angeles Review of books*, 4 February 2021

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