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Tail of the Blue Bird

Nii Ayikwei Parkes

About the Book

Sonokrom, a village in the Ghanaian hinterland, has not changed for hundreds of years. Here, the men and women speak the language of the forest, drink aphrodisiacs with their palm wine and walk alongside the spirits of their ancestors. The discovery of sinister remains – possibly human, definitely ‘evil’ – and the disappearance of a local man brings the intrusion of the city in the form of Kayo, a young forensic pathologist convinced that scientific logic can shatter even the most inexplicable of mysteries.

As old and new worlds clash and clasp, Kayo is taken into a world where, in the unknown, he discovers a truth that leaves scientific explanation far behind.

About the Author

Born in England in 1974 and raised in Ghana, Nii Ayikwei Parkes lives in Manchester. He has performed poetry in the UK, Europe, Ghana and the US and was a 2005 Associate artist-in-residence with BBC Radio 3. In 2007 he was writer-in-residence at California State University, and became one of the youngest living writers to be featured in the Poems on the Underground programme in London for his poem *Tin Roof*. *Tail of the Blue Bird* is his first novel.

Praise

'A brilliant new voice' *Time Out*

'A delightful book that combines the basic tug of the whodunit with the more elegant pleasures of the literary novel' *Independent*

'A deeply complex novel ... Parkes' steady, assured writing weaves a cosmological mystery that keeps you guessing to the very last page' Courttia Newland

'A lyrically beautiful tale' *Arise*

NII AYIKWEI PARKES

Tail of the Blue
Bird

VINTAGE BOOKS
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To my mother, Mary Na Akuyea Parkes, for allowing me to daydream; Christopher Wells, who in one afternoon taught me the art of patience and negotiation; and the memory of my father, Jerry, who taught me to rise early.

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'On this dunghill we will search among the rubble for
our talisman of hope'

This Earth, My Brother, Kofi Awoonor

kwasida - nkyi kwasi

THE BIRDS HAVE never stopped singing. If you look you will see that whatever happens the birds will sing their song. In my grandfather's time the forest was thick thick and higher; we didn't have to go far to kill a hog. Ah, their spoor began at the edge of the village and the taste of boar meat was like water to us, we ate so much. I remember well. Now they have gone deep deep, the boar. But all things are in Onyame's wide hands. Only Onyame, the shining one, knows why a goat's shit is so beautiful. We are not complaining. When I go to forest I can see that the world is wonderful. The birds are all colours colours. Red, sea blue, yellow, some like leaves, some white like fresh calico. What creatures can you not find there? The smallest catch I have ever brought home is adanko. (Ndanko are not hard to catch. Even when they hide, their ears stick up so you can see them. If I created them I would have put their eyes on their pointed ears to keep them safe, but then I wouldn't be able to catch them. Maybe hunger would consume me. Ah, ndanko. They are fast, but I have many traps. That is a hunter's life.)

So we are not complaining. The village is good. We are close to the chief's village and we can take any matters to him. But we have just twelve families so we have no trouble. Apart from Kofi Atta. He is my relative, but before I learned how to wear cloth my mother told me that he would bring heavy matters to us. I remember; my father had brought otwe - *antelope* - the night before and she was cooking abenkwan.

Yaw Poku, she said, when you are playing with your relative look well ooh.

Yoo.

Yaw Poku! (My mother said things to me twice.) I said look well when you play with Kofi Atta. You hear?

Yoo.

She took my hand and put hot soup in it for me to taste. Then she said, You don't know that the woman who helped his mother lost his umbilical cord? She shook her head. It is not buried. The boy will bring trouble someday.

So maybe I shouldn't be surprised, but I forgot. We don't think of these things. They are like light. In the day there is always light and we don't think about it, but I, Yaw Poku, am a hunter so light surprises me. I am used to the dimness of forest, the way the light falls on me like incisions from a knife when I move. When I go to forest sound is brighter than light, so light surprises me. The same way I was surprised even though my mother warned me to look well - *be careful*.

We were at our somewhere when they came. First it was the young woman whose eyes could not rest. Hmm, since you are here let me tell you. The ancestors say that the truth is short but, *sebi*, when the tale is bad, then even the truth stretches like a toad run over by a car on those new roads they are building. I, the one who crouches, the one who watches, I, Yaw Poku who has roamed the forests from Atewa to Kade, seen every duiker, hog, cobra and leopard that turns this our earth, I was surprised. But let me tell you the tale before it goes cold. It was my grandfather, Opoku, the one whose hands were never empty, who told me that the tale the English man calls *history* is mostly lies written in fine dye. This is no such tale. It is said that the wise weaver of webs, Ananse, did not sell speech, so I shall speak. I shall tell the tale.

It was kwasida, nkyi kwasi – just *one week* before kuru-kwasi, when it would be a taboo, *sɛbi*, to speak of death and funerals. Nawotwe before we were to pour libation for the ones on the other side. I am sure of the day but if you think I'm lying you can check with the Bono, who have kept the days for the Asantehene for centuries.

We were at our somewhere when she came. The one whose eyes would not lie still. I myself was coming from the palm-wine tapper's hut. (The woman who sells palm wine doesn't open on kwasida. She went to live in the big city, Accra, for six years and when she came back she refused to work on *Sundays*. Before she went to the city she used to sell tomatoes at the roadside, but that is another story.) The palm-wine tapper gave me a large calabash of his *special* and I was going back to my hut when I heard the woman scream like a grasscutter in a trap. I don't play with my palm wine, no, no, so I went to put it in the corner of my hut, then I came to the tweneboa tree in the village centre.

She was wearing these short short skirts some. Showing her thighs, *sɛbi*, but her legs were like a baby otwe's front two legs – thiiiiin. (It was later that I found out she was some *minister's* girlfriend. Hmm. This world is full of wonders.) Her *driver* was wearing *khaki* up and down like a colo man and he wanted to hold her still, but the woman was shaking her head and screaming. And there she strengthened herself and ran towards a pale car at the roadside. The *driver* followed her rear like dust.

When I asked the children, Oforiwaa, Kusi and the twins – Panyin and Kakra, who were playing in the village centre – what happened, they said the *cream Benz* parked and the woman was following a blue-headed bird (it is true that our village has many beautiful things) when she held her nose. She called her *driver* and they sniffed the air like dogs until they got to Kofi Atta's hut. They said Agoo, but nobody answered. Then the *driver* raised the *ketɛ* and held it up and the woman went inside. That's when she screamed. It

was still morning and the sound made the forest go quiet. But it's what happened after they left that's wondrous. It is true. Even the eagle has not seen everything.

The sun was at its highest, sitting hard in the middle of the sky. I was resting on the felled palm by the tweneboa tree, listening to my *radio* (these days I catch this new *Sunrise FM* from Koforidua), drinking some of my palm wine and watching the children play when they came. The first car came towards the tree at top speed and screeched to a stop, raising sand like rice husks. There were two aburuburu in the trees. I'm telling you, they flew off, making that sound like pouring water in their throats and flapping wildly as the other cars stopped near the first. There were five cars in all. *Police* cars. The first car wasn't even like the *police* cars you sometimes see. It was a *Pinzgauer* with a long *aerial* on top; that's how I knew it was a big matter. *Pinzgauers* are what the army use when they go into jungle for training; I have seen them while hunting.

The big man in *mufti* got down from the *Pinzgauer*. He was wearing a big black abomu over his *jeans* and he was eating groundnuts.

Who is in charge here?

The children pointed towards the giant kapok tree beyond Asare's farm. *The chief lives in that village there.*

The other *policemen* had come down from their cars, all in black black. *Policemen* one, one - nine, in our village on this young day. The one in *mufti* looked left and right, then I saw him looking behind the tree at my mother's blue sanyaa basin that I put on top of my hut after she died. I remember she carried water with it until it was full of holes, then she took it to her farm to harvest vegetables until there was just a big hole at the bottom. I put it on top of the grass on my roof so I can see my house from far when I am coming back from forest. When the *policeman*

looked, I looked too. And there he looked at me and pointed.

You, do you speak English?

Ah. I thought this man either doesn't respect or because, *sebi*, I have shaved my hair he can't see my seventy-four years. Chewing groundnuts while speaking to me! I didn't say anything. I raised my calabash and drank some of Kwaku Wusu's palm wine. It was good. Kwaku Wusu is the best tapper in the sixteen villages under our chief and the twelve villages under Nana Afari.

You. The *policeman* walked towards me, while the children jumped around him. Oforiwaa started singing a Papa *Police* song (that girl is always singing) and clapping. Kusi was standing by the eight *policemen* in uniform, touching their guns while they tried to push him away. These *policemen*, they carry guns all the time, everywhere. Even I, a hunter, I put my long gun down on kwasida.

His name is Opanyin Poku, said the twins.

Ah, said the *policeman, senior man*. He showed his mother's training and swallowed his groundnuts and put his hands behind him. Opanyin Poku, please, do you speak English?

I smiled and finished my palm wine. Small, small. I go for Nkrumah adult education.

OK, listen. I no get plenty time. I dey house for Accra wey I get call say some woman find something for here wey e dey smell. You know something for the matter?

Ei, the elders say that news is as restless as a bird, but as for this! The woman had come in the morning and it was still morning, afternoon had not yet come, but these *policemen* were here all the way from Accra, as if there were no *policemen* in Tafo. I shook my head.

You see the woman?

Oh yes *police*, I see am. Thiiin woman like so.

The *policeman* smiled. But you no dey smell anything?

No, I no dey smell anything.

Ah, ah. He turned to look at the other *policemen*. *Do you people smell anything?*

Yes Sergeant, it stinks like rotten meat.

Thank you. He turned to me again. And you no dey smell anything?

No, Sargie.

He shook his head. So where the woman go?

Accra.

No. Which side she go for here? He raised his arm towards the tweneboa tree.

I pointed at Kofi Atta's hut.

He brought his hand down to hold the black stick in his abomu. *Let's go.*

The other *policemen* followed him. After a little distance he stopped and turned to me. Opanyin Poku, I beg, make you come some.

I called Kusi to come and get my calabash and radio, put them at the door of my house and tell Mama Aku that I'll be back later. Then I stood up and walked to join the *policemen*.

The sargie was trying to send the other children back but they were still singing and refused to leave. He looked at me.

Children, I said. Stop your silliness and go home.

They stopped following the *policemen* and turned to leave.

Suddenly the sargie clapped. *Children, do you smell anything?*

No sir, Sergeant. They laughed and ran off.

The sargie frowned and looked at me. Opanyin Poku, why say we all dey smell something wey you people for here no dey smell anything?

I laughed. Sargie, make I talk something for Twi inside?

Oh, Opanyin, no problem.

Then listen Sargie. Sebi, our village is like a vagina. Those on the inside have no problems with it; those on the