



VINTAGE

BLOODLINES

FRED D'AGUIAR

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About the Book

Like no poetry you've ever known before, Fred D'Aguiar's novel-in-verse sweeps you up in the scintillating story of a young female slave who falls in love with the son of the plantation owner and runs away with him in search of a new life. En route they are rescued by an old man who has organised a secret underground railroad to help slaves escape, but they become separated from each other: Faith, the woman, is sold back into slavery and Christy, her lover, punished with forced labour. The novel is narrated by their son who is stuck in time until their story is told. Using the intricate rhyme-scheme of Byron's wonderfully picaresque *Don Juan*, D'Aguiar wittily plays with language to create poetry that is dazzling in its inventiveness whilst being utterly readable. Despite the seriousness of its subject matter, *Bloodlines* is full of humour, satire, experiment and, above all, life. Its characters are, like the language, brim-full of energy and very sympathetic as they struggle against vicissitude. Read this book fast like a novel, savour every word like a poem, do both, the choice is yours.

About the Author

Fred D'Aguiar was born in London in 1960 and raised in Guyana and south-east London. He now lives in Florida, where he teaches English at the University of Miami. Author of three novels and four books of poetry, he has been awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize for poetry, the Guyanese National Poetry Award and the Malcolm X prize for poetry. He also won the 1994 Whitbread First Novel Award for his novel *The Longest Memory*.

ALSO BY FRED D'AGUIAR

Fiction

The Longest Memory

Dear Future

Feeding the Ghosts

Poetry

Mama Dot

Airy Hall

British Subjects

Bill of Rights

Plays

A Jamaican Airman Foresees His Death

For Baba Christopher

BLOODLINES

Fred D'Aguiar

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

This, today, is all that we can tell you:
what we are not, what we do not want.

Eugenio Montale

I and I

Word goes I born with a full head of weed
cut by my owner and stones in my mouth
she pulled before she let me take my first feed.
I could see clearly the moment I popped out
how my life would be because I had two seeds
between my legs and a pointer due South.
I should mention that my two seeds brown;
in this time brown did not stick around.

You guessed correct. My earthly father white,
my mother, black. Two trains on one track
thundering towards each other at night,
neither willing nor able to stop and back
the fuck up regardless who more right
than who, each looking through a crack
at the other and seeing only one gesture,
the old, backwards facing two-finger.

Had she hidden from him or he ignored her,
instead of neither giving way that night or day
on those proverbial tracks, I would not be here.
I'd be a figment in your mind, a mandalay
(I looked it up) or wraith, if it's ghosts you prefer
to something substantial handed you on a tray;
not this body with two bloodlines in its veins,

nor this death-in-life caused by those two trains.

As usual, I am running ahead of myself,
too eager to divulge how I cannot die,
can't be killed, buried, put on a shelf
in a crypt, or snuffed out, even if I try,
as I found when my one true love left
me for another and yours truly climbed a
sky-scraper (this is in my modern phase),
jumped and landed splat and got up dazed.

My six-foot-one, two-twenty-pound frame
mixes two skin tones and matches my brown eyes.
My knotted black hair and broad nose came
from my mother, and her pouted lips, and, yes,
her stubbornness. But I have my father's pink gums,
a grip that crushes walnuts, a swipe that catches flies,
and his big hands and all the benefits thereof;
things that a gentleman would not show off,

nudge nudge, wink wink. From my time to theirs
I climb a library ladder and reach for a top shelf,
or I dig deep so that our times become stairs
laced with cobweb that lead down into the self.
I am the very history that lives unawares,
or better still that thrives on blood and flesh,
both in and through me, therefore I look inside
into a well, and there's the sky trying to hide.

My parents met when my mother was a slave.
My father did not own her, she belonged
to a neighbour. He was the type who craved
something even though he had lots cloned

from it; the fact is Mother had to be brave
once she'd caught his eye, or risk a prolonged
game of hide-and-seek with one or other
of her admirers jumping in to save her;

black men who were slaves like her and proud,
too much so to watch another black woman
at the mercy of a single white man, or a crowd,
or pack of them who saw her sex as an omen
for trouble, for possession: if white, in a shroud
of mystery, but if black then the chattel of men.
There for use and abuse, impregnated
not courted, shown respect, or venerated.

She knew this by instinct and from experiences
related to her by older women who sought to school
her in how to conduct herself using common sense.
In all their tales the woman played the fool
but lived to see another day. The essence
of it meant that her life was not a tool
for some man to poke at until bored.
She could shape her future, see what it stored,

and, by some pre-emptive move on her part,
alter it to suit her dreams. A grand plan.
Alas, she was dealing with someone just as smart.
The reality panned out differently on the
plantation where the head could never rule the heart,
when both obeyed below the waist, no
planetary positions in relation to time and date
of birth in this plot, just plain old copulate.

She lay in wait for him, as he sought her,

to say, 'You are courting the Devil's mistress if you think you can lay even a finger on me.' But when she locked eyes with his all he could think of was that she was there because she wanted him, making easy this thing he was always doing with a slave; the polar opposite of her motive.

A simple walk from the fields to the house along a path twisting into a grove of alders that comes to a sudden clearing whose light seems pooled there, for bathing, like solder in a flame, the blue part a phoenix might choose to plunge in, not me or you for all the tea in Hong Kong, though on occasions I have swept my finger through a candle's eye.

But nothing's simple, least of all her walk determined to meet him and perhaps stop his eyeing her up and down, his rude talk in front of people, their gossip to top the story, as if it were enough to stalk her to make her his and she would drop everything and comply because it has always been and will always be the white man's way:

to take what he wants when he wants, how he wants, to go where he pleases when he wishes, to be everything we can't be except during the nightly release offered by dreams when he becomes the ants under our feet, he eats crumbs from our feast. 'Welcome to Slavery,' the sunrise would shout before the light of that dream was out.

Dear reader, what happened next has happened countless times, will happen countless more. Let the record show, for too few are penned, that he grabbed her and called her a whore. That she fought him but he had her hemmed in against a tree, he had done this before. He knew what to do to make her scared - he made the deep impression of a scar

by pressing the knife on her face. She turned rigid, wooden, and he mounted her and he rode flat out as she shut her mind down to get rid of him in her and made herself a lifeless board under his weight, his teeth biting, his rancid breath, his hips, its thrust, its sudden load, the knife threatening to break her skin, so she had to, she had to, let him in.

She kept her eyes open, allowed the light to bathe them; sun rays sunk in that grove concertinaed through her eyes' bright shine into her brain, already an oven turning on a slow, steady burner the sight of him to ashes, her hate burning to love. Don't ask me how the worst moment she knew switched on the best thing life can give to you.

The man may have shown more than his malice. In the middle of lust, his knife, those bites, something tender accidentally surfaced. Could be because she was so still despite everything, she spotted in his embrace what even he couldn't see: the anthracite inside himself, a commoner giving birth

to love's jewel, love's uncommon hurt.

He leapt off her, vomited and ran
wildly into the trees and their shade.
She wept in that clearing and sang,
whispered more like, a mother's tune made
up to soothe a teething infant in slang
known to that child, on its lips when it played.
'Hush now baby, don't cry, dry your eyes
at least you live, not cut into pieces,

but whole and alive, others see worse.'
And it went on, more a song than a prayer,
talking herself to her feet off the gorse
that was her bed shared with her ensnarer;
a shocking tune, a tune out of shock, a curse.
If her calm were a garment, then she, the wearer,
had pulled it airtight about her rattled
frame, to hold herself together though embattled.

And he, after his revulsion lessened,
knew what had hit him in the solar plexus,
but denied it to himself as if the lesson
of love only comes once we've read its prospectus,
picked a date, time, place and person
to get it on, then said, 'Love infect us!'
Ridiculous but true. He walked the town
in denial with the two faces of a clown.

One face was plastered with a loving smile,
the other, sour-mouthed and bitter-eyed.
Both flashed in equal measure all the while.
Both told the truth and yet, by turns, both lied.