



# Ifeoma Chinwuba: Book review: *Goddie*, a biographical novel

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Book Review

A *Biographical Novel*, *Goddie*, Robert Picart, 270 pages,

New Degree Press, 2022

by Ifeoma Chinwuba

*Goddie* traces the life of Veta Ormsby, alias *Goddie*, from an idyllic childhood in a Jamaican suburb of the mid twentieth century, (*a poor man's Eden*, p.26), to a hardscrabble life. The Ormsby family is happy, but dirt poor, a poverty that is reminiscent of slavery, literally living from hand to mouth from the proceeds of farming, (*...if we nuh sell, we nuh eat*. p.120). When tragedy strikes, *Goddie's* world somersaults. Intent on completing her education, she will submit to certain indignities, but will serially refuse to be vanquished. In her quest for the good life, she will be sustained and propelled by voices of encouragement from her past:

*Give yuhself as much chance as possible. When di window opens fah yuh, fly through.* (Mumma, p.55).

*I demand more from you because I see more in you. Be ready for the opportunity and run through the door. Don't walk. Run.* (Mumma, p.65.)

*It's ok to start again. Yuh can start again.* (Daadie, p.81).

From this perspective, *Goddie* is quintessentially, a woman's literature that celebrates the female's resilience and triumph, over betrayals by siblings, a wicked mistress and subsequently, an abusive/vanishing/ abdicating male partner, that leaves the woman with the short end of the stick. It is akin to David Chariandy's *Brother*, another tale emanating from the Toronto Jamaican diaspora.

*Goddie* is divided into six parts, thirty chapters. This makes for easy reading because each chapter depicts a milestone in Veta's journey. The novel is an odyssey, where the protagonist encounters and overcomes a series of hardships on the road to self-actualisation and emancipation. In science, the notion of Escape Velocity comes to mind, that force required to launch a rocket to defy gravity and keep soaring into the stratosphere. In my estimation, the heroine of *Goddie*, encapsulates this escape velocity.

I find *Goddie* remarkable on many fronts; from the point of view of a son ghost-writing for Mother, giving birth to her anew, as it were, telling her, 'Mom, this is your life,' a life he did not witness firsthand. The author, in transcribing an oral story into the written word, is not just capturing the zeitgeist for posterity, but more importantly, invites all struggling folk, to rise and shine. *Goddie* is, therefore, a motivational memoir.

*Goddie* also enriches the cornucopia of literature cataloguing the diverse origins of Canada's demographic; our trajectories from various (Hobbesian) peripheries of the world, to berth at this metropolis, an ongoing phenomenon. Picart's work amplifies the voices immanent in the fabric of the True North by weaving yet another strand of our story, so eminently because no one but us, can capture the true grit of our beginnings, what the Nigerian writer, Chimamanda, calls 'telling our story.'

Elsewhere, I see a reversal of the pernicious triangular trade in the trajectory of Veta from Kingston to Toronto, via London. Veta, a descendant of slavery, is fleeing enslavement. The Windrush crossing will be her ticket to freedom.

Picart's inventive and playful use of language adds beauty to the narrative. For instance, jilters, who 'toast' a girl and then vamoose, are seen as arsonists;

*She watched as the arsonist left her in the fire.* (P.246)

The book abounds in metaphors. The name of the heroine, Veta, seems to be an iteration of *vita*, Latin for life. Her triumph is the triumph of the life source. Secondly, the fact that in Kingston, Veta lives on Hope Road, telegraphs optimism.

Picart hugely personifies Nature: *The morning breeze was a false friend.* (p.2)

*The trees rose for duty...The sun assumed the overseer position once held by others.* (p.25).

*The weather in London was an unpleasant welcoming committee.* (p.222).

The author also uses the epistolary form to play 'catch-up' with his reader. For instance, through the intercepted letters from home, we learn of Lauretta's demise as well as the sensei that will guide Veta in the next stages of her adventure.

Thanks to the glossary provided, the reader is able to understand the Jamaican patois rightly used in the dialogues to capture the essence of the locals. An incomplete album of family photos and a family tree, complete this biographical narrative.

What is the downside? We are presented with a one-sided panegyric of Veta. Her antagonists are not given the opportunity to explain their side of the story.

All in all, *Goddie* is a good and relatable read about the human condition, or what the Finnish refer to as the *sisu* of women.

*Ms. Ifeoma Chinwuba was the 2021-2022 Writer-in-Residence of the Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton. A retired diplomat, she is the author of five books, made up of novels, poetry in dialogue, and a juvenile novella. Her "Merchants of Flesh" and "Waiting for Maria" have, at different times, won the Prose Prizes of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), while "Waiting for Maria" was on the Long-list of The Commonwealth Writers Prize, 2008. Ms. Chinwuba's latest novel, Sons of the East, will be released in November, 2023, by Criots Lounge Publishers.*

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