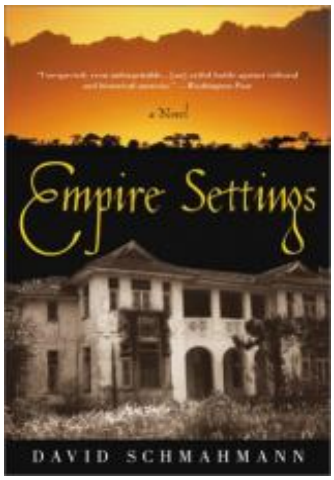
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Empire Settings

by David Schmahmann



About the Book

The Divins, a prosperous, liberal, Jewish family, oppose the apartheid regime under which they live in 1970's Durban, South Africa. But when their 17-year-old son, Danny, falls in love with Santi, the mixed race daughter of a black domestic servant, they are thrown into a crisis of philosophy vs. parental concern. Danny's father forces him to end the relationship with Santi. Although Danny promises to find a way to work things out, after a year, he loses contact with her.

Tired of witnessing the hateful, divisive politics of South Africa that destroyed his relationship with Santi and his family, Danny leaves Durban and moves to Boston. On his first day there he meets a free-spirited but caring young woman named Tesseba who offers to marry him to save him from deportation. Danny and Tesseba build a life together but not a day passes that Danny's thoughts do not turn to his long lost love.

Twenty years after leaving, Danny returns to South Africa in the hopes of saving the family fortune and finding the girl he has never forgotten. It is here in this new, still struggling, still fragmented South Africa that Danny finally discovers where, and with whom, home really is.

Discussion Guide

1. The book is written in five voices --- Danny, Santi, Helga, Bridget and Baptie. Is there one narrator whose story you find more compelling than another?

2. **Empire Settings** gives readers a very personal view of apartheid. How does this relate to your concept of it? How does this relate to class distinctions that exist today?

3. Baptie takes care of the family. Her role with the children is to give them the gestures of intimacy that are often

lacking from their mother, but she also plays this role with Helga. "I looked at her carefully, this white lady whose children I had helped bring up, whose husband I had known so well, ironed his shirts, cooked his meals, in some ways he was like my own husband, whose death I had mourned as if my own husband had died, and I felt for her the same things I felt for myself, that the ship had come away from the pier, that it had no journey it wanted to go on, but that also there was nothing left to hold it in place." (Pg 184) Discuss Baptie's role in holding the family together.

4. Helga is a strong independent woman. She returns to school as soon as her children are old enough to be left; she send her daughter away. How does her strength impact the family dynamic? If her children received more attention from her, how would their adult lives be different?

5. Discuss the relationship between Danny and Tesseba. On the day they meet, Tesseba suggests that she and Danny marry so he can get a green card. Is this swift accommodation typical of what Tesseba brings to their marriage?

6. At one point Tesseba says, "You're used to me....And you like me. You really do, I know. But I don't know if this is the kind of love that will satisfy me as I become a little old lady." She goes on to say, "Perhaps it's time for you to resume your real life, the one I seem inadvertently to have interrupted." (Pg 268) Do you think she always knew there was someone else?

7. Is Santi more than Danny's true love? Is she a symbol for him of something else? What is the attraction between them? Do you think Danny and Santi's early relationship would have evolved differently if they had first met in today's post-apartheid South Africa?

8. Why did Danny never look for Santi when he was free to do so? When Santi mentions this it seems like a thought that never occurred to him. What do you think she means when she says, "When someone walks away from his heart he has to walk back to it himself. Someone else cannot come running to bring it." (Page 315)

9. Danny and Bridget feel that they must leave South Africa in order to be free. Santi never feels that way, and cannot imagine living anywhere else. Discuss these contrasting thoughts on the country.

10. What will your lasting impression of the book be?

Author Bio

David Schmahmann was born in Durban, South Africa. He is a graduate of Dartmouth College and the Cornell Law School and has studied in India and Israel and worked in Burma. His publications include a short story in The Yale Review and articles on legal issues. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts and practices law in Boston. EMPIRE SETTINGS is the first in a two novel series. The second, THE IVORY DINGHY, is in progress.

Critical Praise

"It bristles with tension and suspense and is remarkably authentic. You can smell the sea and the decay and almost touch

the people who are so real."

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