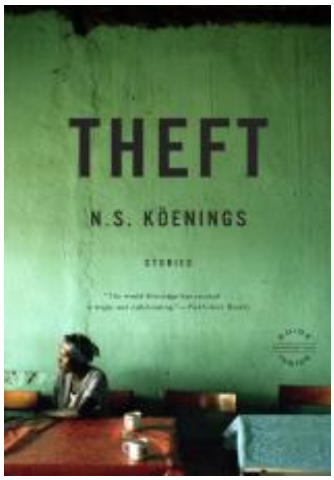
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Theft

by N. S. Köenings



About the Book

The path from Europe to Africa has been much traveled in literature but rarely in such an evocative, nuanced, and even playful way as in N. S. Köenings' **Theft**. Here are five seductive tales that move with grace and subtlety between the continents, between moments of utter ignorance and complex harmony, maintaining all the while a hardy faith in the essential sameness of all human desire.

In "Pearls to Swine," a childless socialite invites her American goddaughter to spend the summer in her European mansion. In "Wondrous Strange," a British spirit medium is haunted by the ghost of an ancient African djinn. In "Setting Up Shop," a young woman from an Indian Ocean island dreams of traveling to the US, even as a local entrepreneur, promising to leave his other wives for her, courts her relentlessly. In the title story, a bus hijacking in an East African city brings about critical change in the lives of a local bus tout and a first-time tourist from Philadelphia.

Discussion Guide

1. Although these stories are set in various disparate places, all of the characters are aware of the existence of other lands and people. How do you think the characters' backgrounds have shaped their expectations of distant places? How might Zulfa or Masoud respond to Sheikh Abdul Aziz if he appeared on Kudra Island? How might Celeste and Gustave's visions of North Africa differ from Osman's or Ayeesha's? In your own life, how do visions of faraway places figure in the choices you make or the dreams you have?

2. In "Pearls to Swine," Celeste sees herself in relation to others in a very particular way. How do you think Petra and Thérèse see Celeste? How might this story be different if it were written from Petra's or Thérèse's perspective?

3. Celeste forms quick judgments of Petra and Thérèse when they come to stay with her. How are the young women different from Celeste's expectations of them? What does Celeste's reaction to them tell us about her?

4. The story "Wondrous Strange" makes reference to many magical elements. If Eva Bright's vision is genuine, what do you think is Sheikh Abdul Aziz's purpose in helping restore George to health? Is there a particular symbolism to the objects required for the ritual? Why do you think the author chose to end the story before we learned the outcome of the ceremony?

5. "Wondrous Strange" is told from a number of different perspectives. Which character(s) did you fi nd most compelling, and which least? How does the Sheikh's message change the lives of each of the main characters: Eva, Flora, and Susan?

6. In **Theft**, among the bus passengers, the locals' reaction to having been robbed is very different from that of the strangers. Why, even though "it was much worse for them all because their things were more precious" (page 129), do they not try to fi le a complaint or get their things back? Whose reaction makes more sense to you? If the same incident had taken place in the United States, what do you think the passengers would have done?

7. In "Sisters for Shama," what are Osman's feelings towards Shama? Why do you think Shama continues to care for him and let him live in her house? Do you believe his version of the story about why he was exiled from the upper floor?

8. What does Osman hope to accomplish by telling Shama the story of Ayeesha and her son? How does Shama's taking over the storytelling at the end surprise Osman? Has Osman achieved his goal?

9. On page 216 of "Setting Up Shop," we are told that "the men of Usilie thought Masoud was doing a good thing" by marrying multiple wives. Given the social and cultural context of the place where Masoud lives, do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?

10. Whom do you sympathize with most in "Setting Up Shop": Zulfa, Masoud, Masoud's other wives, or another character? Did your answer change over the course of the story as you learned more about each of them?

Author Bio

I've spent a lot of my adult life in East Africa, too, and I do still go there. That area of the world is part of my contemporary experience-my actual, continued life. Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, these countries and places in them are not particularly weird or exotic to me, and I don't primarily, or only, associate them with my childhood.

By that I mean that East Africa is not, for me, a symbolic repository of 'memories'; it's definitely not a mythical or charmed, mysterious region of my imagination. The capital cities, the more provincial and coastal towns, and the rural areas I've been in, they're just places, like wherever a person has grown up or worked or lived is just an ordinary place. I can't write, yet, about places I've never been or seen-so, like most writers, I'm working with what I've got.

And at the moment the fact is I've spent more of my life in East Africa than elsewhere, though at this point I've been in

the U.S. for a rather long time, too. I'm trying very hard to get to Kenya and to Mozambique next year. N. S. Köenings holds a BA in African studies from Bryn Mawr College and a PhD in sociocultural anthropology from Indiana University, where she completed her MFA in fiction. She has lived in East Africa and Europe. She is currently teaching at Hampshire College, in Massachusetts.

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