ReadingGroupGuides
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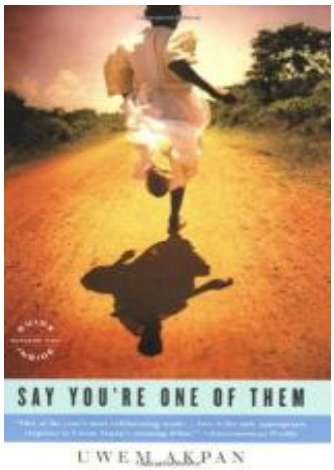
Say You're One of Them

by Uwem Akpan



About the Book

Uwem Akpan's first published short story, "An Ex-mas Feast," appeared in *The New Yorker's* Debut Fiction issue in 2005. The story's portrait of a family living together in a makeshift shanty in urban Kenya, and their attempts to find gifts of any kind for the impending Christmas holiday, gives a matter-of-fact reality to the most extreme circumstances --- and signaled the arrival of a breathtakingly talented writer.

"My Parents' Bedroom" is a Rwandan girl's account of her family's struggles to maintain a facade of normalcy amid unspeakable acts. In "Fat-tening for Gabon," a brother and sister cope with their uncle's attempt to sell them into slavery. "Luxurious Hearses" creates a microcosm of Africa within a busload of refugees and introduces us to a Muslim boy who summons his faith to bear a treacherous ride through Nigeria. "What Language Is That?" reveals the emotional toll of the Christian-Muslim conflict in Ethiopia through the eyes of childhood friends. Every story is a testament to the wisdom and resilience of children, even in the face of the most agonizing situations our planet can offer.

Discussion Guide

1. Each of the stories in **Say You?re One of Them** is told from the perspective of a child. Do you think this affected your reaction? If the narrators had been adults, might you have felt differently about the stories? Why do you think Akpan chose to depict these events through children?s eyes? How do Akpan?s young characters maintain innocence in the face of corruption and pain?

2. In ?An Ex-mas Feast,? Maisha leaves her family to become a full- time prostitute. Do you think she chose to depart, or did her family?s poverty force her to flee? Is it possible to have complete freedom of will in such a situation? Is it reasonable to judge a person for her actions if her choice is not entirely her own?

3. In ?Fattening for Gabon? the children?s uncle and caretaker,Fofo Kpee, sells them into slavery. How does Fofo?s

poverty and vanity contribute to his unthinkable actions? Do his pangs of conscience redeem him for you? Why or why not?

4. In ?What Language is That?? Hadiya and Selam are kept apart by their parents after the escalation of religious conflict. Have you ever experienced a situation in which friends and family have objected to someone in your life for reasons you didn?t understand? What did you do? How did you feel?

5. The bus in ?Luxurious Hearses? is a microcosm not only of African hierarchies and religions but also of the continent?s numerous languages and dialects. Discuss how speech is related to class, culture, religion, and heritage. How does dialogue function in the other stories? Do we hold similar attitudes about language in our own culture? What are some examples?

6. This book takes its title from instructions given to a Rwandan girl by her mother in ?My Parents? Bedroom.? Did the familiar domestic detail in this story --- Maman?s perfume, little Jean?s flannel pajamas, toys like Mickey Mouse in the children?s room --- intensify for you the horror of what ensued? Is there comparable detail in any of the other stories that helped you to identify with Uwem Akpan?s characters?

7. Although the stories in **Say You?re One of Them** are fictitious, the situations they depict have a basis in reality. How do the emotions you feel when reading these stories compare to your emotions when reading accounts in the news media of similar atrocities? Has reading **Say You?re One of Them** changed the way you think about these issues?

8. Uwem Akpan addressed his other vocation in an interview, saying, ?A key Vatican II document makes it very clear that the joys and anguish of the world are the joys and anguish of the Church.? While reading these stories, were you ever reminded that this writer is also a Jesuit priest? Does Akpan?s subject matter seem to you to be imbued with religious values? In what ways? Do the drama and power of Akpan?s fiction call forth any biblical stories for you? If so, which ones?

9. Some of the children in **Say You?re One of Them** are not poor. What are the particular obstacles these children face that are not issues in your own country? Are there challenges other than poverty with which you can identify? Do the family dynamics feel familiar to you?

10. The poet and memoirist Mary Karr wrote that Uwem Akpan ?has invented a new language ? both for horror and for the relentless per sis tence of light in war- torn countries.? Did you find any beauty or goodness in these tragic tales? If so, offer some examples.

Author Bio

Uwem Akpan?s fiction and autobiographical pieces have appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *Nigerian Guardian, O, The Oprah Magazine* and more. His collection of stories, SAY YOU'RE ONE OF THEM, won the Commonwealth Writers? Prize (Africa Region), the PEN Open Book Prize, and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and was the 2009 Oprah Book Club selection. He is from Ikot Akpan Eda in the Niger Delta in Nigeria and lives in Gainesville, Florida.

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