

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### IMMIGRATION REMOVAL CENTRES

Immigration removal centres (IRCs) are holding places for foreign nationals awaiting decisions on their asylum claims or awaiting deportation following a failed application. The power to detain immigrants was first provided by the Immigration Act 1971 when 'detention centres' – as they were then called – were introduced to impose restrictions on the movement of immigrants while their claims were being processed. No time limit was fixed for maximum detention and the centres were much like prison facilities. In 2002 the government tightened up its immigration policy as a response to public concern about the rising numbers of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants arriving in Britain in the late 1990s. Today there are ten immigration removal centres in England and Wales, all run for profit by private companies at the taxpayer's expense. Those detained and their advocates have frequently complained about the conditions inside detention centres and the treatment of detainees by staff. In February 2002, violence broke out at the Yarl's Wood centre in Bedfordshire because the firm running the facility, Group 4, allegedly refused medical treatment to a detainee. The rioting resulted in a break-out and a fire that destroyed half of the £100 million centre. Disturbances, hunger strikes and suicides are common occurrences in all of Britain's immigration removal centres.

## FURTHER READING

*Mr Pip* by Lloyd Jones

*Small Island* by Andrea Levy

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*What is the What* by Dave Eggers

*A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah

*Human Cargo* by Caroline Moorhead

[www.chriscleave.com](http://www.chriscleave.com)

Home Office site on IRCs: <http://tinyurl.com/6ydlcy>



SCEPTRE

Continued from front:

Over the coming weeks, Sarah must contemplate her return to normal life but finds little comfort in the world she has made for herself. Her job, her ongoing affair with Lawrence and even her conscience provide little shelter from her darkest thoughts. Despite every conceivable difference in background and experience, Sarah and Little Bee come to realise that they have a connection literally forged in blood, and that they must save themselves, and each other, from the cruelties of life.



CHRIS CLEAVE Photograph © Niall McDermid

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Cleave has been a barman, a long-distance sailor, a teacher of marine navigation, an internet pioneer and a journalist, although he currently works as a writer of novels and a regular family column for the *Guardian*. His debut, *Incendiary*, a controversial open letter to Osama bin Laden, gained notoriety for the macabre coincidence of its UK publication on 7th July 2005, the day of the London terrorist bombings. It went on to become an international bestseller published in 20 countries to awards and critical acclaim. His second novel, *The Other Hand*, was inspired by his early childhood in West Africa and by an accidental visit to a British concentration camp. Chris lives in London with his French wife and two mischievous Anglo-French children.

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### THE OTHER HAND Chris Cleave



**'A very funny book about brave, funny people . . .  
Just read it' Anna Carey, *The Gloss***

It is a warm morning in May 2007, and a Nigerian refugee calling herself Little Bee has just emerged, not entirely legitimately, from an immigration detention centre in Essex. She is afraid and ultimately alone, but she is also intrigued by Britain with its Queen's English and its baffling customs. After a bittersweet encounter with a farmer and his wife, Little Bee embarks on a long journey through the English countryside to the high suburbia of Kingston-upon-Thames, past the rows of shiny cars and straight to the front door of high-powered magazine editor Sarah O'Rourke and her Batman-obsessed son Charlie. Little Bee has nowhere else to turn and Sarah, on the day of her husband's funeral, has her reasons for letting the girl stay. Something has happened that has not only left its mark on Little Bee but has shaken the O'Rourke family to its foundations, and it has something to do with a beach in Africa and the missing finger on Sarah's left hand.

Continued on reverse . . .

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### NIGERIA AND OIL

Oil was discovered in the Niger Delta just when Nigeria gained independence from British rule in 1960, and promised to transform the nation from colonial backwater to economic world contender. Yet ever since mining began Nigeria has been subverted by the very thing that brought it hope of real economic advantage. Multinational oil companies have long been blamed for fuelling political unrest, and the political elite are often accused of squandering oil revenues that could be spent on improving health and education for Nigeria's citizens. Today Nigeria is the world's eighth-largest petroleum exporter, yet the way oil wealth is managed is still one of the key issues facing those living there. The government and oil companies have profited by hundreds of billions of dollars since oil was first discovered, yet many Nigerians still live in dire poverty. Away from the main towns there has been little investment in basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity and running water. Inevitably criminal gangs have emerged, seeking to undermine – and profit from – the situation. The Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, the largest rebel group in Nigeria, regularly attacks and steals from wells, pipelines and base stations. It is estimated that in 2008 sabotage and oil theft cut Nigerian oil production to its lowest level in 20 years.

### THE OTHER HAND: FACT OR FICTION?

The 'Black Hill Immigration Removal Centre' does not really exist, although some of its particulars would seem familiar to the thousands of asylum seekers detained in the UK's real immigration removal centres, since they are based on the testimony of former interns of these places.

Similarly, the beach on which Sarah and Little Bee first meet in the novel is not intended to correspond to any specific location in Nigeria, although the inter-ethnic and oil-related conflicts from which Little Bee is fleeing are real and ongoing. In the period leading up to the writing of the novel, Nigeria was the second-biggest African exporter of asylum applicants to the UK. Jamaica is much less significant as a point of origin of asylum seekers, although during the same period between one hundred and one thousand Jamaicans each year sought asylum in the UK.

## FOR DISCUSSION

'Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeing [sic] persecution and conflict'. Why do you think Chris Cleave chose this UK Home Office statement as the book's epigraph? How does it fit with Little Bee's experience of British attitudes towards her as an asylum seeker? What effect does the spelling mistake have on your interpretation of the statement, if any?

'Excuse me for learning your language properly. I am here to tell you a real story. I did not come here to talk to you about the bright African colours' (p.15). Little Bee is keen to avoid the stereotypes of postcolonial writing. Is she successful? Is hers an original voice? Why is Little Bee so determined to speak the Queen's English?

Why does Charlie pretend to be Batman? Is it significant that he finally removes his Batman costume at the end of the novel and, if so, why?

'We all had identities we were loath to let go of . . . We were exiles from reality, that summer. We were refugees from ourselves' (p.34). What does Sarah mean by this? Are Sarah, Little Bee and Charlie's 'true' identities reinstated by the end of the novel? If so, how? What is the relevance of names in the book?

'This is the human triumph. This is called, globalisation' (p.6). What does *The Other Hand* have to say about globalisation?

Why does Little Bee insist that 'we must all see scars as beauty' (p.17)?

'"Of course I'll get you a feature on refugees, if you really want it. But . . . it isn't an issue that affects anyone's own life, that's the problem" ' (p.286). What does *The Other Hand* have to say about the West's attitude towards Africa? Why does Andrew describe modern Western life as 'too antiseptic' (p.133)?

*The Other Hand* is overshadowed by Little Bee's foreboding that 'the men are coming'. Who are these men? Is it always men who cause the suffering? Lawrence says men are 'a little more house-trained' in Europe (p.261). Does this prove to be the case? Do 'bad' men differ in Britain and Nigeria?

Do you find it surprising that Chris Cleave, as with his last book *Incendiary*, chose females as his protagonists? Are his portrayals of women convincing? How do they compare to his depictions of men?

What is the significance of the book's title?

Little Bee directs her narrative to a British 'you' and occasionally to an imagined chorus of Nigerian village girls. What is the effect of these conversational techniques, and how do they contribute differently to our understanding of Little Bee and her story?

'Your system is cruel, but many of you were kind to me' (p.69). How is Little Bee treated as an individual, as opposed to as a generic 'asylum seeker'? What does this tell us about Chris Cleave's attitude to British asylum policy, if anything? Were you surprised by Lawrence's attitude towards Little Bee (p.172), considering his job with the Home Office? Did *The Other Hand* make you think differently about asylum seekers?

'Me talk like a ooman who swallowed a ooman who talk nice. Me dumb, yu nuh see it?' (p.106-7). Is Yvette 'dumb'? How do she and Little Bee differ in their survival tactics? Whose is the most effective, do you think?

Whose narrative do you prefer, Sarah's or Little Bee's? How do the two women differ in their perceptions, attitudes and writing style? Are there any similarities? Why do you think Chris Cleave chose to narrate his book from these two different perspectives?

'And my father said, We should be thanking you sir, you have really put our village on the map, this is our first road traffic accident . . . And my father and my uncle lived very happily in that place until the afternoon when the men came and shot them' (p.120). How does Chris Cleave interweave comedy and horror in *The Other Hand*? What is the effect of his technique on your reading experience, and what impact does it have on the story?

Were you surprised by the novel's ending? Would you describe *The Other Hand* as a bleak book? A political treatise? A melodrama? Or something else?