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A bureaucrat at the ministry of fear

Isegawa's novel of Idi Amin's Uganda is a tale of ambition and greed

Snakepit

By Moses Isegawa

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Reviewed by Sarah Coleman

When the exiled former Ugandan leader Idi Amin died in August in a hospital in Saudi Arabia, obituary writers all over the world weighed in on the legacy of one of the world's most notorious dictators. The adjectives used to describe him — "brutal," "ruthless," "monstrous," "deranged" — proved that even a quarter-century after he fled Uganda, Amin had lost none of his power to stir people's emotions. Amin makes only a few appearances in Moses Isegawa's new novel, "Snakepit," but his influence is everywhere in its story.

Set in late 1970s Uganda at the chaotic end of Amin's rule, "Snakepit" is a devastating portrait of a country at the brink of implosion. The story follows Bat Katanga, a Cambridge-educated Ugandan who returns home with the dream of improving his country's fortunes along with his own. Anything is possible in Amin's Uganda, and Bat soon lands a top government job, a mansion and a glamorous girlfriend. But there's a price tag attached: His ministry boss is a thug, his girlfriend may not be what she seems, and people have a habit of disappearing mysteriously in a country that was "like a madwoman of untold beauty; efforts to save her were bound to be doomed."

Bat soon finds that his idea of using his skills to turn Uganda into a prospering democracy is naive at best. Corruption swirls around him, and when he's forced to take a bribe from a Saudi prince (who menacingly boasts, "My generosity has never been spurned"), he finds him-

self in the middle of forces he can't control.

Isegawa, a Ugandan expatriate who lives in the Netherlands, clearly belongs to the class of writers-in-exile whose tangled relationships with their home countries produce big creative sparks. His acclaimed first novel, "Abyssinian Chronicles" (2000), was a vast, sprawling picaresque that covered four decades in Uganda's history and earned him comparisons to Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Though somewhat less ambitious, "Snakepit" is just as complicated and intense. The driving force behind it is Isegawa's rage at the horrors his country was forced to endure, and he makes a concerted effort to understand how the rot took hold and spread. Of course, much of the insanity traces back to Marshal Amin, in whom "paranoia swelled to the size of a cathedral." Under his rule, Uganda has become a place where astrology has replaced religion, where education is mistrusted, and petty tyrants hold on to power "by surrounding themselves with yes-men and throwing violent temper tantrums." Isegawa includes some satirical touches in his portrayal of Amin. In one extended riff, he has Amin move to Hollywood, where the dictator stars as his hero, Benito Mussolini, in two movies ("the jutting jaw, the heavy make-up, the fact that a black giant was portraying a white runt, made for wonderful comedy"). Though he might have relished the opportunity, Amin never impersonated Mussolini on film (he did, however, star in Barbet Schroeder's acclaimed 1974 documentary "General Idi Amin Dada" — and threatened to kill Schroeder if the director refused to make certain cuts). Still, it takes more than one violent, self-deluded dictator to derail a country.

The most chilling aspect of "Snakepit" is its depiction of how Amin's henchmen, rather than simply doing his bidding, used their boss'

lunacy to unleash their own bloodlust. One of the henchmen is Gen. Samson "Bazooka" Ondogar, Bat's boss, whose idea of a sophisticated party trick is "holding beer in his cheeks and spraying his guests, especially his dates or pickups." Drunk on power, Bazooka boasts, "If I want someone's eye, I pluck it. If I want somebody's arm, I harvest it, ha-ha-ha." Near the beginning of the novel, Bazooka takes an attractive woman and, by a combination of intimidation and calculation, turns her into a cold-blooded killer. The woman, Victoria, will later become Bat's girlfriend, and her descent into the abyss of amorality is the novel's most tragic arc.

By far the most nuanced portrait in the book, though, is of Bat. A lone intellectual in an administration filled with "former butchers, gargemen and loafers," Bat comes across as a fundamentally decent man. Though he's not exactly innocent, his main sin — letting personal ambition blind him to the sleaze and violence that surrounds him — is at least understandably human. Through Bat, Isegawa explores the idea of responsibility: We're clearly meant to wonder whether, in choosing to serve under Amin, Bat should be blamed for abetting the country's collapse. Thugs like Bazooka are easy enough to categorize, Isegawa seems to be saying, but what about the quietly ambitious bureaucrats who swim with the sharks, hoping they won't get mauled in the process?

Full of visceral, graphic language and acts of premeditated violence, "Snakepit" offers a dark, queasy-making vision of a country hijacked by greed and megalomania. Finally, though, Isegawa allows for a glimmer of hope, a suggestion that the cycle of violence can end and that better instincts can prevail over reckless self-interest. ■

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