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Menu

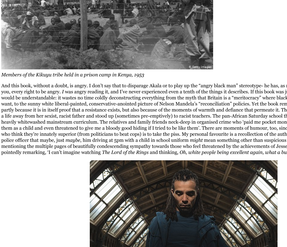
s by Akala- one of the best anti-racist books you'll ever read

Emma Curzon Black Lives Matter, book reviews, books, Uncategorized September 11, 2020 6 Minutes

Well, maybe the title's a bit of an exaggeration. I haven't actually read anywhere near all the anti-racist books out there- so far I've checked a good total of five, and that's only if you count fiction and autobiography. So it's just possible that rapper Akala's debut book isn't quite one of the greats- but only just. At the absolute least, it should go somewhere near the upper end of the top 10. In one of those books that, once it's medically safe to do so, I fully intend to quite literally press into the hands of every other human being I know, and deserves to be universally regarded as essential reading for anyone- especially white Brits- wishing to educate themselves on racism in the UK.

Akala's CV includes founding The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company (http://www.hiphopshakespeare.com), so evidently he's no stranger to juxtposition. This might explain why *Natives* stands out as being intriguingly genre-fluid, especially by non-fiction standards- and why it does so remarkably well. The final cover picture of Nelson's Column and its subtitle, *Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*, suggest a commentary on a specific chapter of history and its ramifications in the present day, and Natives is partly that. But it's also part-autobiography, with its many history lessons interspersed with snapshots of the author's life. It's not unusual, of course, for a writer to get the ball rolling with a personal anecdote before delving into the wider issues it represents. Laura Bates, for example, does it with street harassment in *Everyday Sexism*, and journalists thrive on it for comment pieces. But those are mostly brief, swiftly transcended and separate from the wider article/chapter/book; in Natives, Akala seamlessly interweaves his personal stories with historical and contemporary facts. It's a pretty genius way to discuss modern, ongoing problems such as institutional racism, and it's a pretty genius way to make a book that's, for the most part, a fairly dense piece of historical research and analysis more accessible and contexts to facilitate our educations, while also saving- and, crucially, empathising with- their impact on a single, individual human life decades or centuries down the line.

But while an examination of Akala's use of form and transcendence of genre would make for an interesting English Literature assignment, that's not why I think everyone should read this book. The book's true appeal isn't in how he structures his writing; it's in what he's writing about. To describe Akala as "spilling the tea" might be in bad taste considering that over the drink has roots in colonialism (https://www.nrdc.org/archives/threads/tea-vs-h2o/20746604400) (yes I wanted to have two puns reshared this- British comics 2ez (#pugsandmedicine)), but since the phrase is now synonymous with telling the truth, all I can say is holy crap is the tea exceptionally good in this book.



'A Friendly Power in Egypt', 1906. From Cassell's Illustrated History of England, Vol. VIII. (Cassell and Company, Limited, London, Paris, New York & Melbourne, 1906). (Photo by The Print Collector/Getty Images)

Or rather it's bad. Very very bad, and depressing. Reading this book isn't like school history lessons, where you learn about World War 2 evacuees, and the Tudors, and the Civil Rights Movement but only in America. This is the stuff that most of us aren't taught and which, according to Boris Johnson, we needed feel the shittest he had about (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-the-empire-rule-britannia-1-910-over-British-history-black-lives-matter-2008?fbclid=IwAR0ZZ0Ldq0Ldq0Ldq