

= The Other Hand =

The Other Hand , also known as Little Bee , is a 2008 novel by British author Chris Cleave . It is a dual narrative story about a Nigerian asylum @-@ seeker and a British magazine editor , who meet during the oil conflict in the Niger Delta , and are re @-@ united in England several years later . Cleave , inspired as a university student by his temporary employment in an asylum detention centre , wrote the book in an attempt to humanise the plight of asylum @-@ seekers in Britain . The novel examines the treatment of refugees by the asylum system , as well as issues of British colonialism , globalization , political violence and personal accountability .

The novel was published by Sceptre , an imprint of Hodder & Stoughton . Sales were initially slow , but increased as a result of " word @-@ of @-@ mouth " publicity , with the book eventually ranking 13th on the 2009 Sunday Times bestseller list . It has also been ranked # 1 the " New York Times " bestseller list . The novel has received mixed reviews from critics . It has been praised for its focus on underlying human decency ; however , some reviewers felt its events were contrived . The two protagonists have been juxtaposed , with less sympathy evoked by Surrey @-@ born Sarah than Nigerian @-@ refugee Little Bee . The novel was nominated for the 2008 Costa Book Awards and a 2009 Commonwealth Writers ' Prize . A film adaptation is being developed , and will be produced by and star Nicole Kidman .

= = Background = =

Cleave spent his early childhood in West Africa , which he credits for having partially inspired The Other Hand . Further inspiration came from Cleaves 's temporary employment while studying experimental psychology at the University of Oxford . During the summer , Cleave painted underpasses , gardened and picked up litter , and hoped to use this experience to write a book . His final job was at Campsfield House in Oxfordshire , an immigration detention centre . Cleave spent three days serving food to residents from war zones including Somalia , Eritrea and the Balkans . He explained : " I got talking with some of them and said why are you here ? Why are you in prison ? It 's not illegal and yet we concentrate them in these places . It 's a text @-@ book definition of a concentration camp . The conditions are appalling . I was shocked enough for that to be the end of my light comedy book of my amusing summers working as a labourer . " Cleave believes he would not have written the novel were he not a parent , as he does not wish for his children " to grow up into a world that is callous and stupid . "

In 2005 , an incident inspired Cleave to write The Other Hand . Four years previously , in 2001 , an Angolan asylum @-@ seeker named Manuel Bravo had arrived in England with his 9 @-@ year @-@ old son . After being detained in an immigration centre for four years , officials decided to forcibly deport Bravo and his son back to Angola the next morning . During the night , Bravo committed suicide , aware that his son , who was still a minor , could not be deported unaccompanied . Cleave felt compelled to write about the " dirty secret " that is the British immigration system , and to do so in such a way as to showcase the " unexpected humour " of the refugees wherever possible , in order to make the book " an enjoyable and compelling read " for his audience . Cleave explained :

= = Plot = =

Using alternating first @-@ person perspectives , the novel tells the stories of Little Bee , a Nigerian refugee , and Sarah O 'Rourke ( née Summers ) , a magazine editor from Surrey . After spending two years detained in a British immigration detention centre , Little Bee is illegally released after a fellow refugee performs sexual favours for a detention officer . She travels to the home of Sarah and her husband Andrew , whom she met two years previously on a beach in the Niger Delta . Sarah is initially unaware of Little Bee 's presence , until Andrew , haunted by guilt of their shared past , commits suicide . Little Bee reveals herself to Sarah on the day of Andrew 's funeral , and helps her to care for her four @-@ year @-@ old son Charlie .

Through a mutual reflection on their past , it is revealed that Sarah and Andrew were on holiday at the time of their meeting with Little Bee . The trip was an attempt to salvage their marriage after Andrew discovered Sarah had been unfaithful to him , embarking on an affair with Home Office employee Lawrence Osborn . While walking on the beach one morning , they were approached by a then 14 @-@ year @-@ old Little Bee , and her older sister Nkiruka . The girls were being pursued by soldiers who had burned down their village and intended for there to be no witnesses left alive . The soldiers arrived and murdered a guard from the O 'Rourkes ' hotel , but offered to spare the lives of the girls if Andrew would amputate his own middle finger with a machete . Afraid , and believing the soldiers would murder the girls anyway , Andrew refused , but Sarah complied in his place . The soldiers took both girls away , leaving the couple in doubt as to whether the soldiers would leave one girl alive in response , as they promised .

Little Bee explains that although Nkiruka was gang raped , murdered , and cannibalised by the soldiers , she was allowed to escape , and stowed away in the cargo hold of a ship bound for England . Sarah allows Little Bee to stay with her , intent on helping her become a legal British citizen . Lawrence , who is still involved with Sarah , disapproves of her actions and contemplates turning Little Bee in to the police . When he informs Little Bee that he is considering this , she responds that allowing her to stay would be what is best for Sarah , so if Lawrence turns her in , Little Bee will get revenge by telling his wife Linda about his affair . The two reach an uneasy truce . After spending several days together , Sarah , Lawrence , Little Bee and Charlie take a trip to the park . Charlie goes missing , and Little Bee calls the police while Sarah searches for him . Although he is quickly found , the police become suspicious of Little Bee , and discover that she is in the country illegally .

Little Bee is detained and quickly deported back to Nigeria , where she believes she will be killed . Lawrence uses his Home Office connections to track Little Bee 's deportation details , and Sarah and Charlie are able to accompany her back home . Sarah believes that Little Bee will be safe as long as she is present , and together they begin collecting stories for a book Andrew had begun , and which Sarah intends to finish on his behalf , about the atrocities committed in the Nigerian oil conflict . During a trip to the same beach where they first encountered one another , soldiers arrive to take Little Bee away . Despite being captured , Little Bee is not dispirited , and instead is ultimately hopeful at the sight of Charlie playing happily with a group of Nigerian children .

= = Characters = =

The primary characters in *The Other Hand* are Little Bee , a Nigerian refugee , and Sarah , a middle @-@ class Englishwoman . Critics have focused on the contrast between the two , with Caroline Elkins of *The New York Times* commenting that Sarah might initially appear " insipid " to readers , and that when juxtaposed with Little Bee , she seems " unsympathetic , even tiresome " . Tim Teeman of *The Times* deemed Sarah " batty , bizarre and inconsistent , and despite the tragedy she has suffered , unsympathetic " , while writing that in contrast : " Goodness peppers every atom of [ Little Bee 's ] being . " Other reviewers took an opposite stance . Margot Kaminski of the *San Francisco Chronicle* found Little Bee 's characterisation problematic , writing : " Sometimes she 's not convincing , and sometimes she tries too hard to convince . It 's too often apparent that Little Bee is not real . This doesn 't do justice to her story , and puts the burden back on the author to show that he 's representing her , rather than exploiting her . " Ed Lake of *The Daily Telegraph* felt that " Bee 's arch reasonableness and implausibly picturesque speech mean she often comes off as a too @-@ cute cipher " , and ultimately found Sarah the more convincing character .

The *Guardian* 's Lawrence Norfolk commented that Sarah is a " far from perfect heroine : a semi @-@ neglectful mother and unfaithful wife " , but noted that " Cleave does not mock Sarah ( and life in Kingston upon Thames ) any more than he does Little Bee and her experiences in Nigeria . " Norfolk felt that : " For all the characters ' faults , none of them is presented as inauthentic or standing for something that we are intended to disbelieve . On the disparity in sympathy for Sarah and Little Bee , Cleave assessed : " Sarah inevitably suffers by proximity to Little Bee , who is much easier to like . If Sarah is more twisted , I think it 's because her path through life has necessarily

been more convoluted . Little Bee 's life is extremely harrowing but it is also very simple ? she is swimming very hard against the current , struggling to survive and not to be swept away . Sarah doesn't have the luxury of knowing in which direction she should swim . "

Steve Giergerich of the St. Louis Post @-@ Dispatch felt that Sarah and Little Bee are both " so richly drawn that the supporting characters suffer by comparison . " These supporting characters are Andrew , Sarah 's husband , Lawrence , her lover , Clarissa her colleague and Charlie , her four @-@ year @-@ old son , who for much of the novel answers only to " Batman " and dresses only in his Batman costume . Sarah Liss of CBC News deemed Andrew and Lawrence the two least @-@ likeable characters in the novel , describing Andrew as " an ordinary guy with self @-@ righteous beliefs who comes up slightly short when he 's tested by real life " and Lawrence as a " cowardly yes @-@ man " . Cleave agreed that for Lawrence , " career and propriety are more important than basic morality . He 's gone so far down that road that he can 't come back , and he 's made more villainous for all the things he could do but doesn't . " Charlie is based on Cleave 's oldest son , who similarly spent six months aged four answering only to " Batman " . He forms the emotional centre of the novel , holding the adult characters together , and is a study in the early formation of identity . Cleave explained : " Little Bee is a novel about where our individuality lies ? which layers of identity are us , and which are mere camouflage . So it 's a deliberate choice to use the metaphor of a child who is engaging in his first experiments with identity ? in Charlie 's case by taking on the persona of a superhero . "

= = Themes = =

The Other Hand presents a critique of the British asylum system and attitude towards asylum @-@ seekers . Cleave feels there exists a " general lethargy " about the way asylum @-@ seekers are treated in Britain , and though he believes he is not a political writer , the book begins with an extract from a 2005 UK Home Office publication entitled " United Kingdom : A Journey to Citizenship " . The extract reads : " Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeing ( sic ) persecution and conflict . " Cleave questioned : " If a government can 't even successfully proof @-@ read such a fundamental document , how seriously can we take its asylum procedure ? " In writing The Other Hand , Cleave hoped to " humanise " the issue for readers . Despite discussions of political violence and British Colonialism within the novel , Sarah L. Courteau , editor of the Wilson Quarterly commented : " You 're almost entirely unaware of its politics because the book doesn't deal in abstractions but in human beings . " For this reason , she deemed The Other Hand " the best kind of political novel " . Emma Philip of The Courier @-@ Mail has opined that while The Other Hand does make political points , readers should not confuse it with a political book , as the " overwhelming beauty " of the relationship between Sarah , Little Bee and Charlie " far outweighs the political message . "

The novel also deals with the issue of globalisation . Courteau observed that although Little Bee learns English from newspapers she acquires at the English detention centre , her reference points are still Nigerian , and thus through her narrative voice Cleave " illustrates the forcible dislocations of a globalized world . " Cleave chose to explore the issue in The Other Hand as he believes that , although globalisation is frequently discussed , people rarely consider its meaning . He explained : " money can move freely across national borders , but people can 't . They 're actively prevented from going where the money is . Capital is global , but labour isn't . I believe that 's the cause of two major crises that we 're involved in as a species ? one is a financial crisis and one is a refugee crisis . Imagine a world where money can 't move , where capital is stuck in its country of origin , but people can freely move where the work is ! That 's an alternate interpretation of globalization that would solve a lot of problems . " Although Cleave did not intend for the novel to be heavily political , he felt it was important to raise the issue , given the refugee subject matter of The Other Hand .

Marital infidelity features throughout the sections of the novel narrated by Sarah . Cleave discussed : " When you are choosing a lover , you 're choosing a philosophy ; it 's not about sex , it 's not about marriage . With Sarah , her unfaithfulness is just one of the symptoms of the fact that she 's torn and is going to have to make this strong moral choice . " Sarah 's storyline also explores her moral

culpability following Andrew 's suicide . Personal accountability is a central theme of the novel , with Elkins of The New York Times opining that by not focusing on " postcolonial guilt or African angst " , Cleave is able to use the novel to challenge readers ' conceptions of civility and ethical choice . Margot Kaminski of the San Francisco Chronicle similarly feels that the book delivered a message of anti @-@ complacency , however believes that it does so by " bemoaning the normality of the First World in the face of the horrors of the Third . " She deemed *The Other Hand* essentially a novel about " the borders we draw , and the real damage they inflict " .

= = Style = =

Having spent almost two years working on the novel , Cleave decided upon using the dual narrative , as : " This is a story of two worlds : the developed and the developing , and of the mutual incomprehension that sometimes dooms them to antagonism . " He found it technically challenging to write from a female perspective , but felt that it prevented him from unwittingly using his own voice to animate the characters , explaining : " It forces me to listen , to think , and to write more precisely . " Kaminski accused Cleave of cultural appropriation , asking rhetorically : " When a white male author writes as a young Nigerian girl , is it an act of empathy , or identity theft ? " Cleave has responded by stating that he sympathises with those who feel he has no right to write from the perspective of a Nigerian girl , but feels that he does it well . He believes that the best mechanism for telling a story about crossing borderlines is to depict both sides . He conducted interviews with actual asylum seekers and illegal immigrants , a psychiatrist specialising in the trauma of child refugees , and members of London 's Nigerian community , researching speech patterns to shape the " quirks and cadences " of Little Bee 's narrative voice .

A central stylistic feature of the novel is the lack of detail Cleave gives regarding elements of Little Bee 's past . " Little Bee " is an assumed name , described as a " mechanism for survival " by Courteau , as the character is forced to discard her true name when pursued by soldiers , through fear it may reveal her tribe and religion . Her real name , Udo , is not revealed until the end of the novel . Courteau also highlights the fact that Little Bee 's Nigerian enemies and their motivations are never explicitly described , as the novel is told through the first @-@ person narrative , and Little Bee herself is limited in her understanding of them . Cleave intended for the story as a whole never to be fully explicit , relying instead on readers ' interpretation of the characters ' dialogue .

Throughout the novel , Little Bee considers how she would explain England to " the girls back home " in Nigeria . Cleave uses the girls as a Greek chorus , providing a foil to allow the cultural dissonance experienced by Little Bee to be made explicit . He feels the device is more natural than having Little Bee narrate her alarm first hand , allowing the reader to appreciate the cultural gulf , and Little Bee to seem knowing as opposed to tragic . Through Little Bee 's narration , Cleave examines human culture from the opposite perspective as science fiction does , having an extraordinary protagonist explore an ordinary world . This contemporary realism gives a significance to mundane events experienced by Little Bee , while bringing into focus " sad and ignoble " aspects of English culture such as the detention system . Cleave commented : " We have become accustomed to viewing our own actions in soft focus , but the alien narrator has not yet acquired this cultural immunity . She sees us as we can no longer see ourselves . "

Courteau compared *The Other Hand* to Ian McEwan 's *Enduring Love* observing that both novels are formed around " a single horrific encounter " , and praised Cleave for his " restrained , diamond @-@ hard prose " . Philip drew a different comparison , opining that Cleave 's writing style ? using plain language to describe atrocities ? was reminiscent of John Boyne 's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* .

= = Publication history = =

The novel was first published on 7 August 2008 , released in hardback by Sceptre in the UK . The hardback edition sold just 3 @, @ 000 copies in 2008 , however the publication of a paperback copy , released on 5 February 2009 , saw increased sales , with 100 @, @ 000 paperback copies sold in

Britain in March and April 2009 , despite no advertising and little marketing for the novel . As of November 2009 , 300 @, @ 000 copies of the novel had been sold . Richard Brooks of The Times attributed its success to recommendations from readers to family and friends , with Cleave calling it " an example of word @-@ of @-@ mouth success . " The novel was published in America and Canada by Simon & Schuster under the alternative title Little Bee . It was released in hardback and eBook format in February 2009 , and in paperback in February 2010 . Cleave likes both titles , believing that The Other Hand " speaks to the dichotomous nature of the novel , with its two narrators and two worlds " , also referencing Sarah 's injury , while Little Bee is appropriate as the novel is really the telling of Little Bee 's story , and sounds " bright and approachable " , in line with his aim to write " an accessible story about a serious subject . "

= = = Blurb = = =

Mirroring the deliberately vague detail within the novel , the blurb on the book is unusually written , in that it does not name the characters or reveal the plot . It was written by a team at Sceptre led by marketing consultant Damian Horner , and has the approval of Cleave , who described it as " genius " . Cleave explained : " I think readers are quite smart and don 't really need the whole thing spelt out for them in a plot summary . It 's nice to let them discover the book at their own speed . And the technique of the book is to release these dirty secrets gradually . " The content of the blurb varies between UK and American editions of the novel , but both begin : " We don 't want to tell you too much about this book . It is a truly special story and we don 't want to spoil it . " and end : " Once you have read it , you 'll want to tell everyone about it . When you do , please don 't tell them what happens either . The magic is in how it unfolds . " James Spackman , Sales and Marketing Director for Sceptre , was initially sceptical of the blurb , particularly disliking the use of " we " for the publisher to address the reader directly . Once the book became a best @-@ seller , however , he revised his stance , and now believes that the reason the blurb works is because it makes a virtue of denying the reader information , with an unusual format and " arrestingly direct " tone . The blurb won Sceptre the " Best Blurb " award at the 2010 Book Marketing Society Awards .

= = Reception = =

The Other Hand reached number 13 on the 2009 Sunday Times bestseller list , and was the only literary title on the list without a Richard and Judy Book Club recommendation , a literary award or a film adaptation . It also topped The New York Times Best Seller list for paperback trade fiction in 2010 . The novel was nominated at the 2008 Costa Book Awards , though lost to The Secret Scripture by Sebastian Barry . It was nominated for the 2009 Commonwealth Writers ' Prize as the best book originating from Europe and South Asia , but lost to Unaccustomed Earth by Jhumpa Lahiri . In 2010 , The Other Hand was longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award , nominated by Cleveland Public Library , Seattle Public Library and Dunedin Public Libraries , New Zealand .

The book has received mixed reviews . Some critics have praised the novel for its focus on underlying human decency . The New York Times 's Caroline Elkins felt that the pretext of the novel " initially feels contrived " , but assessed that " in a world full of turpitude and injustice , it is [ Sarah and Little Bee 's ] bold , impulsive choices that challenge the inevitability of despair , transforming a political novel into an affecting story of human triumph . " James Urquhart of The Independent called the book " a powerful piece of art " , writing : " Besides sharp , witty dialogue , an emotionally charged plot and the vivid characters ' ethical struggles , The Other Hand delivers a timely challenge to reinvigorate our notions of civilised decency " . Equally , Andrew Rosenheim of Publishers Weekly found the book noteworthy for Cleave 's " ability to find a redemptive grace in the midst of almost inconceivable horror . " while Jeremy Juhu of The Daily Telegraph deemed it an " elegant parable " and a " challenge to every cosy , knee @-@ jerk liberal inclined to spout off about our shared humanity and global obligations . "

A separate Daily Telegraph review , this by critic Ed Lake , took a dissimilar stance , opining that

that book is " pervaded by a vaguely distasteful glossiness " , and that " if Cleave is writing from great depths of feeling , he hides it well . " Lake deemed the book " faultlessly relevant , but ultimately cloying . " Another Publishers Weekly review was also less positive , calling the book " beautifully staged " but " haphazardly plotted " , and noting : " Cleave has a sharp cinematic eye , but the plot is undermined by weak motivations and coincidences . " Teeman of The Times felt that the book was overwritten , and wished " twistedly " that it had a less positive conclusion , commenting : " With every motive and action explicitly drawn , fleshed out and explained , there is no room for mystery , ambiguity or even tension . "

= = Film adaptation = =

Following the novel 's paperback release , six offers were made from companies interested in producing a film adaptation . BBC Films acquired the rights , and are potentially set to begin filming in late @-@ 2010 or early @-@ 2011 , once a director has been contracted . The film will star Nicole Kidman , and will be produced by Kidman , Gail Mutrux and Per Saari through Mutrux 's production company Pretty Picture , and Kidman 's , Blossom Films . Shawn Slovo will write the script , and Christine Langan will be the executive producer . Kidman had already read the novel before Mutrux contacted her about producing the film , on a flight between Los Angeles and Australia . The Times reported that she was " so eager " to play Sarah that she personally competed with several film studios in order to secure the rights to the book .