



AUGUSTOWN

By Kei Miller

256 pp. Pantheon, \$25.95.



This brilliant and moving novel begins in the titular Jamaican town on April 11, 1982, and opens with a reminder that “every day contains all of history.” The elderly and blind Ma Taffy senses trouble coming her community’s way — and she is right. When her grandson returns from school shorn of his dreadlocks after a bad encounter with an arrogant teacher, the event sets off an uproar among the people of Augustown, who are moved to recall a litany of wrongs they’ve suffered at the hands of the establishment, or, as they call it, Babylon.

A series of ingeniously structured jumps in time and point of view show what led to little Kaia’s humiliation at his teacher’s hands, and reach all the way back to Augustown’s own iconic “flying preacherman,” Alexander Bedward, whose prophesied ascent into the heavens throws not only his flock, but all of Jamaica — including its pompous colonial governors — into upheaval long before Kaia’s birth. Miller paints the town with powerful language and a deep sense of history, ushering in a past so alive it feels like the present. Every era and sector of society bustles with fully fleshed characters; each carefully chosen detail leads to a painful and seemingly inevitable end, and a world both smaller and bigger than it seems. The story portrays faith with faith, and chides its reader gently on occasion, anticipating skepticism. “Perhaps it is time at last to make space in yourself to believe such stories, and to believe the people who tell them.”

Each observant sentence in this gorgeous book is a gem.

GRAVEL HEART

By Abdulrazak Gurnah

272 pp. Bloomsbury, \$28.



The measured elegance of Gurnah’s prose renders his protagonist in a manner almost uncannily real, in part because the author does not elide the young man’s transience, but instead makes its slow impact on his life a genuine focus of the story. Salim grows up in Zanzibar, where his family breaks apart when he is very young for reasons no one will fully explain to him. He lives with his mother and uncle, and is confused by his unraveling relationship with his father, who has seemingly estranged himself from not only his wife and son, but also most of humanity. The boy takes solace in reading, and eventually his strong performance in school leads his uncle, who has risen through Zanzibar’s diplomatic ranks, to offer him a place to study and make his way in England — as a business student.

Once in London, Salim discovers that his family’s expectations for him are more than he can bear. He commences an itinerant life in England that sees him cross paths with fellow travelers and immigrants from all over the globe. Gurnah’s portrayal of student immigrant life in Britain is pleasingly deliberate and precise, and also riveting, perhaps especially when Salim finds himself alienated. Struggling with intimacy in the face of both what he knows and what he may never know about his family, he is forced to decide whether to return home and see what has become of them.

Even the minor characters in this novel have richly imagined histories that inflect their smallest interactions — one of the loveliest pleasures of this book, and a choice that makes its world exceptionally full.

WHAT WE LOSE

By Zinzi Clemmons

224 pp. Viking, \$22.



In stark prose, Clemmons’s narrator, Thandi, grieves the agonizing loss of her difficult and loving immigrant mother to cancer. Searing vignettes describe her life before and after her mother’s death.

“Most of her friends (and she had many) spoke of her offending them shortly after they met,” Clemmons writes. The light-skinned black daughter of a woman born in South Africa and a man born in New York, Thandi navigates her student days as an inhabitant of liminal social spaces. Her constants are her family, some of whom live in South Africa, and her childhood best friend, Aminah. As Thandi becomes a lover, then a wife and then a mother herself, her own mother’s presence looms over her evolving consciousness.

The book takes its title from a hospice pamphlet for the soon-to-be bereaved. Thandi’s awareness of her own place in society is both informed by and in conversation with current events and history. She is a mourner and also a reader, and understands her own life and her mother’s death in relation to politics. When she thinks, for example, of maternal morality, she remembers Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, an iconic mother who was also accused of involvement in horrific murders: “Why are we surprised when a mother — a real mother, someone who takes care of her children and loves them — commits atrocious crimes?” She also notes her mother’s passing as part of a larger injustice, as black Americans have shorter life expectancies than white Americans. The book’s distinctive form and voice give it an unusual capacity to show how individuals connect deep feeling to broad political understanding — an experience too rarely rendered in fiction.

REFUGE

By Dina Nayeri

336 pp. Riverhead, \$27.



This novel tracks the relationship, over decades, between the Iranian immigrant Niloo and her father. Oscillating between Niloo in first and third person and her father in third person, the

narrative leaps from the past to a present in which Niloo’s refugee history has toughened her in ways both empowering and sad. The story is punctuated by a series of visits with her estranged father, Bahman, who — despite a promise — did not accompany her, her mother, and her brother when they left Iran in the wake of threats to her mother, a Christian doctor. In the aftermath of his betrayal, Niloo becomes an academic overachiever, a Yale graduate, and, finally, a professor who feels more at home in her books than in her marriage. Bahman and Niloo meet again in other countries, at other ages, and alternately break and renew their bonds. Bahman, a dentist and opium addict, lives life large and is hungry for his children’s affection, even as he attempts, clumsily, to build a new family after their departure.

The novel embraces a number of settings with humor and authority, capturing time and place through the lens of believably awkward and tender family interactions. One of its strengths is the heartrending depiction of Niloo’s bid to reconnect with her birth country through budding relationships with a constellation of Iranians in Amsterdam, each of whom hovers in a different brand of immigrant limbo.