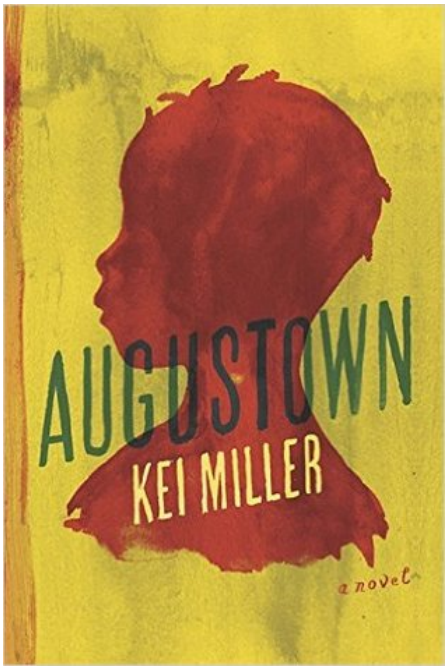

Augustown

Kei Miller

Augustown

Kei Miller

Augustown Kei Miller
From the winner of the Forward Prize, *Augustown* is a magical and haunting novel set in the underbelly of Jamaica.

Ma Taffy may be blind but she sees everything. So when her great-nephew Kaia comes home from school in tears, what she senses sends a deep fear running through her. While they wait for his mama to come home from work, Ma Taffy recalls the story of the flying preacherman and a great thing that did not happen. A poor suburban sprawl in the Jamaican heartland, Augustown is a place where many things that should happen don’t, and plenty of things that shouldn’t happen do. For the story of Kaia leads back to another momentous day in Jamaican history, the birth of the Rastafari and the desire for a better life.

Augustown Details

Date	:	Published August 11th 2016 by Weidenfeld and Nicolson
ISBN	:	9781474603607
Author	:	Kei Miller
Format	:	Hardcover 368 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literary Fiction, Magical Realism

From Reader Review Augustown for online ebook

Trish says

An inverted gold crown on a jet background graces my cover of Kei Miller's 2016 novel Augustown and the fiction points to the couple of days in the 20th C when the power structure inverted in a small town in Jamaica. A flying preacher, Alexander Bedward, is instrumental in inspiring the beginnings of the Rastafarian movement in 1920's Jamaica. That story is wrapped around a more current parallel story of Gina, the clever girl some thought would also fly. "...the stories bounce against each other like echoes..." Power and powerlessness entwine in this novel.

A town is populated with memorable figures like blind Ma Taffy, gun- and drug-runner Marlon, the dread-headed part-white child Kaia born out of wedlock, the childless spinster Sister Gilzene who could sing an operatic soprano, Rastafarian fruit peddler Clarky, the uptight upright teacher Mr. Saint-Josephs whom we suspect is insane, and a white family: a corporate father with ugly values, his wife learning to ignore him, and a boy who was selfish in the way white people are when they 'do not see color.'

A bit of a thriller, this novel, because we scent blood early on, with the guns Marlon stashes under Ma Taffy's house, Clarky dying, and crazy old Bedward rising up like some kind of lunatic second ~~coming~~ going. Oppression surrounds and weighs on us like humidity.

> "The rastaman thinks, draw me a map of what you see
> then I will draw a map of what you never see
> and guess me whose map will be the bigger than whose?
> Guess me whose map will tell the larger truth?"
> —from *Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*

Only after I looked for interviews with Miller did I realize he is considered a poet first, though in descriptions of his education he says he started with prose stories. He is lavishly talented, and writes with an enlightened sexual awareness. This novel has a strong set of female characters and in his 2010 collection of poems called A Light Song of Light, we also get that sense of even ground, and more:

> Every bed was made illegal by the brush
> of chest against chest, and by our sweat.
> --from *A Short History of Beds We Have Slept in Together*

Miller saves his challenges for colonialists and from his words we recognize Miller understands rage and sorrow.

> "...how they have forced us to live in a world lacking in mermaids--mermaids who understood that they simply were, and did not need permission to exist or to be beautiful. The law concerning mermaids only caused mermaids to pass a law concerning man: that they would never again cross our boundaries of sand; never lift their torsos up from the surf; never again wave at sailors, salt dripping from their curls; would never again enter our dry and stifling world."
> --from *The Law Concerning Mermaids*

Historical figures feature in this poetry collection, including Alexander Bedward again, Singerman (Marley?), Nathaniel Morgan, Coolie Duppy, etc. and there is a strong scent of homesickness. Miller has

lived in Great Britain for some years now and perhaps is telling the same story over and over, in a new way each time, pruning and training the branches until they remind him of home.

In the poetry collection The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion published in 2014, Miller's language is English but there appear so many words we have never seen that we are unsteady, unsure, very nearly undone.

Unsettled

So consider an unsettled island
Inside—the unflattened and unsugared

fields; inside—a tegareg
sprawl of roots and canopies,

inside—the tall sentries of blondwood
and yoke-wood and sweet-wood,

of dog-wood, of bullet trees so hard
they will one day splinter cutlasses,

will one day swing low the carcasses
of slaves; inside—a crawling

brawl of vines, unseemly
flowers that blossom from their spines;

inside—the leh-guh orchids and labrishing
hibiscuses that throw raucous

syllables at crows whose heads are red as annattos; inside—malarial mosquitoes

that rise from stagnant ponds;
inside—a green humidity thick as mud;

inside—the stinging spurge, the nightshades,
the Madame Fates;

inside—spiders, gnats and bees,
wasps and lice and fleas; inside—

the dengue, the hookworm, the heat
and botheration; unchecked macka

sharp as crucifixion. This is no paradise—
not yet—not this unfriendly, untamed island—

this unsanitised, unstructured island—
this unmannered, unmeasured island;

this island: unwritten, unsettled, unmapped.
—from *Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*

The unsettlement one feels when reading the poem is curiously the way Miller makes us feel in his novel, though he does not use such words. We retain a kind of distance. Just as well. There is danger everywhere. The only other place that ever gave me this sense of familiarity and menace was another island with a bloody colonial history, Tasmania.

This is a new cultural sphere; it takes some time to accustom to this point-of-view. The language which is at once foreign and familiar, continental and island, melodic and profane, knowing and naive. Hope is not an obvious choice when one is the underclass. Rastafarians have a mighty sense of their closeness to god and ghost. White folk don't offer the same opportunities. This truth is such a relief after centuries of colonial cant.

We can feel the tide, the sun, the heat; we smell the flowers, the sea, the mangoes. Miller's language in *Augustown* is easily poetic, not caught in it but casual and natural. The story, Gina's growing up and standing up, is where we're focused. And yet…and yet the bleaching light on the sunbaked road and the overhanging flowers thrust their way into the story, embellishing it, making us a little homesick, too.

The chapter on autoclaps squeezed the heart and was almost pure poetry. This chapter made the book Kei Miller's. Any other author may have left that chapter out, and they would have been utterly wrong.

We, humans in the world, for centuries in every country, have put men in charge of…everything…our well-being, our safety, our protection. Since barely cognizant, I have always thought that was a lot to lay on one half of the human race. Kei Miller seems to understand this.

Extraordinary.

Rebecca Foster says

Augustown is essentially a collection of the oral and written stories that define a Jamaican community. That structure is both a positive and a negative: While it introduces a diversity of voices and allows for the interweaving of bits of history and etymology, it can also make the book seem more like a set of disparate tales than a connected story line, even though Miller keeps circling back to April 11, 1982. It definitely requires a suspension of disbelief to appreciate what Miller is doing here, but ultimately I took the scenes of flying and levitation – whether literal, or simply a metaphor for rising above unfortunate circumstances – as evidence of the archetypal human desire to escape.

See my full review at BookBrowse.

See also my related article on Rastafarianism and dreadlocks.

Lisa says

This gorgeously written, poetic and heart-shattering novel circles around a pivotal event in the school day of a young boy, Kaia. As the stories unfold, more and more is revealed about the lives of the people in

Augustown, a ghetto in Kingston, Jamaica.

"To know a man properly, you must know the shape of his hurt --the specific wound around which his person has been formed like a scab." Kei Miller brilliantly succeeds with this novel.

Missy J says

The third time I read a work by Kei Miller (after the original and emotional The Last Warner Woman and the poetry collection The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion)! I can see that Kei Miller is forging his own literary path. In other words, he has his own writing style and I like that!

Essentially, I think **Augustown** is about the "gap" in Jamaican society - be it upper vs. lower class, white vs. black, educated vs. uneducated, Babylon vs. Rasta. Augustown is a poor part of town where the blind Ma Taffy lives with her niece Gina and little Kaia. One day Ma Taffy wakes up and smells that something isn't right in the air. Her suspicions are confirmed when Kaia returns home prematurely from school with his dreadlocks cut off by a teacher. Babylon has attacked!

The first half of the book is dedicated for the most part to the story of the "flying preacher man" (see the biography of Alexander Bedward). At first, I was really intrigued why Miller decided to include this piece of oral history that has such a mythical undertone. But as the story progressed, I realized that Miller wants us to understand the way the underclass in Jamaica thinks, their beliefs and how they make sense of the oppressed reality.

We are introduced to a wide set of characters and we see the differences between the two groups. Is it still possible to bridge the gap between them? Towards the last quarter of the book, all the threads are brought together. The story of Gina was a heartbreaking tragedy. *Love requires context, and they had none. This leaving, then, was probably for the best.* At the very least, Kei Miller addresses this "gap" and leaves his readers in contemplation.

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jo says

this is the story of the jamaican people but it is also the story
of all the people
with melatonin in their skin
who were enslaved
and then were freed
and nothing changed because
they were owned anyway
so they created their stories
and the stories are true
they are stories of hope and elevation
even as
they are still owned
and traumatized
and casually lynched

and you
can't
keep
them
down
cuz

they fly.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I selected this book from the Tournament of Books longlist as a potential dark horse. I really liked it and would love to see it make the shortlist. I like the way it plays with storytelling and assumptions the reader might be making.

Halfway through, I was confronted with this:
"Look, this isn't magic realism. This is not another story about superstitious island people and their primitive beliefs. No. You don't get off that easy. This is a story about people as real as you are, and as real as I once was before I became a bodiless thing floating up here in the sky. You may as well stop to consider a more urgent question; not whether you believe in this story or not, but whether this story is about the kinds of people you have never taken the time to believe in."

The novel starts with a woman in a specific area known as Augustown, which may be based on the real life area of Jamaica referred to as August Town, now known as Ma Taffy, somewhat of a matriarch for her nieces and nephews and greatnieces and greatnephews. She is blind but knows something has gone wrong, because she can smell something, which she can't at that moment identify. Kaia returns home from school and she discovers his dreadlocks have been chopped off by his teacher.

From there, Ma Taffy starts telling a story about a flying preacherman who showed up in Augustown when she was younger. This connects to the autoclaps (ie: apocalypse) events that are about to occur. The novel ends up roughly divided into before and after, and it all spirals around Kaia's day at school.

There is a lot here about modern, non-tourist Jamaica.

Columbus says

The writing in this book will leave you breathless. Just exquisite prose. I just turned the last page and I immediately started reading the beginning of the book again. I wanted to both go over some scenes in this book that I was little confused or maybe befuddled about, but also revisit the lyrical prose. This book reminded me a little of The Fishermen by Obioma; Claire of the Sea Light by Danticat; and some others. One critic compared the writing to Garcia Márquez, whom I've never read, but certainly aware of the high praise for such a revered author.

I came so close to taking this back to the library, unread, and I'm so glad I didn't. A book I will be thinking about quite a bit.

Ifeyinwa says

3.5 stars.

The longer I reflect on this book, the more nuanced my thoughts become. Kei Miller can write his ass off! No question. His prose throughout this novel was simply jaw dropping, but there were some instances where this writing style got in the way of the story. And although the story unfolded brilliantly, in retrospect, the novel's plot is part basic, part impressive and part disjointed.

Regardless, this is an absolutely gorgeous novel that explores so much, including class issues, fables, family, and rastafarianism. There's quite a bit to enjoy in this book.

Lark Benobi says

A hauntingly beautiful and yet brutal story. It's a hard combination to pull off, and Miller does it. Lyricism can be used to make ugly things too pretty and bearable but I never felt that Miller walked into this trap--instead, his poetry of expression allowed me to look straight into the story, and to see the humanity and uniqueness of his characters.

Augustown also manages to tell a lot of story in a little book--only 250 pages. In these ways I prefer it to Marlon James's bludgeon of a masterpiece, A Brief History of Seven Killings. With Augustown, I was better able to enter the book and to enjoy it on its own terms.

Anna says

"Now Focus 17 59' 0' North, 76 44' 0' West. Down there is the Caribbean, down there is Augustown, it sits between two hillsides."

Kei Miller gives us a narrative spanning from 1920's to 1980's. We are introduced to Spliff-smoking granny, Ma Taffy, who was blinded by rats and now has her senses tuned to coming catastrophes (which Jamaicans call “autoclaps”); rude-boy gangster “Soft-Paw”, a self-proclaimed defender of this ghetto community and Gina, the bright school “gyal” who must fend off the unwelcome attentions of older men awaiting her ripening.

Kaia (Gina’s son and Ma Taffy great-nephew) comes home from school in tears, because his teacher (Mr. Saint Joseph) has cut off his dreadlocks—a violation of the family’s Rastafari beliefs. Ma Taffy, comforts Kaia with the story of Bedward, an Augustown preacher and forerunner of the rastafari. Sixty years earlier, Bedward’s miraculous attempt “‘to rise up into de skies like Elijah’” was halted by the “Babylon boys” pulling him down “with a long hooker stick.” Like Bedward, Gina believes she might escape: the principal of the school has been tutoring her, and after the local college accepts her application, “a certain lightness of being” takes her over, “as if she could close her eyes right now and begin to rise.” After seeing Kaia’s cut locs, though, she is instead forced into a confrontation with Mr. Saint Joseph and Babylon.

Despite the complexity of the novel’s structure, Miller easily weaves all the component parts together. The result is absorbing and affecting, this novel is something truly special. There is much to enjoy in the story itself, the characters, the individual dramas of the supporting characters. This book gives us the legacy of colonialism, religion, class conflict, and violence. I highly recommend. This book is Fyyyyyaaaahhh!

Beverly says

Thoughts coming shortly
One of my fav read this year

Kathleen says

“To know a man properly, you must know the shape of his hurt—the specific wound around which his person has been formed like a scab.”

I am mesmerized by Kei Miller’s unique poetic voice. There’s a soft ring to it, a gentle clarity.

Augustown has a timeless quality, as if it wasn’t so much written as revealed. And after reading it, I feel like a child feels after a magical fairy tale: aware of a whole new world.

Jamaica is a place I’ve never been, an exotic locale to me. But Miller did something special here. He wove dialect through the story, created vivid characters like Ma Taffy and Sister Gilzene and Bongo Moody, and shared local folklore and beliefs, simply but clearly explaining how they came to be. And the way he did this made me--an outsider--feel in the end as if this story was mine, like it belongs to me now.

I recommend avoiding spoilers. The surprises in the telling of this are part of the magic. At the same time, it is a book rich in layers that I will want to re-read many times.

“ … perhaps it is time at last to make space in yourself to believe such stories, and to believe the people who tell them.”

Monica says

There is very little doubt in my mind that Augustown is brilliant. It is such a simple tale and yet so complex in the moods and emotions evoked. He showcases that what happens (the event) is not the story. What happens is only the face or the cover. The story, the reverberations, the impact, the undercurrents, the culture, the resentment, the simmering anger, the privilege, the inequities; all of these things and more are percolating in communities. Flowing, growing, changing. It's all fluid. Miller ostensibly a poet cum novelist brings an artistic bright light on what in less skilled hands would be pedestrian and heavy-handed. Miller shows and doesn't tell in a beautiful, poetic light.

This is one of those books that should be read more than once to capture the depth of meaning. Unfortunately, I've only read the book once so it is certain that I have missed much more than I have captured in this review. Ma Taffy the blind/grizzled neighborhood "grandmother" has a bad premonition

that something big and bad is about to happen and so the story begins to unfold. Miller takes us through some familial tales to explain who Ma Taffy is and what she means to the community and the events about to ensue. No character is too small. Each person represents a part of the community as a whole from the small time thug hiding his guns under Ma Taffy's home to the school principal who sees herself is an integral part of the Augustown community but lives in the hills among the wealthy elements of society. This is a story where everyone is connected in threads both loose and strong in ways that they don't necessarily know or understand. Even this is part of the tale. People don't always know the various ways in which they are connected.(view spoiler)

What I found truly amazing was how Miller drew this story. It unfolds slowly but deliberately and it doesn't culminate until the last few pages of the book. He also brings in some elements of magical realism and Jamaican folklore to help paint the mindset of the community. By the end of this very short book, he has rendered understanding of a community into the reader in an unexpectedly deep and effective way. I've found myself thinking about the book and its implications since I read the last word. I think Miller shows the potential of a rare talent and I eagerly await his next novel.

4.5 Stars

I read this book on kindle.

Sue says

With this amazing novel, Miller provides a portrait of 20th century Jamaican history through conversations, retelling of folk stories and witnessed events (with mythic interpretation). We see attempts of the darkest-skin people to break free spiritually in a culture where skin tone defines class. All of this happens in Augustown, the poor section of Kingston.

Ma Taffy has raised three girls and now the child of the last, a six year old boy, Kaia. He is being raised Rastafarian by his mother, Gina, and one day his teacher becomes enraged with his appearance. On his return home, sobbing, Ma Taffy tells him the story of the Flying Preacherman, Master Bedward, whom Ma had seen levitating toward the heavens when she was a child.

Ah magical realism vs the power of stories and memory. Miller has much to say about this throughout the book. These people live on their stories which repeat and repeat through generations. Those who attempt to alter or rise above their history seem to risk everything. There is a feeling of darkness behind the words that speaks of brutality, racial and class divides, a long history. Myth and the gift of stories can be a trap to hold one inside this history or a ladder with a way out. I may have to read this again to better understand Miller's views.

Miller is a poet as well as a prose writer, and it shows in his work. I recommend this book highly with the caveat that it is not a straightforward, linear novel. Thanks to The World's Literature group for leading me to this book.

Gumble's Yard says

> *Call it what you will – "history", or just another "old-time story" – there really was a time in Jamaica, 1920 to be precise when a great thing was about to happen but did not happen. Though people across the length and breadth of the island believed it was going to happen, though they desperately needed it to happen, it did not. But the story as it is recorded and as it is whispered today is only one version. It is the story as told …. by journalist, by governors, by people who sat on wide verandas overlooking the city, by people who were determined that the great thing should not happen.*

This book resembles the Booker prize winning "A History of Seven Killings" in a number of ways which go beyond just its Jamaican setting: a Jamaican born author now teaching creative writing at an Anglo-University; part fiction/part historical, set across many decades; based around a key figure in both Jamaican history and in the Rastafarian movement; ; blending Jamaican patios into the text; examining the interactions between the Island's black population, its gangs, its rulers and the forces of Babylon.

This book covers two different historical periods:

Firstly: the early 1920s and the rise and fall (in the literal as well as figurative sense) of the charismatic revivalist preacher Alexander Bedward and his clash with the white political and business establishment. This Paris Review article gives particularly useful background to Bedward and to the "great thing" mentioned in the opening quote of my review (albeit one which, despite its sympathy to its subject, could be said to represent the "only one version" described in the quote:

https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2...

Secondly: some 60 years later in the early 1980s when a dramatic incident (a stressed teacher hugely over-reacting to perceived insolence from a 6 year old from a Rastafarian family, and cutting off his dreadlocks) unleashes dramatic consequences (*) on the some of those who witnessed the 1920s incidents (and their families).

(*) or as it is known in Jamaican patios, the autoclaps – later defined in the book (after a discursion into etymology) as

"Autoclaps: the collapse of the heart; a small apocalypse; the afterclap"
(http://www.dictionary.com/browse/afte...)

The book is told by a (more than usual) omniscient narrator who directly intervenes in the story to address the reader, to give historical context or to provide interpretation of what happened in both stories – only as the book ends do we discover the identity of the narrator, their own role in the 1980s story and the link between their own fate and that of Bedward in the 1920s story - a fate which in this telling challenges the "one version" and challenges the reader's own prejudice.

> *Look, this isn't magic realism. This is not another story about superstitious island people and their primitive island people and their primitive beliefs. No. You don't get off that easy. This is a story people as real as you are, and as real as I once was before I became a bodiless thing floating up here in the sky. You may as well stop to consider a more urgent question; not whether you believe in this story or not, but whether this story is about the kinds of people you have never taken the time to believe in.*

Highly recommended.

Lulu says

Simply put, this was a really good story, told in a really good way.

Chrissie says

Andrew Bedward (1848 – 1930) was one of the most successful preachers of Jamaican Revivalism. His followers became Garveyites and then later Rastafarians. They fought against colonial and white oppression. Born in St. Andrew's Parish north of Kingston, Jamaica, it is in this same parish in which August Town exists today, the Augustown of the book's title.

When the GR book description states that Ma Taffy "recalls the story of the flying preacherman", it is Andrew Bedward that she is speaking of. When Ma Taffy's grandnephew, Kaia, comes home bawling because his teacher has unfairly and without provocation cut off his dreadlocks, it is the tale of "the flying preacherman" that she tells. It is 1982 when Ma Taffy tells her tale to Kaia about Bedward, a tale tied to her own childhood memories decades earlier.

Generation after generation, history is repeated. Still today poverty, violence, murder and gang feuds wrack August Town. "Every day contains all of history." is a quote from the book. This is a book about opposition. It is a book not just about the past but the present too. It is a book about people's need to believe they can rise above their present situation. But look at history, look at where we are today in the 21st Century. Go ahead, do it, search Google. What is happening in August Town today, and by that I mean the last few years? Violence and murders and poverty are all too prevalent still.

So what **is** the point of our telling our children of the past, which Ma Taffy insists we must do, if history just repeats itself over and over again. This is a book about the underbelly life of Jamaican cities in the past and still today. What we see is not pretty, but it is real.

The lyrical and oh so wise lines found in this book end up irritating me for just the same reason - the incongruity between the lines and the story. The lines are pretty and we may want them to be true, but they are not always true and certainly not in this story. The pretty lines do not fit here in this book.

So let's look at some of the lines, I am speaking of. We are given lines such as these:

"Look, this isn't magic realism. This is not another story about superstitious island people and their primitive beliefs. No. You don't get off that easy. This is a story about people as real as you are, and as real as I once was before I became a bodiless thing floating up here in the sky. You might as well consider a more urgent question; not whether you believe this story or not, but whether this story is about the kinds of people you have never taken the time to believe in."

"Every language is a storehouse of existence."

“The great philosophical question goes: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear, does it make a sound? But this is a troubling question, exalting one kind of being above all others. What then of the ears of snakes, or wood frogs, or mice, or bugs? Do they not count? What then of grass, of stone, of earth? Does their witness not matter? If a man flies in Jamaica, and only the poor will admit to seeing it, has he still flown? ….... Always, always, there are witnesses.”

“And now everybody get the understanding that Gilzene did get. A man cannot rise on his own. Not even a powerful man like Alexander Bedward. Him did need us. Him did need Augustown. It was we who had to push him up into the sky. It was we who had to show our faith to the governor and everybody else.”

Some lines are lyrical. Some thought-provoking. Some pique your interest. I like these lines just as much as you do. The lines give us hope, but the events of the story do not. So even if I like the lines, I wonder what they are doing here.

Beware, the raunchy, vulgar language of inner city, slum gangs is drawn too. Some of the images drawn are exceedingly disturbing.

These lines I liked. They are spoken by Ma Taffy to her youngest niece, the mother of Kaia:
“To make a fool fuck you is one thing, but to make a fuck fool you is an even worse thing. Don’t make no man turn you into a fool.”

Words are used in ways that leave you guessing what is being implied:

“She knew that for people to be people, they had to believe in something. They had to believe that something was worth believing in. And they had to carry that thing in their hearts and guard it, for once you believed in something, in anything at all, Babylon would try its damnedest to find out what that thing was, and they would try to take it from you.”

What is meant by Babylon here? You have an idea, but you need to know more. Waiting for that information gives tension to the prose and this pulls a reader in.

What I am saying is that while I definitely do like the lines, they pull me in different directions. I am left unsettled by them.

The story goes off in different directions; it feels disjointed until you see where it all ends. Beside the “floating preacherman” and the “shorn dreadlocks” stories, there is an all too co-incidental love story. A death. A birth. A dissatisfied but affluent wife and husband in the wealthy Beverly Hills community of Kingstown. Moreover, the connection drawn between some of the tales stretches believability. The principle at Kaia’s school (view spoiler). Here reality flies out the window.

I liked the prose. I did. At the same time the prose carries the reader in opposite directions, which is confusing. The link between some of the stories is tenuous. What is the author saying by tying these different stories together? Is it that still, in the Jamaica of the 1980s, it remained impossible rise above one’s class? As a depiction of life of the have-nots, in Jamaica in the 1980s, the book is good.

Let’s go back to Bedward. Wiki tells us that “In1921 he and 800 followers marched in to Kingston “to do battle with his enemies.” This however didn’t result in him flying to heaven. Bedward and his followers were arrested and he was sent to mental asylum for the second time where he remained to the end of his life.”

The audiobook is narrated by Dona Croll. She reads with a thick Jamaican patois. Words are difficult to decipher. Nouns can be used instead of adjectives, pronouns instead of nouns and verbs can be missing. While this may accurately depict how the characters most probably would speak, it is not easy to follow on audio. That is the bad, but the good is that what you hear feels utterly real. This **is** what these people would say, and this is exactly how it would sound. Pulled in both directions, I have given the narration three stars. I did like it.

The book's lines of wisdom contrast alarmingly with reality. Reading this book left me unsettled.

Jill says

What is Augustown about? Here's the author, speaking through one of his characters: "Look, this isn't magic realism. This is not another story about superstitious island people and their primitive beliefs. No. You don't get off that easy. This is a story about people as real as you are, and as real as I once was before I became a bodiless thing floating up here in the sky."

Intrigued? How could you not be? This book is simply magnificent, a testimony to where the creative mind can take us and an affirmation of why I read. The characters are fresh and original, from the self-named Ma Taffy who was blinded by rats but still sees plenty, to the sniveling and self-important schoolteacher, Mr. Saint-Josephs, who takes it upon himself one day to cut off the dreadlocks of a little boy named Kaia – a name that literally means "home."

Why does the act of cutting off dreadlocks matter…and how does it lead to something that Jamaicans call the "autoclaps"…and what we know as "calamity"? Kei Miller, in prose that soars and captivates, seamlessly weaves in the history of the Rastafarian heritage, particularly that of a charismatic preacher named Alexander Bedward with the ability to levitate. The flying preacherman, as he was called, becomes not just a metaphor but a symbol. As Kei Miller writes, "You may as well stop to consider a more urgent question; not whether you believe in this story or not, but whether this story is about the kinds of people you have never taken the time to believe in."

To really understand one's sense of self, Mr. Miller suggests, you need to have something to believe in. And uncovering what that "something" is challenging when the people are subjugated, disrespected, and unempowered. Otherwise, the only way to "fly away to Zion" is by dying, and indeed, our narrator (whose identity is only unveiled at the end), has had to suffer that fate.

This is a stunning book, picking up the Kingstown patois and combining it with a lyrical poetry. It is so convincingly written, so beautifully rendered, that I cannot imagine it not making my Top Ten list for 2017.

·Karen· says

Utterly magnificent.

Epigraph:

August Town, in the hills of St Andrew, Jamaica is thought to have been named from the fact that freedom

came to the enslaved people of this country on 'August Mawnin' - the 1st August, 1838. August Town later became notable because at this place a prophet, whose name was Bedward, arose. He had thousands of followers, but outdid himself when he proclaimed that he was God and could fly.

From The Dictionary of Place-Names in Jamaica.

Stories bounce against each other like echoes.

Look, this isn't magic realism. This is not another story about superstitious island people and their primitive beliefs. You don't get off that easy. This is a story about people as real as you are, and as real as I once was before I became a bodiless thing floating up here in the sky. You may as well stop to consider a more urgent question; not whether you believe in this story or not, but whether this story is about the kinds of people you have never taken the time to believe in.

Jan says

So, so good -- powerful, fascinating and ultimately heartbreaking story of Jamaica in the 20th century, with brilliant storytelling and language. Also a wonderful audio book thanks to Miller's exceptional writing matched with Dona Croll's narration, although unless your ear is used to Jamaican vernacular and accents, you might want to do what I did and listen to the first half hour or so twice before going through the entire book.
