



THE ABYSSINIAN CONTORTIONIST

Hope, friendship and other circus acts

by David Carlin

Some topics to consider while reading *The Abyssinian Contortionist*:

- Cultural difference and encounter
- Family and friendship
- Asylum seeking
- Freedom
- The notions of 'juggling' and 'contorting'
- Different modes of storytelling

Sosina Wogayehu learnt to do flips and splits at the age of six, sitting in her parents' lounge room in Addis Ababa. Twenty-five years later, Sosina has conjured herself a new life in Australia as a professional contortionist and circus performer. Sosina is able to juggle worlds and stories, and by luck she has a friend, David Carlin, who is a writer.

Following his acclaimed memoir *Our Father Who Wasn't There*, David brings us his 'not-me' book, travelling to Addis Ababa where he discovers ways of living so different to his own and confronts his Western fantasies and fears. Through Sosina's story he shows us that, with risk and enough momentum, life – whom we befriend, where we end up, how we come to see ourselves – is never predictable.



About David Carlin

David Carlin is a Melbourne-based writer, creative artist, teacher and researcher. David is co-director of the nonfictionLab at RMIT University. He has previously written and directed for theatre, film and circus, and since 2008 has led the *Circus Oz Living Archive* project.

- 1 Sosina suggests that the book be titled *The Abyssinian Contortionist* instead of *The Ethiopian Contortionist* because then people will think of more than just famine and starving children (p. 13-14). What did you think of this statement? How does the word 'Abyssinian' resonate differently to 'Ethiopian'?
- 2 Carlin describes *The Abyssinian Contortionist* as his 'not me' book, however he then goes on to say that 'it would also feel wrong to pretend I wasn't involved, to pretend that telling, making and sharing stories across cultures isn't complicated' (p. 17). In what ways is the book both a 'me' and a 'not me' book? How does David's involvement shape Sosina's story? And what does writing such a joint memoir allow that a straight biography would not?
- 3 The prologue depicts "the cigarette seller" trading on the streets of Addis Ababa, her necessarily covert business practices, and her first savings plan, or *ekube*. The chapter is written in the present tense and with an unnamed Sosina. How does this introduction, both in terms of content and style, frame the rest of the book?
- 4 *The Abyssinian Contortionist* explores the politics of cultural encounter and 'trac[es] the contours of th[e] gap' (p. 16) between 'First World' and 'Third World' countries. Discuss any cultural insights the book afforded you, as well as any reflections you had with regard to the "chasm of difference" (p. 16) that guides David's narrative.
- 5 Sosina's cousin Gaito asks David: "why is it so much harder to go to Australia than to American or Canada or Britain or other countries?" (p. 203). What message or perspective does the book contribute to the asylum seeker conversation? How did you react to numerous asylum rejections that peppered the text and the depiction of the Department of Immigration?
- 6 'Giving and receiving' is a key theme in the book; there are many instances in which David and Sosina must consider the effects of the transferral of objects, money or intangible goods. In what ways does *The Abyssinian Contortionist* complicate the notion of generosity? What emphasis does it place on the giver, the receiver, the gift and its attendant connotations and/or consequences?