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Burn My Heart

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Media type:

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To my shame, my seriously limited knowledge of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya during the 1950s hardly extended beyond boyhood memories of terrorism in 'one of our colonies'. To the credit of Beverley Naidoo's writing in this, her latest novel, I have been roused to remedy that ignorance in some small part.

Drawn from Kenya's major ethnic grouping, the Kikuyu (who had been impoverished and marginalised by white settlers), the Mau Maus were intent on reclaiming their land and freedom from British rule. The British Government's response was to declare a state of emergency ? during which 11,000 rebels were killed. That's the official figure: it may have been 25,000. Just 32 white settlers lost their lives.

Such is the background to this new novel: the story of two boys growing up on the same farm. Mathew is rich, white and the bwana's son. Mugo is poor, black and the kitchen toto (boy). Unwittingly caught up in the situation, they find their friendship and loyalty painfully tested by tribal pressures and prejudices (exerted by both the Kikuyu and the white supremacists) and by the sheer arbitrariness of events.

Some readers may be daunted by the Kikuyu and Swahili words although all are glossed at the back of the book and all contribute neatly to its realism and credibility. Indeed, it is a highly effective evocation of that period when the wind of change began to blow through Africa. Above all, it is a good story, economically written, never melodramatic but frequently exciting and often deeply moving.

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