

## ***Truth, Suffering, & Growth: "A Liar's Tale," by André Coleman***

**A Book Review in the Arts Section of OpEdNews.com**

December 10, 2005

What if every lie you ever told became a reality, as long as someone believed it? Money, sex, love, you name it—all is yours if you simply master the skill of deceit. No longer would you have to bother with the truth and the sacrifices it entails; then again, from suffering can come growth. And a world built upon lies, like a house of cards, inevitably comes crashing down upon itself.

Those are the central themes in "A Liar's Tale," the wonderfully inventive, thought-provoking first novel by André Coleman, who, as a journalist (the city reporter for the Pasadena Weekly), has dedicated his life to a search for the truth (one of many delicious ironies infusing this story).

The setting is modern-day America, whose rhythms of life and speech—from the forbidding back alleys of homelessness and the claustrophobic confines of prison to the working class apartments of New York City and the oak-paneled courtrooms of justice—Coleman apparently effortlessly captures with veracity and immediacy.

The central character is Scott Hampton, a young black man originally from an upper-middle-class family. His father is as hard and cold as the marble floors in their spacious home. His

mother is warm and supportive, yet in the shadow of the father. His older brother, Kevin, is the apple of his parents' eye, successful in all he does. And Scott, the chronic underachiever, has become a habitual liar (although there is more to the genesis of his prevarication, as we will learn).

One evening, Scott sneaks out of the house and into the park, where he chances upon a mysterious, cold-eyed figure, the Rastafarian, in the first of several appearances throughout the story. He appreciates Scott's sense of suffocation in his real life and appeals to his overly developed sense of fantasy: With the gift of some very exotic sticks of incense ("truth and lies"), the Rasta man offers to make all of Scott's dreams come true. Fearing perhaps a Faustian bargain—which indeed will be the case—Scott runs back to his dysfunctional home; after watching his hero Batman on TV, hidden from the world by his mask as Scott is by his lies, he lights the incense (or, rather, it lights itself) and he falls back in bed.

Over the years, his father became a judge; his mother, a published professor; his brother, a professional football player; and Scott, an artist who didn't want to suffer for his art. Living in New York City, as far away from his family as possible, Scott becomes a technician in a

hospital (where there has been a series of "mercy killings" of elderly patients). Living in an apartment, he shares brotherly banter, laughs, and thought with "his boys," Darius and Rich, and love with his long-suffering girlfriend, Dorene, who never knows when to believe her boyfriend: Scott is as uncommitted to the truth as he is to her.

At this point it is worth mentioning that Coleman has said: "I don't write heroes and villains. Instead I try and write flawed people." As with everything else in "A Liar's Tale," Coleman has created characters whose imperfections only heighten their reality.

Which only heightens the believability and, thus, the impact of the unreality that is about to come.

Scott has tempted fate far too long, his words in effect playing God, by creating false, new identities and histories for people in his life every time he has gotten someone to believe that he couldn't be at work because his brother was in the hospital, or he was worth sleeping with because he owned a Porsche, or he couldn't turn in his school report because his dog ate his homework. The day of reckoning finally arrives.

In the course of a day, because of his lies, Scott loses his job, his girl, and almost everything he owns. "I was suffering, and I hated the suffering," Scott laments, "It's fate's joke, and once fate finds a sucker it doesn't let up and it keeps laughing at you even after you've been defeated."

Digging through what is left of his belongings, searching for his emergency cash to make his way, tail between his legs, back home, Scott comes across the mysterious incense. "Truth and lies," he thinks to himself, as the incense ignites itself and fills the room with colorful smoke.

Scott arrives at the train station, but you can't go home again. Rather, from this point onward, Scott embarks on a Kafkaesque adventure in a world turned upside-down, where every lie he has ever told that anyone has ever believed has come true, with profound, often disastrous consequences for all concerned. ("It's like throwing a rock in a pond and watching the ripples it creates.")

Far be it from this reviewer to reveal the intrigues that threaten to overwhelm our increasingly enlightened and repentant central character; but suffice it to say that Coleman has crafted a marvelously creative, modern-day morality tale, involving the gain and loss of all the wealth and love one could hope to enjoy, solving a murder mystery created (appropriately enough) by deception within deception, and utterly dripping with irony (For example, at one point Scott is hooked up to a lie detector to prove that he truly believes that his lies have become true).

Ultimately, "A Liar's Tale" is a classically heroic tale, of growth through adversity; indeed, it examines that very premise by standing it on its head! Again, Mr. Coleman has written a decidedly intelligent, wondrously inventive novel, whose elements of fantasy as well as reality work only because he describes every

scene and portrays every character—most especially his or her very individual manner of speech—with a clarity and attention to detail that place you right there with them (a quite shocking realization in the very first scene).

But at the core of the book is the conscience of Scott, asking questions of others or simply of the fates that each of us asks, often in the most trying times of our lives, but rarely have answered—especially "Why does God let people suffer?" In the end, Scott concludes: "Suffering is the road to revelation. We travel on it to realize our dreams. When we lie to make the journey easier, we veer off the road."

"A Liar's Tale" is a road well worth traveling.