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Alpha

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This unforgettable collaboration between award winning novelist Bessora and award winning graphic artist Barroux follows the harrowing journey of Alpha, a cabinet maker from Cote d'Ivoire, who wants to join his sister-in-law in Paris. His wife and son have already left for France but he has not heard from them. Refused a visa, he has no choice but to pay traffickers. And so begins a heart breaking trek across the African continent, always on the edge of survival, at risk from both traffickers and border guards, turning this way and that, aiming to reach a place on the North African coast from which he can reach Europe. Sometimes he takes temporary work to get more money to pay the traffickers or buy a vehicle for the next stage. He spends time corralled in makeshift camps where each migrant nationality has its own ghetto. Along the way he makes and loses friends: Adebi, who takes to prostitution, contracts Aids and dies in childbirth; the boy Augustin, who disappears one night in a transit camp; and Antoine whose dream of playing for Barcelona will never be realised.

Alpha tells his own story as if he is updating us from day to day. His matter-of-fact manner heightens our sense of the appalling threats and dangers that he and his companions face and we might not endure. He begins resolutely upbeat, referring to his journey as an adventure, and throughout he is resourceful, mending broken-down vehicles and, when they finally pack up, stripping them for parts that can be sold. Everywhere, he shows the photo of his wife and son, ever hopeful that someone will recognise them. But, gradually, you feel that all that has happened to him has drained his spirit. And, drifting towards the Canaries on the last leg of the journey, he feels 'Life is weary of what you've inflicted on it, and it wants to abandon you. Life has had enough of you, enough of the water, enough of the sun, enough of the boat.' In an afterword, we learn that Alpha does reach France and finds his sister-in-law but not his wife and son. Wandering homeless around Paris, he is then deported back to Africa.

In a fine translation by Sarah Ardizzone, this is a powerful tale of people whom some would call 'economic' migrants to distinguish them from 'genuine' refugees; as if that somehow made them less deserving or their experience less harrowing. Bessora's text combines both the immediacy of documentary and the emotional insight and empathetic force of fiction. Barroux's illustrations are mainly in black felt tip and wash, using colour very sparingly, but sometimes tellingly, as in the bright clothes of the tourists in Africa or the bloodied face of a beaten migrant. It captures the vulnerability, fear and possible degradation of a journey in the shadows but also the hope of a better life that keeps the

migrants struggling on. **Alpha** is published in the UK by a new imprint supported by [Amnesty International](#) [4] and other partners. A winner of the **English Pen Award** and the **Prix Medecins Sans Frontieres** in France, it is absolutely unmissable.

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