

A Practical Guide to Levitation: Stories

José Eduardo Agualusa

Translated from the Portuguese by Daniel Hahn

Archipelago, 2023, 256 pages. Approx R211 for Kindle; paperback about R360

– Review by Jacqueline Nyathi

Mozambique-based writer José Eduardo Agualusa and his wonderful translator, Daniel Hahn, have a way with words, the fantastical and the surreal. They bring ghosts to life with dry humour, and immerse us in alternate cosmologies, showing us other ways the world might be.

Agualusa's treatment of Angola's history is always slightly farcical, very humorous, and also quite sad, which seems appropriate to histories of liberation movements in Africa.

Agualusa's boundless imagination and distinctive style are on full display in his wonderful collection, *A Practical Guide to Levitation*.

In the opening story Borges wakes up in an endless banana plantation – has he died and gone to heaven – or hell? In another, a man offers to teach a party guest how to float off the ground. Levitation is also the theme in a later story about a potential Angolan political leader. Old liberation war heroes and famous authors are a frequent theme, as we see when a pensive despot muses on how he got to where he is.

Also richly present is Agualusa's particular brand of the surreal. A dog-charmer trains dogs to help him swindle people; a bird-charmer first uses his skills in a war; a baobab offends the sensibilities of a modest public; and laughing lizards are offered for sale at the side of a highway.

Open To The Breeze is a beautiful and evocative story about a place that's trapped in time. There's a delightful story about butterflies and Queen Nzinga. Finally, in a thoughtful, although light, examination of Jonas Savimbi's myth and legacy, we meet Savimbi's daughter.

All of the stories are quite short, making this the perfect book to read whenever you want to take a break from the ordinary – real and boring life – to escape into the fantastical.

If you need an escape from reality, the stories of Agualusa are outside with the engine running: Get in!

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