

## The Garbage King - Elizabeth Laird

Book review by Johanna and Marie-France

Elizabeth Laird's novel is about two boys in Addis Ababa, both runaways. The first, Mamo, runs away from slavery, physical abuse and starvation. The second, Dani, runs away from a life of privilege, a stern father and the prospect of living with a sterner guardian. The two boys meet in the graveyard where they are sheltering and enter into a compact to help each other survive on the streets. This compact develops into friendship and is the vehicle that allows both boys to gain self-confidence and find their strengths.

One of the novel's strengths is the strong characters in the book. The two heroes of the story are quite different as a result of their very different backgrounds. But even the minor characters are well constructed, for example Yacob, the boyfriend of Mamo's sister, Tiggist. To Tiggist he is the image of gentleness but, when provoked, he is actually quite fierce. Another example is the wife of the farmer who has enslaved Mamo. Although she is not named, she seems like a real person, not wholly bad or good. Although she feeds her own children and, at the beginning seems to let Mamo starve, she relents and shares the little bit of food she has reserved for herself with Mamo. Merga and Mrs. Faridah's brother in law are the only characters who are completely wicked.

Another strength of the novel is that it tells us about a culture and a country that has not yet been the subject of many children's novels. Therefore it was disappointing that although Elizabeth Laird is very good at describing the people we meet, she fails to give us a strong visual impression of the landscape and the cityscape of Addis Ababa.

I would give this book 9.7 incheras out of 10 incheras.