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Fiction

Tracy Chevalier
NEW BOY

192pp. Hogarth Shakespeare. £12.99.
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“Because I can” is Ian’s motive for evil in *New Boy*, Tracy Chevalier’s transposition of Shakespeare’s *Othello* from 1600s Venice to a middle-school playground in 1970s Washington, DC. Despite the difference of setting, Chevalier’s novel is a surprisingly close retelling of its tragic ancestor. Osei – “O” as he asks his new classmates to call him – joins the school a month before the end of term. His father is a Ghanaian diplomat, and O has moved schools numerous times, studying in Rome, New York and London, just as Othello fought in Rhodes and Cyprus. He is regarded with suspicion by his Waspish playmates. Ian – Chevalier’s take on Iago – is particularly enraged by the new boy’s presence; he manoeuvres O through spasms of adolescent jealousy by prodding him to believe that Dee, the golden-haired girl O asks to “go with” on his very first day, is more interested in the “appealing face and bright blue eyes” of Casper.

The tightness of Chevalier’s version is admirable. The action takes place over one day, split into five acts, from before school through morning recess and lunchtime to afternoon play and after school. She is careful to make this a book full of movement and observation. In the morning Dee watches “[t]he spinning and the stillness”. Her friend Mimi (Emilia’s counterpart) sees “the playground and its players as strings randomly crisscrossing all over it”. When Dee and O are alone together, they act “as if there were no audience but the two of them”.

Rather than Desdemona’s famous handkerchief, a gaudy strawberry pencilcase is the prop that, to borrow Shakespeare, turns Dee’s “virtue into pitch”. Iago’s “hot as monkeys” becomes children making “hooting noises like monkeys” when O passes them. Ian, too, sees “the poison . . . taking hold”, where Iago observes, “the Moor already changes with

my poison”.

The plot works terrifyingly well in a playground. Fifteen-year-olds are brutal, especially when fired by the conflicting aches and desires of puberty. They absorb adult habit – here, the ingrained racism of Nixon-era suburban America – and reproduce it with innocence. Prior knowledge of *Othello*’s ending makes the final act, played out over monkey bars on a jungle gym, all the worse: such adult consequences to the actions of those so young makes the outcome breathtakingly sad.

ALICE HANCOCK