

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to *Xenopolis*

Books like the Lord of the Rings trilogy and The Song of Fire and Ice series, cemented in the minds of millions across the globe, the stereotypical underpinnings of the Fantasy genre, with their movie and TV adaptations reaching many more who have not read the original text and come to fantasy with ideas brought from the cultural zeitgeist. This style of fantasy, none as High Fantasy or Secondary World Fantasy has become the byword for fantasy of all kinds, so much so that when asked about the novel, people had Lord of the Rings on their minds before I could gently correct them. High Fantasy, is escapist fair. One could argue that all novels are escapist, but High Fantasy in particular, a world completely different from my own, populated by flora and fauna unique to the setting (often a pastiche of many medieval European societies), is built to take the reader and immerse them in a magical world completely of the authors making, with fictional histories and battles coming off every page.

Xenopolis, is not set in a secondary world. It is set in a London, just like our own, with buses and cabs, tower blocks and townhouses, coffee shops and corner stores. It is an Urban Fantasy, a tale set in our own world but with marked differences. *Xenopolis* is based in the real world with its own share of magic but is essentially escapist in a different sense, a flight into fantasy, but grounded in reality. When I wrote it, I was determined that it wouldn't just be a fantasy novel, but a love letter to the city that raised me, London. That London can also be a place of magic, with its own internal rules and places of immense beauty and power, equal to Isengard and King's Landing. It features our main character, Dolapo as a victim of the knife crime that makes a feature on the news with worrying regularity. He is resurrected, by a wizard who in the mode of High Fantasy has incredible magic powers, but with an urban twist, is an admirer of vintage Chanel dresses and introduces him to the underbelly of a city he thought he knew his whole life.

Before winning the inaugural TLC Chapter & Verse Scholarship, I had been digging away at my craft in snatches of time between odd jobs, not sure I was good enough, or worthy of producing work of any note. Since being a part of the scheme, I have achieved a confidence in my work, that I had never imagined with my background. I would like to give a special shout out to Joe Sedgwick and Ellah Wakatama OBE for all their support and encouragement of my work, without them *Xenopolis* would not be the work it has become.

Extract from *Xenopolis* by Daniel Adediran

Dolapo knew he was going to die. Not in any vague, distant way, but in a manner quite acute and not at all of his own making. The premonition clung to him like a second skin, weighing him down into a slough of despondency that threatened to consume him at every step. He brushed his teeth, showered and put on a worn pair of Levi 501 jeans and gleaming white Nike Air Force 1s before packing his camera equipment into his car. The radio blared and for an instant he thought he heard a voice call his name, the moment was gone with a turn of the knob and he continued driving.

The last time he was on Killarney estate, notorious gangland territory in North-east London, his cousin Akinola had been arrested on it for the possession of drugs. Akinola, or "Akh" a diminutive of his name and an Arabic term of brotherhood, had played the role of a brother in Dolapo's life. A man of single-minded purposefulness and a fearlessness which had come from seeing the worst life in the city could offer. He was a shield, a buffer between Dolapo and a life on the roads, one that had both encouraged and bolstered his younger cousins dreams away from the tower blocks they had grown in. But to be a shield meant taking darts and the prison stretch, with time off for good behaviour, had been the arrows of misfortune Akinola had borne with the dignity becoming of an OG. The times Dolapo was shooed back into the house during a visit, when the tension on the estate was high, the times his cousin was elated at the amateurish angle shots he had taken when he got a new camera, brought a wry smile to his lips as he drove to the estate. Even the relentless teasing and boyish bullying that had left Dolapo with a bruised ego and arms lost their sting with the balm of nostalgia. Dolapo would reap benefits from this shoot. He needed new SD cards and sound cards for his camera and his cousin provided them for him, the weight of his request only lightened by an offer to shoot a music video, a gritty interpretation of life on Killarney estate highlighted by UK Drill beats and Kawasaki motorcycles. Dolapo had shot music videos before and doing something professional for his cousin seemed like a great way to give back to someone who had so much taken from him.

Dolapo practiced his tough-guy demeanour in the mirror, banishing the nostalgia trip. This was not pure altruism though, Akinola was willing to pay his cousin and rent was due. He puzzled over the meaning of his name on the radio as his car

pulled up to the opening of Killarney, a quadrangle surrounded by imposing red brick, grime windowed tower blocks rising into the sky like pleading arms. In the far end, children played in the adventure playground and in the center, a whole bunch of men and women, bedecked in high fashion and low narcotics, milled together under the sound of speakers.

"Yo D!"

"Yo Akh, what's good? Tings in the boot."

"Calm. The mandem wanna run it now and you're late fam. Slackin."

"We still got a few hours to pattern the ting, don't stress."

"It's you that wanted to take this video shit serious. You know if you flop this aunty's gonna be lookin down from heaven wanting to slap your ratid."

"Yo where's this energy comin' from? Couple minutes out the pen and your already talkin about slappings?"

Akinola embraced his wiry cousin, and his extensive muscle mass and his constrictor grip forced Dolapo to cry out and laugh simultaneously. The music, a sound of Chicago origin with stylised criminal references and complex drum and melodic patterns, caused a stir in the group. The men, huddled in semicircles around the large speaker system, chins touching chests out of an inborne habit to hide their faces and as a method to more deeply feel the music, nodded their heads to the rhythm, long corn rows bobbing to the time of the drumbeat, rapping favourite lyrics and putting hands to mouths, with phrases hollered in appreciation of bars of music as tough as ones of steel. Some of the women, either hired for the shoot, or drawn by Akinola's groups allure, went over to the speaker system to refill their glasses, or to grab a joint from the men enjoying the music. They otherwise stayed grouped together, long wigs and braids sashaying, bound by idle chitchat or an on-site Instagram Live stream. The men were more bombastic, the pushing and shoving and loud laughter a world away from the images they were to portray on camera. The girls, though no less joyous, were more demure, extensive displays of emotion and strenuous movement would ruin the hair and makeup done to prep for the scene. The sense of menace in the air was tempered by brandy and cannabis. Dolapo was not in danger as he was a cherished relative, not a stranger, or even worse, an 'opp'. The men and women that flanked his cousin nodded their heads as he introduced himself to them

with a touch of fists and gestured to where they should be positioned. He had to capture the vibe he had seen when the music came on, the lightning in a bottle. Electricity flowed from the assorted members of the group through the camera and into Dolapo's eyes. Magic, it could be called nothing else.

"Cool," he said as he adjusted the lights and the reflectors "We only got a couple hours of daylight, let's run it once."

There were a couple of indignant faces. Akinola waved his hands in an 'allow him guys' manner and the group got in position between the lights and the cameras. A Mercedes AMG crept up slowly to the quadrangle. Dolapo paid it little notice as he began to adjust his cameras. The assortment of Fendi puffers and tight skirts gyrated to the sound of the music and his cousin began to rap for the camera, enhancing the gangster persona that he had long since left behind at Her Majesty's prisons. A second car pulled up as they began a different take for the second verse. The smaller, pitch-black Golf GTI parked beside the Mercedes at the edge of the square. Underneath the sound of the speakers, both engines went quiet.

One of Akinola's crew stopped his performance, went over to him and whispered in his ear. He looked over at the two vehicles, whispered back into the ear of the man who informed him of the intrusion. Akinola broke from the pack and went over to him.

"Yo D. Pack your shit and dus'. It's about to get hot."

"But the light, Akh. Besides how am I supposed to pack up and— "

"They caught us slippin' Dolapo," Akinola growled. "Fuck off. Now."

A round of hoots came from the edge of the square. The speed at which everyone reacted was frightening. The aggression in the air changed into a physical substance, a shawl, armour wrapped around the bodies of the opposing sides that were about to go to war. Dolapo noticed that the back window of the AMG was wound down and as eight men jumped out of the two cars, one stayed in the back of the larger vehicle. Dolapo couldn't place it at first glance, but the man who remained looked...*ill*. Akinola and his group eyed the intruders, all draped in black, from their balaclavas to the puffers and tracksuits. They were decked in weapons, baseball bats and chains, and knives that gleamed like hoarfrost on winter windows.

"What!" one of the men in black said.

"What?" Akinola said.

"It's on pussies. You lot haffi get dead" the first man in black, a spokesmen, said.

"There's only a couple of you man. No straps neither, or you woulda buss shots." A member of Akinola's crew laughed.

"That's enough to kill all of you," the spokesman said.

"I'm not tryna do another bird because of you wasteman." Akinola said.

"I ain't worried about jail dickhead. You Killarney man need to come off the field."

"Do something then!" Akinola said.

The window of the AMG would back up and the fleeting image of the man in the car disappeared behind a dark tint. The group of assailants inched closer to Akinola and his crew and with every inch, the tension grew. Dolapo, was frozen in place. Rooted by fear or courage, he did not know. His camera was in hand and the adrenaline that coursed through his body caused him to tremble. A pigeon cooed. The first of the group of assailants lashed out at Akinola with a blade as long as a forearm.

About the Writer

Daniel Adediran was born in London, England a town in which buildings and storefronts shift like the tides, pieces of wild magic ride the underground trains and monsters hide in plain sight. At the age of 19, he dropped out of a prestigious university where he was pursuing a prestigious degree and went down the totally secure and profitable route of writing poetry. With some success in the Spoken Word scene, especially on the Haven't You Heard About Spoken Word Circuit in North London, he spent the next ten years away from spoken word poetry, after some disillusionment with his skill as a writer and his ability to make what is known in fashionable circles as a 'decent living'. He has worked several interesting jobs, including as a Scheduler for a popular post-production company, a dogsbody doing everything from opening up and shutting down a historic building, working as a tour guide in said historic building, creating and teaching writing classes to the elderly and curating an exhibition on the East India Company as well as bits and pieces of freelance writing, constantly honing his craft, writing and listening and loving life, until the seeds of his current novel Xenopolis took root in his mind. You can find him on Twitter [@Sour_Daniel](https://twitter.com/Sour_Daniel)

