

# Gabriel's Moon

"I enjoyed it hugely. Boyd is  
one of my favorite authors—  
he never disappoints."

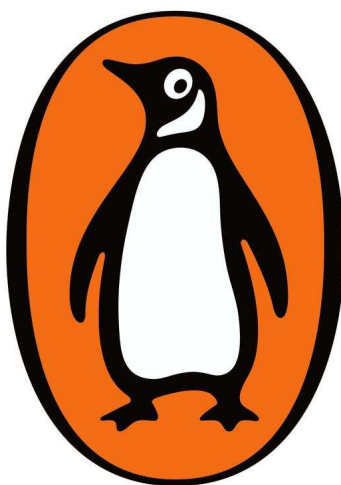
—Kate Atkinson



A novel

# William Boyd

Author of  
*Restless*



## About the Author

William Boyd was born in 1952 in Accra, Ghana, and grew up there and in Nigeria. He is the author of sixteen highly acclaimed, bestselling novels and five collections of stories. *Any Human Heart* was longlisted for the Booker Prize and adapted into a TV series with Channel 4. In 2005, Boyd was awarded the CBE. He is married and divides his time between London and south-west France.

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William Boyd

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GABRIEL'S MOON

*A Novel*



*For Susan*



Lepers of the Moon  
all magically diseased  
we come among you  
innocent  
of our luminous sores.

**Mina Loy**

From a certain point on, there is no turning back.  
This is the point that needs to be reached.

**Franz Kafka**

PROLOGUE

Oxfordshire

*1936*

Gabriel watched closely as his mother lit the night light beside his bed. This ritual was important to him, signifying order and calm. The wick of the stubby candle ignited and she carefully placed the glass globe over it and blew out the match she had used. The moon – his night light was a glass moon-globe – shone with a lambent, shifting pulse from the candle flame that slowly settled. Etched mountain ranges, lunar deserts and meteor-craters glowed in the small moonscape. Gabriel couldn't sleep unless his night light was burning on the table beside his bed: ash-grey and gold, a world as familiar to him as the garden outside.

'There you are, my darling,' his mother said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. 'Gabriel's moon, all's well with the world.'

'Why isn't there a full moon every night?' he asked. 'I don't understand.'

'Neither do I. There must be a reason. An astronomical reason, I suppose. We'll look it up in the encyclopaedia tomorrow.'

Gabriel had asked this question before and had received similar unsatisfactory answers.

'Is Daddy on the moon?' he asked.

'No. Daddy is in heaven. It's not the same.'

'Maybe the moon *is* heaven,' he said.

'Well, if it is, then one day we'll all be together on the moon with him.' She replied in her brisk, no-nonsense way, as if everything in the world was comprehensible, somehow, if you just made the effort. Then she leant over him to kiss his cheek. He smelt her scent, the lavender water she used that just failed to mask the

odour of cigarette smoke that clung to her. She was always smoking, his mother.

'Sefton says there is no heaven,' Gabriel said. His older brother, who was away at boarding school, had newly and zealously embraced atheism, aged fourteen. 'And he says that there is no God.'

'Well, that's just Sefton's opinion. Everyone's entitled to their opinion but Sefton can sometimes be very foolish, not to say extremely silly, as we all know.'

'Is there no God?' Gabriel asked, vaguely troubled by the idea.

'Don't you give it a thought, Master Gabriel Dax,' his mother said firmly. 'You've school tomorrow. More important things to think of.'

She stood up and fussily adjusted the blanket around him.

'You go to sleep, my sweet boy. We'll all be with Daddy on the moon before you know it.'

She switched off the lamp on the bedside table and the room took on its familiar blurry moon-glow. She blew him a kiss and quietly closed the door on him. Gabriel turned in his bed and stared at his radiant night light. One day, he would go to the moon and find his father, he told himself. Yes, he would ...

It was the smell of smoke that woke him, some time later, and it wasn't cigarette smoke. It was like smoke from a fire and it made his eyes smart. What was wrong? The room was fogged with the smoke and his moon had a flocculent wavering halo. He slipped out of bed and opened the door – and recoiled. Orange flame-light, dancing gleefully everywhere. Great turbulent clouds of smoke rising up the stairway from the ground floor; thick grey quilts of smoke held by the ceiling. He covered his nose, pulling his pyjama jacket over his face, and set off down the stairs in a panic. Everything downstairs was on fire, it seemed to him – where was his mother?

He ran into the big drawing room and saw her lying face down in front of the drinks cabinet. The Persian rugs around her were ablaze with small identical fires feeding on their thick nap.

'Mummy!' he screamed. But she didn't respond.

Then a part of the ceiling fell with a great thump and the hot air rushed up through the ragged hole, feeding new fires on the floor above. He winced at the heat-blast on his forehead, felt his hair dry and thicken, tasted the hot, ashy smoke-curdle in his throat.

He knelt beside his mother's body and shook her arm. Nothing. He grabbed her shoulder and heaved her over.

When he saw that her eyes were half-open he knew she was dead. How did he know? He touched her beautiful face.

'Mummy!' he screamed again. 'Mummy, don't leave me!'

Then one of the big beams in the drawing room collapsed and he was knocked back by the wave of furnace-heat that engulfed him. He smelt his hair and eyebrows singeing, sour and acrid. He sensed his cheeks and forehead burn and crackle, toasting in the firestorm.

He became an animal. Flight was the only survival option. He ran to the side door in the kitchen but it was locked. Where was the key? Where did they keep the key? He felt the broiling heat embrace his back, enfolding, clutching, parching his pyjamas. He tried to open the latch on the leaded window by the kitchen door but it was stuck. He pulled the table with the telephone on it closer, knelt on it, picked up the phone and used its receiver as a hammer, smashing it against the handle of the latch. It gave, and opened. Wonderful cold night air fanned his hot face. He flung the phone out of the window and clambered up and out after it, squirming through, unheeding – he didn't want to be burnt alive. He fell into the border, rolled with pleasure on the damp leaves and earth, picked himself up and stumbled out on to the back lawn.

He ran and crouched behind the fish pond, as if the turbid water would somehow protect him, and looked back at the house, the Dax family home, Yeomanswood Farm. The conflagration had taken full hold, the thatched roof blazing meatily with flame, as if there were bombs going off inside, rich and roaring. Only seconds later, it seemed, he saw the whole of the roof collapse with a dull whoomph, and their two-storeyed house became a huge one-storeyed bonfire, as if some rare fuel was feeding the flames, leaping high, warming him even at this distance, turning the fish pond orange.

Then he heard the trilling toytown bells of the fire engines, saw their lights as they sped down the lane from Witney. Sefton was safe at school – maybe they could save Mummy, he thought, futilely, but he knew – beyond doubt – that his mother was already dead, consumed by the fire, gone to join his father on the moon.

He looked up at the sky, utterly miserable and afraid, searching for the moon, but the night was cloudy and it was hidden. Where was Gabriel's moon? His howl of grief and sorrow erupted in his small hot lungs, incomprehension vying with bitter comprehension. How had this happened? What would become of him now? How was he ever going to meet his Mummy and his Daddy on the moon?

Part One

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LÉOPOLDVILLE LONDON MADRID CÁDIZ

*1960-61*

## Dictatorland

It was a hot, humid August day in Léopoldville, in the newly independent republic of the Congo. Gabriel Dax looked across the huge, opaque Congo river, staring at Brazzaville on the far shore, miles away, its buildings blurred to a generic formlessness by the scrim of heat-haze and the distance, like a mythical city in the background of a Renaissance portrait. The river was gunmetal green, despite the pale blue, cloudless sky. It was deep, the Congo, and whatever the sky above, azure blue or lowering grey, its colour never really changed.

Gabriel was standing on the crowded boulevard that ran along the quays, a fairground hubbub of noise enfolding him – vehicles revving, klaxons, shouts, whistles. How wide was the Congo here? he wondered vaguely, thinking he must find some precise answer. Ten miles, fifteen? More like a lake than a great river, he thought, looking at its busy, restless traffic – fishermen in thin wooden canoes, buzzing speedboats, the ponderous, stocky ferries plying to and fro between the twin capital cities poised opposite each other on either bank.

He checked his watch. He was early because he was nervous. Thibault had suggested this neutral point to meet, not the hotel where he might be noticed getting into a government car. Go down to the quays, wait by the big frangipani tree on rue Victor Hugo,



Thibault had told him, I'll pick you up at 3 p.m. Gabriel stood in the frangipani's dappled shade, a breeze fingering his hair although the gusts were warmly wet, almost liquefying, he thought, and the scent of the sun-basted blossom was thickly present, intense, almost palpable. Peddlers and hucksters had tried to sell him biros, combs, keyrings, charms, shoelaces, watches, fruit and sweetmeats without success, but now he was thirsty. Cold-beer time. He was standing astride his leather grip that contained his tape recorder and was already regretting that he had chosen to wear a tie. Still, he reasoned, you don't interview a Prime Minister every day of the week. He looked smart enough, he thought, in his short-sleeved white Aertex shirt and his tropical-weight grey flannels and his brushed suede brogues – every inch the serious, responsible journalist for a British national newspaper.

Then he saw the black Citroën DS cruising slowly down the boulevard towards him. It stopped for a second and the rear door swung open. He picked up his grip and slipped inside. Thibault was there in the back, waiting; a soldier was driving. The car pulled off and he and Thibault shook hands. They had both met for dinner two days before at the Memling hotel. Thibault N'Danza was an old friend of his from university, a doctor, now a Minister for Health in the government of the new state. It was Thibault who had first suggested and then set up the interview with the Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba. It had all been agreed very quickly.

'Look, I don't know very much about Congolese politics or what's going on in the country,' Gabriel had said. 'I'll feel a bit of an imposter.'

'You don't even need to ask a question,' Thibault said. 'He just wants to talk. He just wants everything to be on the record, in a foreign newspaper – of repute,' he added with a smile. Thibault was a thin, rangy man with an alert, thoughtful demeanour. Adopted by American missionaries, he had been blessed by an

education abroad, denied to the small congregation of middle-class Congolese, the *Évolués* as they were known. But now that the country was independent, everything would change. Congo for the Congolese – not the Belgians.

'You've got your tape recorder, I hope,' Thibault asked.

'Yes. Why does he insist I record our interview?'

'Because his voice will be on your tapes. Not filtered through a journalist's interpretation – with respect, Gabriel – or editorial revisions. Whatever you write – whatever appears in your newspaper – the tapes will always be there.'

'Fine with me,' Gabriel said. 'Does he speak English?'

'A bit. He understands it well. He'll speak French, and I can translate, if you like.'

'My French isn't too bad,' Gabriel said. 'Let's see how we do.'

He sat back in the wide seat and tried to relax, feeling a heart-gulp of anxiety. This sort of high-level encounter was new to him – he was a travel writer not a news reporter. Still, it appeared that he was the only man who happened to be in the right place at the right time, for once. Switch on your tape recorder, he told himself, ask the usual banal questions and allow Lumumba to speak, to rant and rail, if he wants. How difficult could that be?

After about fifteen minutes, the Citroën turned into a driveway. There was a high wall and a metal gateway with two sentry boxes. A soldier with a machine gun peered into the car, saw Thibault and the gates were opened; they were waved through to a big colonial-style mansion, wide-winged, white stucco, with a tall, pillared porte cochère. There were more soldiers in attendance, more guns on display.

Thibault led him down a path around the side of the house and into a long, neatly maintained garden, lined with hibiscus and a high poinsettia hedge. At the end was a spacious wooden gazebo-style building with a veranda, painted white, like the main

residence. Gabriel and Thibault crossed the springy, tough grass of the lawn towards the gazebo. Purple bougainvillea lolled expansively over the roof and three immense palm trees stood behind the modest building, tree-monoliths, like guardians. Here, away from the river, the day felt even more airless and sultry and, as they approached, Gabriel was glad to see an electric ceiling fan whirring on the veranda above a round, glass-topped table with three cane chairs set around it.

As they drew near, a tall man in a dark suit, white shirt and thin bow tie emerged from inside. A neat, lithe figure – in his mid-thirties – bespectacled, with a well-trimmed, short goatee beard.

*'Monsieur le Premier Ministre, je vous présente mon ami britannique, le journaliste, Monsieur Gabriel Dax,'* Thibault said.

Gabriel shook Patrice Lumumba's hand.

*'C'est un grand honneur, monsieur,'* Gabriel said. *'Merci infiniment.'*

'Do you have the tape recorder?' Lumumba asked in his heavily accented English.

Gabriel held up his grip.

*'Tout est préparé. Ready and waiting.'*

*'Good. On peut commencer.'*

Gabriel unpacked his tape recorder and set it on the table. He had the twin tape-reels already fixed and locked in place. He positioned a microphone on its small bipod and plugged it in.

'It is working?' Lumumba said with a smile.

'Let's test it,' Gabriel said.

He clicked the machine on, pressing the record button, and counted out loud to five. He rewound the tape and pressed play. Lumumba seemed to relax as he heard Gabriel's recorded voice count the numbers.

Thibault had gone into the gazebo and returned with a servant who was carrying a tray of soft drinks. Gabriel opted for a Fanta,

for some reason. Lumumba opened a bottle of Perrier. Thibault sat down – the triumvirate gathered.

Lumumba leant over and whispered in Thibault's ear. Thibault nodded, whispered back. He turned to Gabriel.

'Any time you're ready,' he said.

Gabriel rewound the tape to the beginning and pressed record. The two spools on the recorder began to revolve lazily. Gabriel opened his notebook, cleared his throat.

*'Monsieur le Premier Ministre,'* he began. *'Quels sont vos espoirs pour la République du Congo?'*

Gabriel ignored the just-illuminated 'Fasten Seat Belt' sign and made his way quickly up the aisle of the first-class compartment. He smiled engagingly at the Sabena air hostess, slipped into the tiny toilet and locked the door. He urinated copiously. He had drunk a lot of beer since they had taken off from Léopoldville, sitting up all through the night going over the notes he'd taken of his interview with Lumumba as he began to block out the structure of the article he would write. Maybe the beer had made him more excited, made him sense that he might have something of a journalistic coup here. All eyes were on the former Belgian Congo and its worrying turmoil. In any event, his notes were extensive. He had added to them after the interview was over, back in the hotel, jotting down everything he could remember about the man himself, Patrice Lumumba. His trademark spectacles, his neat goatee beard, his shy, gummy smile, the scaly dryness of his palm when they had shaken hands on being introduced. Like sandpaper, Gabriel thought. Still, thank God he'd had the foresight to bring his tape recorder on this trip. Everything vital was on the tapes, to be consulted at leisure, not in his memory, even worse.

He flushed the toilet and unlocked the door, stepping past the cabin crew and then, pausing as another passenger pushed by, he