

Interview with Maaza Mengiste

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with Autumn Privett. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. And today we're talking to Maaza Mengiste about her book THE SHADOW KING, which is out now from W.W. Norton.

[00:00:25] **Autumn** So we first saw this week at Book Expo way back earlier this year. And the cover, since we're suckers for beautiful covers, the cover is what drew us in. But oh, man, this book is big and beautiful. And it just covers so many things I never even thought about before.

[00:00:47] **Kendra** I never heard of, let alone read, a novel about the Ethiopian-Italian conflict during World War II until this book. And I mean, it's a really fabulous way to enter the topic.

[00:01:00] **Autumn** Like you just said, this is a part of World War II history that I think was literally glossed over in my history books. And so it's. . . . Like, a novel is such a great way to learn about areas of history like this that you might not have known about previously. And this one is a beautiful, sweeping, mesmerizing story that I just couldn't put down, which is always a bonus.

[00:01:23] **Kendra** It's definitely a type of novel where you read it and then you want to go read all of the nonfiction things about it, for sure. Maybe that's just the history nerds in us. But that's definitely how we felt.

[00:01:32] **Autumn** Basically.

[00:01:32] **Kendra** So a little bit about Maaza Mengiste, she is a novelist and an essayist. And so her debut novel was BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE, which looks at a different part of Ethiopian history. And she says in our interview that THE SHADOW KING is a sort of prequel of BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE, which I didn't know until she said it. So that's amazing. So BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE was selected by The Guardian as one of the 10 best contemporary African books and named one of the best books of 2010 by the Christian Science Monitor, Boston Globe, and other publications. And she's a Fulbright scholar, which we talk about, and she's been published in all of the places and just generally a very prolific writer. And THE SHADOW KING has recently been optioned for film. So she has all the things going on.

[00:02:22] **Autumn** So without further ado, here's our conversation with Maaza Mengiste about THE SHADOW KING.

[00:02:36] **Kendra** Well, welcome, Maaza, welcome to the podcast. We are so excited to have you on.

[00:02:42] **Maaza** Oh, it's great to be here. Thank you.

[00:02:44] **Autumn** We were so excited to actually read your book because we first saw it at Book Expo way, way, way, way, way back this spring. And so we waited a long time to get to read it, and it definitely did not disappoint. So we're excited to get to talk to you about it and to share it with our listeners as well.

[00:03:03] **Maaza** Oh, thank you. Thank you.

[00:03:06] **Autumn** So before we get into talking about the book itself, for our listeners who have not yet read THE SHADOW KING, could you describe it for them?

[00:03:17] **Maaza** Sure. Well, THE SHADOW KING is set during Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 in an attempt to colonize the last remaining free country in Africa. It was . . . It is thought by many historians to have been the first real battles of World War II. I grew up with these stories of a poorly equipped Ethiopian army charging against a very, very advanced military, European military, and winning after five years. The story is set around that period. But one thing I discovered while researching this war was that women were very involved. In fact, more involved than I had thought. And in my book, I focus on women who joined the front lines in Ethiopia to fight against the Italian fascists. The story also involves both sides of the battle lines. I was really interested in what it was like to be a woman in war, but also how the men responded to that. And then I was interested in telling the story, also, from the Italian perspective. I've woven those threads throughout the book.

[00:04:32] **Kendra** I didn't realize a lot of Ethiopian history until one of our contributors, Bezi, is Ethiopian American. And so she did a "Read Ethiopian" week and featured THE SHADOW KING. And so she was talking about it and made us really excited to pick it up. Having this novel in the backdrop just makes it immediately like, oh, of course, we need to read this book because I do feel like that is definitely a story that, about World War II in particular, that I hadn't heard before. And I feel like a lot of us have read a lot of World War II books before.

[00:05:04] **Maaza** Yeah. You know, it's fascinating. I mean, even as an Ethiopian child growing up in Ethiopia, I understood how powerful the story was. You know, all the experiences of people from my grandparents' age and even a little bit earlier, I heard those stories growing up, but I never understood fully, until I was doing this research, how pivotal is this battle or this war was an on a global framework. This was part of world history, not just Ethiopian history and not just Italian history. Everybody was watching what was going to happen. And it was helping to decide who would be on the allied side and who would be on the axis side once World War II really kicked in.

[00:05:55] **Kendra** So this is your second novel, correct?

[00:05:57] **Maaza** Yes, it is.

[00:05:59] **Kendra** And so your first novel, BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE, I believe that was. . . . Is that also historical fiction?

[00:06:06] **Maaza** It is. And that's set in 1974, during the early years of Marxist-backed revolution in Ethiopia that would eventually deposed Emperor Haile Selassie, who features also in my book, the second book that's set in 1935. In some ways I consider that THE SHADOW KING, a prequel to BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE. It involves some similar characters from 1974. They show up forty years younger in 1935. And, you know, writing about the revolution of 1974, I became really curious about the way that, I guess, people live with memories of war, of conflict, of trauma in all its various forms. What happened decades later when the country erupts again, this time in a civil conflict? I wanted to figure out what were these characters like in 1935, and might that help me understand who they were by 1974? And so I'm looking at history as a continuum in both these books, but really also looking at the ways that my characters develop over the decades.

[00:07:21] **Autumn** Oh, man, I've not read your first book. And now I need to read it immediately after reading this one.

[00:07:28] **Maaza** Well, you get a hint of this with Hirut. You know, I opened the book in 1974. I opened the second book in 1974. And then we go back to 1935. And so, even without having read the the first book, you get a sense of how a character carries all these different kinds of wars with her over the decades. And in 1974, she's forced to confront aspects of 1935. This is how the book opens. And again, I'm asking these questions of, how do we travel with our memories? How do women continue to live in the body that has been in some ways not fully in their control while they were growing up? And I think these are questions that Hirut in 1974 finally, finally confronts. And I won't say too much more.

[00:08:26] **Autumn** No, definitely. So that's really interesting, especially because this story was inspired by stories about your great-grandmother, is that correct?

[00:08:37] **Maaza** Yes. Yes. And again, you know, I did not know this story about my great-grandmother until I had already—basically, I had written Hirut. I had I had found these women in history. I happened to be in Ethiopia. And I was talking to my mother about my latest discovery of a photograph of a woman in uniform with a rifle. And she just casually mentioned, "Well, what about your great-grandmother?" And I had no clue at that point. And I've been to Ethiopia several times even before then. My mother has been on research road trips with me. We have had conversations. And when she said that, at first, I wasn't sure that I heard right. And I asked her to repeat herself. And she said, "Well, of course, your great-grandmother!" And so my great-grandmother, when there was a mobilization call throughout Ethiopia in 1935. . . . Haile Selassie is definitely sure that the Italians will be attacking. There will be a war. He says every every able-bodied person, the eldest child of every family, get your weapon and come to war. Come to enlist in the front line.

[00:09:55] **Maaza** And my great-grandmother was the eldest of four children. She had three brothers who were much too young to be fighting. Her father was too old, but she was still a girl. She was not a full adult. And in fact, she was in an arranged marriage with an adult man. And she was too young to live with him and be his wife. So she was young. Her father wanted to give his old rifle to her husband so that the husband could go and represent the family. And she said, No. First, she didn't like the guy. She would eventually leave him and marry somebody else. But she said, "He's not getting my gun. That's mine. The call was for the eldest person in the family. I'm going to go and represent the family." Her husband—or her father refused. So she took him to court. And in front of the village judges plead her case. She won and took the gun and went to the front lines. And I did not know the story until not very long ago.

[00:11:00] **Autumn** That is such an amazing story. I'm surprised your mom could not have mentioned it for so long.

[00:11:07] **Maaza** It made me think about the ways that the stories of women are told. Because I had heard about every single man in my family who had been involved in this war. I had heard those stories again and again. I'm not sure why people did not speak of the women. Now that the book has come out, now that I've shared my great-grandmother's story, what has been really interesting to me is at different readings, people will come to me and say—Ethiopians will come and say, "I checked with my family, and my grandmother was in the war" or "This aunt did fight." So people are starting to come and

share those moments, but they didn't know either. And it makes me wonder how the stories of women are passed down. And maybe they're talked about in kitchens and then around coffee, moments when women will get together and relive memories. But those stories never leave those sections of the home that are reserved for women, or have been traditionally in Ethiopia. And that is really. . . . It has been an interesting question for me to think about as this book has been out, you know, going out into the world, and I'm getting more of these stories from other people.

[00:12:24] **Kendra** My mind is just blown away by this history. And as we were reading for this interview, you know, Bezi sent me an article on Lit Hub, and in it I believe you quote Svetlana Alexievich, who says, "Everything we know about war, we know with 'a man's voice.'" And what you're talking about, I feel like it just encapsulates that, that what we know about war comes from men's perspectives. But your book tackles what war looks like from a woman's perspective in this way.

[00:12:58] **Maaza** I really have been indebted to the writings of Svetlana Alexievich. I kept coming back to this thing that she had said, this man's voice. And what does it mean to talk about war in a man's voice? And I realized that when we share stories of war, and we immediately speak about—I guess we speak of, when we imagine these soldiers or warriors always as male figures, always in uniform—we understand and we speak about the brutalities of it, which are the physical confrontations on the field. I started thinking about a woman's voice speaking about her ideas of war. A woman's war is not only the battlefield with all of those same bloody and difficult confrontations and with all its moral ambiguity. But the woman's war also extends to the camp, to where she sleeps, to how freely she can sleep, how undisturbed her body is once it's off the battlefield. And once I began to realize that's what it means to be a woman in conflict, Hirut's story, Aster's story, the stories of [00:14:12] **Cece** [0.0s] and the cook and all the women in my book really started to come alive.

[00:14:17] **Autumn** I think that something that is so interesting to think about, especially because it's like, I know here in the US, there's been a lot of talk about whether women have a place in war and should they be fighting and all those kinds of things. And the women in *THE SHADOW KING* are so resilient. They're so brave. I mean, not without being flawless or without their their own fears and things like that. And you show that very well in the novel, this interplay between like masculinity and femininity and how it plays out in the war. What were some of the things that you wanted to examine as far as that goes, as far as resilience and how men and women may react differently in wartime?

[00:15:04] **Maaza** I wanted to examine. . . . It was this question of women in some ways pushing their way into a space where some thought that they didn't belong, which was really quite literally the front lines. But also, what some of my characters were doing in the book was, you know, they were saying, "Not only can we fight, but we deserve the same respect as everyone else on the battlefield." And I know that Aster, with her determination to, frankly, she wants to raise an army. She wants to be in the front. She wants to be a commanding officer of her own group of women. She's demanding respect from her husband, who has his army. She's demanding respect not only as a soldier, but as his wife. You know, she was fighting two different battles here, but it's under the guise of war, under military terms. But she is demanding a respect from him that she feels she never got because she was also in an arranged marriage with him. She had no choices in who she could marry and what would happen to her once she was married to him. And when this war comes, she uses it as her opportunity to become something other than this man's wife.

[00:16:23] **Kendra** Recently, a co-host and I, Sumaiyya, talked about a collection of essays called OUR WOMEN ON THE GROUND, which looks at Arab women reporting from the Arab world. And one of the first essays talks about the uniqueness of women's perspective during war. In this case, it was that these women were survivors. And so they were the ones left to tell the story. But in this case, this one is, I feel like, a very much active in the combat and in that way. And we've talked a lot about women's voices during wartime. What was something unique about women's voices during wartime that you discovered while writing this novel?

[00:16:59] **Maaza** One of the things I realized was their perspective on the many ways that a body could be injured. I think men. . . . There was a double awareness of the fragility of the body. For a woman, I started to think, you know, I remember quite literally writing this battle scene and saying, well, how is Hirut understanding this as opposed to the way Kidane or one of the other male fighters is understanding this particular battle? And I began to understand that when she was in battle, she was also carrying with her this body that had been abused and subjugated by the man who was leaving the army. And she began to understand that there is more than one battlefield here. She just happened to inhabit one.

[00:17:51] **Maaza** And I understood then that all of these women were well aware that if they were captured as prisoners of war, or if something happened to them and they were in the hands of the Italians, what they would face would also be something equal to and also very different from what the men would face as prisoners of war. They, if either group survived, if either the men or the women were kept alive. . . . I began to understand that double burden of being both soldier and a vigilant protector of yourself. And I think there's one point in the book when Hirut is in battle and that—I don't know what to call it—but those two dueling identities really crashed down on her. And she wonders, "What can I do? Am I a soldier? Or am I just this girl or this young woman at this moment? Which body am I in?" And at some point she realizes the only way to stop the pain of being this woman that has to go back and deal with another kind of battle in the military, in her camp, is to maybe really be a soldier and just die in the field. It really forced this reckoning with me also about how to speak of soldiers and the military and misogyny and war all at once.

[00:19:21] **Autumn** Something else too, so the title of the book is THE SHADOW KING. And as I was reading, I started to pick up on the many different types of shadows that are in the book. You know, there's this one scene where the emperor is looking at his shadow and how strong his shadow looks. And the photographer, Ettore, he's talking about shadows as it relates to photography. A lot of the things that happened to Hirut happened in the shadows, like those kinds of things. And then the actual shadow king himself. When did you know that shadows would become such a big theme in this story? Or did it just kind of come out organically as you were writing it?

[00:20:04] **Maaza** That's a good question. I realized at some point writing my first book that I was really, even in that book, really starting to think of scenes and moments and characters in terms of shadowing and grayness and light and dark. I was already moving into that way of speaking, and those metaphorical—I don't know what to call them—but those metaphors when I started thinking about this book. And then I had started to also think about the ways that photography was used during this war to create a very specific narrative about Ethiopians, about Africans, about colonialism, about Italians. I started understanding that I really could push these ideas I was thinking about in terms of shadowing, shadows, a photographer working with light and dark. But then he himself being a completely ambiguous character, kind of living in this gray world of complicity and

also lacking certain freedoms. And so I wanted. . . . It felt very natural once I started thinking about photographs and images. But another thing I was thinking about was there is a saying in Ethiopia that an emperor is a sun unto his people. And I knew, according to history, that Haile Selassie had left Ethiopia very early on in the whole conflict with Italy. And then suddenly I imagined this country in shadow. And what would emerge, I imagine, was a king that was of that shadow.

[00:21:56] **Autumn** I love that. I love like. . . . I love themes like that, especially when they come so organically from the story. And now that you've mentioned it, like you're right, so many of the characters are living in this shadowy space where you're not really sure what to think about them yet. That's so cool.

[00:22:18] **Kendra** There's so much depth to the novel and the historical events that you've mentioned, and I believe you received a Fulbright Fellowship to go research this novel. At any time did you ever consider writing a nonfiction kind of narrative about this or were you really just looking at the medium of a novel?

[00:22:41] **Maaza** I was really looking at the novel form because I know how World War II is just a gigantic field of study. And I know that even this part that took five years of of Ethiopian and world history was really complicated. It is really complicated. There are still things to learn and discover from it. And I, at some point, I knew already I was going to write a novel. The question for me, though, was how indebted to historical research would I be in this book?

[00:23:21] **Maaza** I thought initially that I would be re-rendering, re-describing very specific battles looming over the course of the war, the way that the war unfolded, tracking my characters and—mind you, when I was first researching this, I did not know about the female soldiers—so I imagined these men that I would follow, these historical figures, and a few fictional characters, and composites of certain people. And I would basically lay out the general trajectory of this war in a novel form with a lot of history and historical data. A lot of research. I wrote that book, and it was the most boring book. It was painful to go through. It was so bad by the time I got to the end. And I remember the day I finished and I said, "This sucks. It's terrible. And I can't publish it like this." It was not. . . . It had nothing of the excitement, the myth, the legend that I imagined when I was first hearing about the story as a child.

[00:24:33] **Maaza** And I did a complete revision. Really got rid of that draft and started saying, "Whose story is this? Whose story is this? Who wants to tell their story and why?" As I was thinking that, I had already rendered Hirut. I'd already created Aster. But they had always been in the background. And Hirut stepped forward quite literally. She does seem to step and say, "This is my story, but you're not listening to me." And I went back to the drawing board. And I said, "All right. Let's see. What happened to Hirut? And, you know, what am I not seeing here?"

[00:25:14] **Maaza** And the first clue, the first kind of eureka moment I had with this revisioning of it was the understanding that women, traditionally in Ethiopia, followed behind the men as they were going off to war. They carried water. They carried heavy things. But they also tended to the wounded. They collected the dead from battlefields. There were no dead left. You know, they were buried. They were taken care of. They fed the army. They did all of those tasks so that men could focus on fighting. They ran behind the men in battle. And if there was anyone that wanted to turn around and retreat, the women were right behind them, singing songs, mocking them. And, you know, according

to my mom and several other people, the taunts that they hurled at the men was so humiliating that it was better to just keep charging than to go back.

[00:26:15] **Maaza** And I started thinking about these women, even in the ways that we knew that they were involved in war. I began to understand that as the Italians are dropping poison on human beings, the women were not exempt from that. They were right in the line of fire as the tanks were coming in and shooting into the fields. The women were catching that. As the artillery was going off, the women were subjected to the same bullets as men. And I understood that, my god, even if they weren't "in the front lines," they were in the war, and they were facing the brunt of it. And no one ever really discussed that. And then slowly, I started finding threads and soldiers, letters, diaries, photographs that depicted or talked about a woman in war. I found headlines in The New York Times and different newspapers about a woman whose husband was killed in action. She runs up, takes his gun, and leads two thousand of his men into battle. And I said, why didn't I ever hear about this? And this is really where the book started to come alive in this new revisioning. And Hirut took the lead.

[00:27:28] **Autumn** Well, I think that the novel format is perfect for this story. And it is not boring. I sat down one night only planning to read a couple pages and ended up reading more than 100. It's like, very late. I mean, I was so drawn in by these characters. You alluded to earlier the way that you kind of wove the different narratives together. It really put it into stark contrast for me. Like how tangled together and in conflict these people's lives were, you know, on so many different levels. But I thought it was interesting, too, that you also divide it into three separate books within a book. So I was wondering, like, what was your process for establishing the rhythm and structure of the novel in this revision that you were kind of talking about?

[00:28:21] **Maaza** Yeah, that was one of the central questions. How far do I move into the war? How do I divide up these five years? The pace of the writing, the different POVs that I was incorporating. I felt in some ways, I don't need to tell the full five years of the war, not the chronological time. But I do need to follow each of these characters and tell their own particular wars. And so I focus on individual—I don't want to say timelines—but I focus on the individual rhythms, the rhythms of these individual characters as opposed to rhythms of war. And the beats in a war. And I started understanding that each of them, in particular Hirut, but all of them, there were certain moments of their lives in those years that I was covering that seemed to coincide with each other.

[00:29:21] **Maaza** The book begins with, I think, waiting. Of course it's not. I opened the book forty years after the war. And this is Hirut getting ready to meet somebody. But there's much more than. . . . It's much more than one person she's waiting for. She's in some ways waiting for resolution to happen in that space. And then there's invasion. And that's just natural. Everybody's getting ready for that. So I have these breaks that seemed very naturally. . . . I think it fit very naturally into the beats of each of these characters' lives. And I worked with that and divided the book up in those sections. The war itself went through certain phases. But I was really interested in the phases of these people.

[00:30:04] **Kendra** And that is just incredible. And I'm just trying to wrap my mind and visualize the structure of this book. And it's so well crafted. So congratulations on such a well-written novel, and I hope all of our listeners go and pick it up. So before we let you go, we wanted to ask you, are there any Ethiopian or Ethiopian American women writers that our listeners should definitely know about and pick up?

[00:30:31] **Maaza** Oh, yes, definitely enough. Nafkote Tamirat is a new writer who just published her book recently, *THE PARKING LOT ATTENDANT*. Incredible. And Meron Hadero is an incredibly interesting and wonderful writer who's been winning short story awards and has some short stories in different anthologies. I think she's definitely one to watch. And she has a book that will be out. There is a Canadian writer, Ethiopian Canadian writer, Rebecca Fisseha. And she has a new book that just came out. And Mahtem Shiferraw is a poet and just absolutely fantastic. And I edited an anthology with Akashic Books called *ADDIS ABABA NOIR*, and it's coming out in August, next August, and it will feature fourteen fighting writers living in Ethiopia and outside of it. And I think that's something that people should definitely pick up. And it's in another way to introduce writers to a wider audience from Ethiopia.

[00:31:54] **Autumn** Well, all of those sound amazing. You just mentioned the collection you edited. But is there anything else that you have forthcoming or are working on that you would like for our listeners to know about?

[00:32:09] **Maaza** You know, I'm I'm right in the middle of this book tour, but I am really looking forward to starting on book three. I can't talk too much about it, but that is going to be my next major project. But what I will let everyone know is that *THE SHADOW KING* has just been optioned by Atlas Entertainment. They are working on making it into a movie. So I think listeners should look out for that. That is going to be really exciting to see how this unfolds.

[00:32:42] **Kendra** Well, that does sound fabulous. And congratulations on that, and on the new project.

[00:32:47] **Maaza** Thank you so much. Thank you.

[00:32:50] **Autumn** Thank you, Maaza, for coming into the podcast and talking with us about *THE SHADOW KING*. We definitely loved reading it. And it was just so great to get to talk to you about it as well.

[00:33:01] **Maaza** Oh, it was such a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much. Thank you.

[00:33:07] **Kendra** We'd like to thank Maaza Mengiste for talking to us about her novel, *THE SHADOW KING*, which is out now from W.W. Norton. You can find Maaza Mengiste on her website, maazamengiste.com. And on Twitter (@maazamengiste) and on her Instagram (@theshadowkingnovel). And of course, all of her information will be linked in our show notes.

[00:33:27] **Autumn** We would like to say a special thank you to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. You can find Reading Women at readingwomenpodcast.com and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thank you all so much for listening. And we'll talk to you next time.