November 2013

To the Members of the Middlebury Class of 2017.5—

We look forward to welcoming you to campus in February. We are writing to you as Commons Heads, the faculty and staff leaders of the commons system. In this role, we work alongside students to cultivate your intellectual interests and extend the learning environment beyond the classroom and into dinner conversations in the dining halls, or late night discussions on your hall. During orientation in early February, we will gather together in small groups along with other faculty, staff and upper-class students to take part in a campus-wide Common Reading discussion. This will afford us one of many such opportunities for shared intellectual exchanges during your time at Middlebury College.

This year’s Common Reading selection is Dinaw Mengestu's The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears (2007). Mengestu, who lives in New York City, was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1978. His father had to flee Ethiopia and Mengestu joined him with his mother and sister in the US in 1980. He graduated with a BA in English from Georgetown University and an MFA from Columbia University. Dinaw Mengestu is a 2012 McArthur Fellow. He is Lannan Chair of Poetics at Georgetown University.

NPR states: ""How was I supposed to live in America when I had never really left Ethiopia?" questions Sepha Stephanos, the protagonist of The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears. That isolation and frustration of immigrant life is thoughtfully portrayed in the award-winning fictional debut from Dinaw Mengestu. The story of an Ethiopian immigrant who fled his country’s communist revolution, The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears follows him nearly two decades later, struggling to live the American dream, with a failing convenience store in a gentrifying Washington, D.C., neighborhood."

Mengestu paints a realistic and differentiated picture of the immigrant experience of the African diaspora in the US while at the same time enabling his readers to identify with the emotions and struggles of his protagonists. This brings an almost universal feel to this riveting novel that should resonate with many of us.

We hope that you will find The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears a good and challenging read and that the issues raised in this enthralling and highly nuanced novel will help you reflect on your own journeys critically and profoundly. We also expect that when we compare notes in February we will find a wide range of responses. Our Common Reading experience will give you a chance to share your observations and
ideas with your peers and to learn from one another. That’s the nature of our intellectual community—we prize thoughtful conversations, new insights, and diverse perspectives and we are looking forward to your contributions.

We wish you a fulfilling Febmester and look forward to meeting you in February. In the meantime, enjoy the novel!

From your Commons Heads:
Pete and Michelle Nelson, Atwater Commons
Roman Graf, Brainerd Commons
Patricia Zupan, Cook Commons
Pavlos Sfyroeras and Maria Hatjigeorgiou, Ross Commons
Jonathan Miller-Lane, Wonnacott Commons