

# *in the* Classroom

# African Novels in the Classroom

edited by  
Margaret Jean Hay



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# Introduction

Margaret Jean Hay

I HAVE FOUND THAT MOST AFRICANIST SCHOLARS ARE passionate about their teaching. Conversations over dinner at a professional conference or informal messages over email often involve discussion of how a particular class is going, exchange of relevant syllabuses, and comments on a new textbook, approach, novel, or film that has been tried and found helpful—or just the opposite. Publishing a persuasive article or an award-winning book represents critical recognition from our peers, but the interest and effectiveness of our teaching often makes more of a difference in our everyday lives. I feel strongly that the publishing world has overlooked this aspect of our experience. Literally hundreds of books aimed at elementary and secondary schoolteachers present new methods and advice on teaching particular subjects, stimulating students' creativity, encouraging them to write, and so on—the list is vast. In contrast, once college teachers have demonstrated mastery in their field of academic expertise (in most cases through the successful completion of a Ph.D. dissertation), they are expected to become effective teachers without any specific training or guidance in that dimension.

Along with its predecessor, *Great Ideas for Teaching About Africa*, edited by Misty Bastian and Jane Parpart, the present collection is intended to address that need. Here, twenty-four college teachers from different disciplines discuss how they use specific African novels in the classroom—why they choose a certain novel, what corollary readings they assign, what background information they present in lecture, what major themes emerge in discussion, and what written assignments then explore the students' engagement with that particular novel.

If you teach a unit or a course on some aspect of African studies and would like to diversify your reading assignments or to enliven class discussions, this book is for you. It has been written primarily with college teachers in mind, but will be useful for secondary teachers as well. Let me say right up front what it is not: this is not a work of literary criticism, nor is it about African novels or African literature as such. It is something quite different: hands-on personal accounts from teachers who have used one of twenty-four African novels in the classroom, with plot summaries, background information on historical context and on the novelist's life and work, related reading and writing assignments, and the major themes that come up in discussion, as well as advice on specific problems students might encounter. It is intended to be informal, helpful, and relevant to day-to-day teaching.

The works discussed in these pages are drawn from across the African continent, although more come from West Africa than from any other region, reflecting the historical dominance of literature from that area in both anglophone and francophone literary traditions. The great majority of novels presented here are set in the twentieth century; Maryse Condé's *Segu*, D. T. Niane's *Sundiata*, and Buchi Emecheta's *Slave Girl* are the striking exceptions. Indexes at the end of the collection list the novels by region and by principal theme.

Two of the essays included here involve books that are not technically novels at all: Niane's *Sundiata* is a short, accessible version of a historical epic about the founding of the kingdom of Mali, and Wole Soyinka's *Ake* is an autobiographical account of growing up in a Nigerian village. The essays on these books fit comfortably with the other chapters here and suggest that African epics and life histories offer additional possibilities for teaching. I did not preselect the list of books to be included and then search for authors to write about them. In most cases the scenario was reversed; I approached individuals I knew to be good teachers, asked whether they used novels in their teaching, and if so, what novel they might like to write about. The process confirmed my impression that a great many teachers assign novels as part of the required reading for African studies classes in anthropology, history, political science, religion, and women's studies, as well as literature. I believe there are three broad reasons why this is the case.

First, Western students with little or no first-hand experience of African societies will pick up a vast array of information from reading a novel, including such details as what houses and cities and vil-



lages look like; what a meal might consist of; what kinds of work people do; how leisure time might be used; how a prosperous government minister, a hard-working peasant, or a call girl might dress or behave; but perhaps most important of all, they will absorb many clues about relationships—the extended family in its urban and rural permutations, the bonds or conflicts between workers, or the varying relationships between the sexes, between officials and peasants, black and white, young and old.

Second, it quickly becomes apparent that students really enjoy the change of pace involved in reading African novels in the midst of other more scholarly writings. Instructors also find pleasure in class discussions that are usually a break from normal routines. (One of my colleagues at a large midwestern university, perhaps too close to the fictional Lake Wobegon, warned me that not only did she not use novels in her teaching, she felt it was counterproductive and perhaps dangerous to have assignments that students actually enjoyed.)

Perhaps most important, however, is the students' ability to relate to fictional characters as human beings, to conceive of African societies as populated by distinct individuals whose behavior, personal concerns, and perceived self-interest can differ widely from one to another. This is quite different from the perception some students might have developed of Africans as faceless victims oppressed by Western colonialism—a sympathetic stance from the students' point of view, no doubt, but one that tends to distance and dehumanize.

Each of the twenty-four teachers whose essays are included here have personal reasons for assigning one African novel instead of another in a particular class, but a number of common themes arise from their discussions. Richard Rathbone, for example, feels that students are often alienated by the fact that much of modern African history tends to be rather impersonal. He enjoys using Peter Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udomo* (Chapter 1) when he's teaching about modern Ghana because the novel's portrayal of fictional African radicals makes the epic figures who dominate the nationalist epic of the mid twentieth century—especially Kwame Nkrumah himself—come to life. Abrahams also provides a wealth of detail about the actual founding and day-to-day operation of political movements and parties. The same might be said about D. T. Niane's *Sundiata* (Chapter 17), a short and engaging epic account of the thirteenth-century foundation of the Mali empire. The legendary hero is first introduced as a toddler who is unable to walk properly but who accumulates both strength and wisdom sufficient to guarantee his place in

history. Curtis Keim uses Niane's version of the Sundiata epic to help his students appreciate that historical fiction is a story about the past as well as evidence for the time it was written. *Sundiata* is one of only a handful of works suitable for classroom use that focus on precolonial African history.

Many teachers find novels helpful for the way they make broad historical processes more understandable through the constraints and opportunities faced by individual characters and the choices and decisions they make. Joye Bowman assigns Maryse Condé's historical novel *Segu* (Chapter 7) because she likes the way it presents the sweeping historical themes of the nineteenth century in West Africa—the spread of Islam, the abolition of the slave trade, and the development of “legitimate commerce” through the experiences of a single family. In a similar vein, Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (Chapter 23) is a wide-ranging historical novel, covering approximately 150 years of East African history through the experiences of one extended Asian family in Tanzania. Jamie Monson assigns the novel because it integrates several themes she feels are central to understanding East African history: oral narrative, collective memory, cultural identity, race, gender, and nationalism.

*God's Bits of Wood* (Chapter 21) is one of a few African novels that recreate a specific historical event—in this case, a railway workers' strike in late 1940s French West Africa. Dennis Cordell finds Sembene's novel a wonderful novel for teaching about the complexity of social movements and social change, ranging from labor organizing and gender relations to race relations and nationalism. The book is also very useful for class discussions about the nature of history, the “truth” of the historian, and the “truth” of the novelist. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *A Grain of Wheat* (Chapter 16) is a moving depiction of the involvement of ordinary people in Mau Mau resistance and their ultimate disillusionment with the political independence for which they had sacrificed so much. In my own teaching I especially value *A Grain of Wheat* for the ways it muddies the waters of resistance and collaboration by showing individual calculations and compromises; it is thus a useful antidote to students' tendency to simplify (and perhaps to glorify) notions of African resistance without understanding the ultimate costs involved.

Because *The Marabi Dance* (Chapter 9) covers so many aspects of both urban and rural life in South Africa—from squalid housing, gangs, and the vibrant appeal of marabi music to transitions in religious and marriage ceremonies—it offers students a window into a broad range of cultural and social issues during a time of rapid social

transformation. But Iris Berger appreciates the way author Modikwe Dikobe avoids simple dichotomies in representing the choices open to individuals and neither idealizes rural culture nor condemns it. James Pritchett finds that Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (Chapter 4) forces students to focus on the individual strategies of both men and women in late colonial Senegal. Bâ's novel shows how individuals rethink fundamental issues about work, polygyny, family, and Islamic faith and customs, and how their different positions within society present them with different options and constraints. African responses to colonialism are infinitely varied and complex, and *So Long a Letter* helps the class deconstruct previous assumptions about the opposition between "tradition" and "modernity." Many other essays mention the value of encouraging students to rethink these dichotomies. Martin Klein feels that Chinua Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart* (Chapter 2) gives students an African perspective on indigenous social patterns and the British colonial impact from the standpoint of a decentralized Nigerian society; it also challenges their assumption that "civilization" is identified with the existence of large-scale political systems. After students read *Things Fall Apart*, they no longer associate Igbo village life with "primitive society."

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (Chapter 8) usually provokes an enthusiastic response from undergraduates because the main character is a teenage girl whose conflicts with her father echo familiar themes from their own lives. Bill Bravman and Mary Montgomery also value Dangarembga's novel because of the way it challenges students to rethink staple dichotomies like African/Western, rural/urban, and traditional/modern. They find that the ambivalences and contradictions of all the major characters help students grasp the complexities of gender, generation, and Westernization in mid-twentieth-century Zimbabwe.

In many of the essays included here, teachers assign specific African novels for the purpose of sparking discussions about the changing roles of women in particular regions and time periods. Janice Spleth finds that Driss Chraïbi's *Mother Comes of Age* (Chapter 5) is most valuable for incorporating the theme of women's status under Islam—the novel's sympathetic male characters make it easier for her students to question issues of seclusion, education, and the veil. In this warm-hearted account, two young men in a fairly cosmopolitan Moroccan household consciously decide to liberate their very traditional mother. For Sandra Greene, Flora Nwapa's presentation of Igbo women in *Efuru* (Chapter 18) provides a useful forum to discuss controversies surrounding the issues of female cir-

cumcision, bridewealth, and polygyny in early colonial Nigeria. *Efuru* was written partly in response to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and is also a text to which other authors in turn have responded. This situation gives students a chance to explore the intertextual conversations that have taken place between African men and women, and among African women writers themselves, over how the historical lives of African women should be presented to a broader public.

Lindsey Collen's *The Rape of Sita* (Chapter 6), which presents rape in actual and metaphorical contexts in Mauritius, provides Beverly Mack's students with a new perspective on women's responses to patriarchal control. Mack particularly appreciates the multifaceted style and subject matter; Collen's integration of epic and oral narrative styles, Western literature, and a broad Islamic context forces students to acknowledge the complexity of contemporary African societies, while her conscious manipulation of an old Beatles' tune ("Jojo was a man who thought he was a woman") startles everyone and stimulates discussion.

Misty Bastian has found that *Joys of Motherhood* (Chapter 10) works well as a detailed description of Western Igbo experience in the high colonial period of Nigeria and particularly the ways in which women were integrated into urban economies during the 1930s and 1940s. Along the way, readers learn that motherhood may be universal, but its social expression can vary widely from place to place and from one historical period to another. Bastian is especially careful to point out the ambivalent reception of Emecheta's work in Nigeria to her students. Kathleen Sheldon has taught Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Slave Girl* (Chapter 11) in order to provide an example of African women's voices, to present the historical theme of internal African slavery through accessible fiction, and to raise a series of questions about women's position in African societies. She particularly values Emecheta's ambivalence toward aspects of both Nigerian and Western culture and the ultimate ambiguities of the story's outcome as enabling wide-ranging discussions in the classroom.

Jeanne Penvenne believes that assigning novels and biographies focusing on ordinary women's experiences can help compensate for the elitism and androcentricity that still characterize much of the historical literature. In addition to valuable suggestions about the day-to-day lives of working people in apartheid South Africa, Elsa Joubert's *Poppie Nongena* (Chapter 13) raises valuable questions about authorship and form, history and memory. Karen Keim chooses J. Nozipo Maraire's novel *Zenzele* (Chapter 14) because it offers

her students a highly accessible introduction to upper-middle-class life in Zimbabwe. In the form of a letter from an African mother in Harare to her undergraduate daughter at Harvard University, *Zenzele* portrays a clear statement of one African woman's core values: dignity based on an appreciation of one's heritage, respect for the family, the wise use of education, the importance of building long-lasting relationships, and the promotion of racial understanding.

The blunt racism inherent in colonial rule is another theme that emerges in many of these chapters. In *Houseboy* (Chapter 19), Cameroonian writer Ferdinand Oyono has an acute eye for the nuances of social interactions between African and European, for the subtle violence of daily life in late colonial Cameroon, and for the tragicomic dimensions of the spectacle of French power. Barbara Cooper particularly enjoys the tremendous sympathy and humor of Oyono's writing and the fact that *Houseboy* confronts students with a clear case in which the construction of gender affects men as well as women. Farouk Topan uses *Season of Migration to the North* by Sudanese author Tayeb Salih (Chapter 20) to teach about expressions of Islam in Sudanese society. While studying in Britain, the novel's African protagonist makes a career of sexually exploiting English women, clearly a response to the British exploitation of the Sudan. Topan appreciates the tensions involved in the novelist's depictions of the cross-cultural negotiations of the self and the other, both in Britain and subsequently in Africa. Wole Soyinka's memoir, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (Chapter 22), allows readers to interpret one African's perspective on what it was like to grow up in an elite, educated Christian family in colonial Nigeria. Tamara Giles-Vernick appreciates the particular glimpse that *Ake* provides into the direct and indirect ways that British colonialism could shape education and families, and the different ways African women and men could negotiate and reshape these influences.

Several teachers choose novels set in the 1960s, 1970s, and later as representing individual African intellectuals' perspectives on the troubling transformations within postcolonial society. Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Chapter 3) illuminates the political and moral decay of Ghana in the mid-1960s and, by extension, casts light on today's situation as well. Emmanuel Akyeampong appreciates Armah's intimate descriptions of working-class life, which show how ordinary people are affected by larger issues of political economy. Meja Mwangi's novel of urban Nairobi in the 1970s, *Going Down River Road* (Chapter 15) can be read both as a gritty depiction of urban life during the first decade of independence and as a pessimistic document of its time. By 1976 a sense of

decay and decline had begun to undermine the optimism and confidence of the immediate postindependence years in Kenya. Charles Ambler uses *Going Down River Road* in class to complement broad arguments regarding neocolonialism and underdevelopment, showing how the broad forces of change impact ordinary lives and how individuals resist those forces or attempt to profit from them.

Historian Melvin Page assigns novels in his teaching to lend a feeling of authenticity to his courses and to highlight indigenous perspectives on the troubles that have plagued many African countries after independence. P. T. Zeleza's novel, *Smouldering Charcoal* (Chapter 24), provides an artistically satisfying and politically astute analysis of postcolonial problems in Malawi through the fictional experiences of several friends who dare to challenge the establishment. Lidwien Kapteijns uses Nuruddin Farah's beautiful novel *Gifts* (Chapter 12) to introduce her students to an African intellectual's perspective on the disintegration of the Somali state in the late 1980s. Farah's novel also allows her students to experience a particular African context through particular fictional individuals, in this case a young, middle-class Somali nurse in Mogadishu. Kapteijns believes that true social history begins when students try to understand that in Africa as elsewhere, the social institutions of the present are the crystallization of social struggles of the past, and that these institutions are maintained or changed by people both like and unlike themselves who face circumstances not of their own making.

After paging through this collection, it should be clear to readers that none of these essays attempts to present a novel as representing historical truth. Nevertheless, as Keith Booker reminds us, historical novels constitute a major component in the processes of historical recovery and the reconstruction of cultural identities that are underway across Africa (see Booker 1998: 27–28). Many of those who write historical novels, of course, have done a great deal of background research on their subjects. See, for example, the fascinating essay by novelist Margaret Atwood and responses by three historians comparing history and historical fiction in the 1998 *American Historical Review*.<sup>1</sup> The African novelists described here often write about events or periods with which they are personally familiar—Ngugi wa Thiong'o's various portrayals of Mau Mau, Buchi Emecheta's account of Lagos in the 1940s, Ousmane Sembene's presentation of the 1947 railway strike, or P. T. Zeleza's critique of the repression of political opposition in postcolonial Malawi. What is important is that a particular writer has chosen to interpret history or society in a particular way.

A number of African literature scholars have expressed their concerns about the potential misuse of African novels in the classroom by those in other disciplines, where they feel students can too easily fall into the trap of assuming that any particular novel represents literal and historical truth. For a considered expression of these concerns, see the collection edited by Eileen Julien, Biodun Jeyifo, and Mamadou Diouf entitled *African Literature Between Humanism, Theory, and Ethnic/Area Studies*. This forthcoming collection of papers grew out of two African Studies Association roundtables and a workshop on the ways members of different disciplines use and refer to African novels. Julien and her coeditors are concerned that we remind students that novels are literary works in which the time and setting portrayed are mediated through the time and setting of the writer's location and the time and setting of the reader's location—where location is defined in terms of history, class, gender, and identity. It is useful to remind our students periodically that these are works of literature and not case studies of anthropology, politics, or history, although they will learn much about a particular African region during a certain period of time from reading any of these novels. In the present collection, there are particularly useful accounts of engaging students on the issues of fiction, representation, and historical truth in Chapters 10, 21, and 24.

I have found much of interest in the following chapters, even when they deal with novels I am already quite familiar with, and hope to apply some of the innovative teaching methods next semester. It is my hope you will find them useful as well.

## NOTE

1. Unfortunately for our purposes here, the three historians are discussing the links and similarities between history and historical fiction, rather than using the latter to teach the former.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

- Atwood, Margaret. 1998. "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," *American Historical Review* 103, 5: 1503–1516. Along with responses from historians Lynn Hunt, Jonathan Spence, and

- John Demos, Atwood's piece comprises a special "AHR Forum: Histories and Historical Fictions."
- Bastian, Misty L., and Jane L. Parpart, eds. 1999. *Great Ideas for Teaching About Africa*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner.
- Booker, M. Keith. 1998. *The African Novel in English: An Introduction*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann. A useful guide to teaching African literature, with discussions of the major issues students will need to confront, a historical survey of the development of the African novel, and specific chapters on eight representative novels.
- Cazenave, Odile. 1999. *Rebellious Women: The New Generation of Female African Novelists*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner.
- D'Almeida, Irene Assiba. 1994. *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Davies, Carole Boyce, ed. 1986. *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.
- Gunner, Elizabeth. 1987. *A Handbook for Teaching African Literature*, 2nd ed. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann. A marvelous introduction to using African literature in all forms in the classroom: novels, plays, short stories, poetry. Gunner includes teaching suggestions, discussion questions, audiovisual resources. While aimed at nonspecialist precollegiate teachers, contains useful tips for college teachers as well.
- Harrow, Kenneth W., ed. 1991. *Faces of Islam in African Literature*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Irele, Abiola. 1990. *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- JanMohamed, Abdul R. 1983. *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. Discusses the writings of six authors in interesting pairings. I learned much from his discussion of Ngugi's novels.
- Julien, Eileen. 1992. *African Novels and the Question of Orality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Julien, Eileen, Biodun Jeyifo, and Mamadou Diouf, eds. Forthcoming. *African Literature Between Humanism, Theory, and Ethnic/Area Studies*.
- Mortimer, Mildred P. 1990. *Journeys Through the French African Novel*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Owomoyela, Oyekan, ed. 1993. *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Research in African Literatures*. The preeminent scholarly journal of African literary criticism, beginning in 1970. Readers browsing through back issues will find articles of interest on all of the authors whose works are mentioned here.
- Zell, Hans, Carol Bundy, and Virginia Coulon. 1983. *A New Reader's Guide to African Literature*. New York: Africana. This exceptionally useful annotated reference work unfortunately ends in 1983 and is sadly in need of updating. Includes author biographies and country-by-country listing of published works.



# Peter Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udomo*

Richard Rathbone

A SESSION WITH A LIE DETECTOR WOULD PROBABLY elicit the real reason for my classroom use of Peter Abrahams's novel. The truth is that I always enjoy rereading it, and that my claim about its pedagogic value is, in some measure, an excuse for doing so. It does require some serious excusing. By no stretch of the most indulgent imagination is it great literature. It is unremittingly didactic, the dialogue is often desperately unreal, and the plot is extremely contrived. The characters are for the most part two-dimensional; the handful of women in the story enjoy or endure walk-on—or rather lie-down—parts. But it is a curiously powerful novel for reasons I try to outline in the course of this chapter.

But first, how do I use this book, and with whom? It finds its place in two history courses I teach. The first is a tightly focused, final-year undergraduate course on the late colonial period of Ghanaian history. Before commencing the course, the students must have read, over the summer vacation, Dennis Austin's *Politics in Ghana* and Kwame Nkrumah's autobiography *Ghana*, and they are asked for book reviews of one or another of these before admission to the course. For those claiming total ignorance, I recommend the later chapters of F. M. Bourret's short book *Ghana: The Road to Independence*, which still remains the most concise introduction to the place and the period.

The class is usually about fifteen strong, and they are all history majors. Although we are looking in detail only at the years between

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Peter Abrahams, *A Wreath for Udomo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956).