

Beyond Heart of Darkness:

WHEN JOSEPH CONRAD returned to London after a trip to the Belgian Congo in 1890, he portrayed a nation haunted by colonialism and savagery in his short masterpiece, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). “And this also,” says Conrad’s character Charles Marlow as he pilots a steamboat up the Congo River to relieve an ivory trader named Kurtz, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.”

A scathing criticism of European imperialism, occasionally faulted for dehumanizing, and stereotyping, black Africans and using them to represent the darkness into which European colonizers ventured, *Heart of Darkness* reveals the cultural complications of discovering unknown lands and people and unraveling the mysteries of the human soul.

Conrad’s depiction of colonialism, however unevenly spread across the continent, contributed to the Western world’s understanding of Africa a century ago. The legacy of European conquest also helped create the Africa of today. Most African countries gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, but ongoing political struggles and economic uncertainty have led to corruption, ethnic conflicts, border disputes, authoritarian regimes, and civil war; few African nations have been able to sustain democracies for significant periods of time.

Yet the end of colonial rule also witnessed an explosion of African literature in English, French, Portuguese, and traditional African languages. Many African writers from the mid-20th century on address the clash between Africa’s past and present; the continent’s vast economic and gender disparities; the social and political problems wrought by the legacy of colonialism; the challenges of establishing new, independent states; and the attempt of African nations to capture their own voices.

In the first section, we cover African writers of the mid- and late-20th century by general region; in the second, we feature a newer generation of writers who reflect the social, political, and economic diversities of 21st-century Africa. We have included writers born and living in Africa, as well as those now residing throughout the African diaspora. Since we have covered Middle Eastern writers in previous articles, we have omitted well-known writers from North Africa, such as Albert Camus and Naguib Mahfouz. We also do not discuss authors who, like V. S. Naipaul, have written about Africa but are not native to the continent. We have also omitted writers whose works, though they may be acclaimed throughout the African diaspora, are not readily available in English translation.

Postcolonial Africa in Contemporary Fiction

BY JESSICA TEISCH

The 20th Century

Western Africa

Chinua Achebe (Nigeria)

“One of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised.”

Considered the father of modern African literature, Achebe (1930–2013) wrote about Igbo traditions, the clash of Western and traditional African values, the effect of Christianity on society, and the social and political problems facing newly independent African states. An active voice in Biafran and Nigerian politics until its corruption left him disillusioned, Achebe, who wrote in English, chronicled the continent’s tumultuous history. *Things Fall Apart* (1958), perhaps the most widely read novel in African literature, depicts the life of a local leader and wrestling champion in a fictional Igbo village grappling with changes brought by British colonialism; *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964) are sequels. In *A Man of the People* (1966), a school teacher enters a corrupt political system in a country resembling

postcolonial Nigeria, and in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987; ♦ BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST), set in a West African country newly independent from British rule, a brutal military dictatorship takes over.



Ousmane Sembène (Senegal)

“Real misfortune is not just a matter of being hungry and thirsty; it is a matter of knowing that there are people who want you to be hungry and thirsty.”

Born in Ziguinchor, Senegal, to a Lebou family, Sembène (1923–2007) is a seminal figure in African literature and film, primarily for his exploration of the cultural practices surrounding African women (including female circumcision). Along with his films, Sembène, who attended both French and Islamic schools and wrote in French, is best known for his second novel, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), about the Senegalese and Malian response to colonialism in the 1940s, as well as for the novella *Xala* (1973), adapted to a film of the same name in 1975 and featuring a businessman in Senegal cursed with impotence upon his wedding to his young, beautiful third wife.

Wole Soyinka (Nigeria)

"The greatest threat to freedom is the absence of criticism."

Soyinka, born into a Yoruba family in Abeokuta, Nigeria, in 1934, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 and remains one of the most prominent voices in and from Africa (though he has taught in the United Kingdom and the United States). Like many of his fellow Nigerian writers, Soyinka was outspoken on the Biafran War and called for a ceasefire in 1967. He recounts his subsequent imprisonment in his memoir, *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1972), and much of his work deals with oppression. Although most notable as a playwright and a poet, Soyinka is also an acclaimed novelist. In *Season of Anomie* (1973), he retells the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice—in the Nigerian context, particularly the chaos that led to the Biafran War.

Ayi Kwei Armah (Ghana)

"Alone, I am nothing. I have nothing. We have power. But we will never know it, we will never see it work. Unless we come together to make it work."

Descended from a royal family in the Ga nation in Ghana, Armah, who was born in 1939 and educated at Harvard and Columbia University, wields fiction to criticize a country overrun by nepotism and corruption. Armah's best known novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), echoes the French existential tradition as its Ghanaian protagonist, a railway freight clerk, tries to make sense of both his life and his nation following the betrayal of Ghana's dreams of independence. Armah followed this classic text of Western African literature with other works, including *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), *The Healers* (1978), *Osiris Rising* (1995), and *The Eloquent of the Scribes* (2006).

Mariama Bâ (Senegal)

"The flavour of life is love. The salt of life is also love."

Born in Dakar, Senegal, in 1929, into a well-to-do, educated family, Bâ was raised as a Muslim. Preoccupied with gender inequalities in African and Islamic cultural traditions, she struggled to gain an education, eventually attending a teacher training college. After she was left to care for her nine children following her divorce from a Senegalese member of Parliament, she started to write in French. Her first novel, *So Long a Letter* (1981), a key feminist text written as a letter from a Muslim widow to a childhood friend in the United States, expresses the frustration with the fate of African women. Bâ's second novel, *Scarlet*

Song (1986), which also gained international attention for its exploration of intermarriage between a Senegalese Muslim man and a European woman, was published after her death in 1981.



Amos Tutuola (Nigeria)

"Hard to salute each other, harder to describe each other, and hardest to look at each other at our destination!"

Amos Tutuola (1920–1997), a Nigerian contemporary of Achebe's, based his books on Yoruba folk tales. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), the novel that earned him international acclaim, draws on the West African oral folktale tradition; Tutuola, who trained as a blacksmith, had scant formal education and wrote in broken English. The novel describes the fantastical odyssey of a palm-wine drinker who enters the land of "Deads' Town," a world of magic, ghosts, and supernatural beings. Tutuola followed this metaphorical novel with *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), which explores the fate of mortals who reside in the world of ghosts—the heart of a tropical forest.

Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria)

"God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? she prayed desperately!"

Emecheta (born in Lagos in 1944, educated in London, and currently living there) has influenced the newest generation of West African female writers, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (see below). In more than 20 books, including *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), Emecheta explores the struggles of Nigerian women and children. She once described her work as "stories of the world ... [where] ... women face the universal problems of poverty and oppression, and the longer they stay, no matter where they have come from originally, the more the problems become identical." Emecheta left Nigeria at age 16, when she married a man who moved to London to study, and had five children; at age 22, she left her abusive marriage. Her other novels, including *The Slave Girl* (1977) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), examine the ways in which writing can become a mode of resistance within a largely patriarchal culture.

Ben Okri (Nigeria)

"I grew up in a tradition where there are simply more dimensions to reality: legends and myths and ancestors and spirits and death. ... Nobody has an absolute reality!"

Born in Minna, Nigeria, in 1959, Okri is a postmodern poet, novelist, and essayist. After a childhood in London, Okri returned to Nigeria; he now lives in England. *The Famished Road* (1991), the first in a trilogy, won the Booker Prize. A work of magical realism, it chronicles the life of a spirit-child narrator, Azaro, as he experiences the violent turmoil of a country resembling Nigeria. *Songs of Enchantment* (1994) and *Infinite Riches* (1999) continue the story.

Further Reading

THE CONCUBINE (1966) | ELECHI AMADI (NIGERIA)

Eastern Africa

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Kenya)

"Our lives are a battlefield on which is fought a continuous war between the forces that are pledged to confirm our humanity and those determined to dismantle it."

Born into a peasant family in Kenya in 1938, Ngũgĩ is a celebrated intellectual, playwright, journalist, novelist, and social activist who currently teaches at the University of California, Irvine. British rule, the Mau Mau struggle for independence in the 1950s, and neocolonial Kenya influenced much of his writing. Ngũgĩ's first major play, *The Black Hermit* (1962), and his first novel *Weep Not, Child* (1964), the first postcolonial novel about the East African colonial experience, established his reputation. His second novel, *The River Between* (1965), involves two villages separated by different faiths during the uprising; his third, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), explores the state of emergency in Kenya's struggle through multiple narrators and story lines. Ngũgĩ's criticisms of postcolonial Kenyan society's injustices led to his imprisonment in 1977, an experience reflected in his memoir *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1982). In 2004, Ngũgĩ's fantastical novel *Wizard of the Crow*, set in the imaginary Free Republic of Aburiria, brought him further international acclaim.

Nuruiddin Farah (Somalia)

"Somalia is no longer what it was. It's past reconstruction. How can you reconstruct a country that's self-destructing continuously?"

Based in Cape Town, South Africa, but born in Somalia in 1945, Farah fled his native land in 1963, three years after Somalia's independence and following violent border conflicts. After studying in India, Farah began writing novels, plays, and essays about his native country, from which he

was unofficially exiled after the publication of *A Naked Needle* (1976), about postrevolutionary Somali life in the mid-1970s. His three trilogies, concerning the paternalistic social dynamic of oppressions, form the core of his fiction. Perhaps the best known is *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, comprising *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981), and *Close Sesame* (1983), which offers a quasi-Orwellian portrait of life under autocratic rule.

Further Reading

NERVOUS CONDITIONS (1988) | TSITSI DANGAREMBGA (ZIMBABWE)

GOING DOWN RIVER ROAD (1977) | MEJA MWANGI (KENYA)

THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL (2003) | M. G. VASSANJI (KENYA/TANZANIA/CANADA)

Southern Africa

Nadine Gordimer (South Africa)

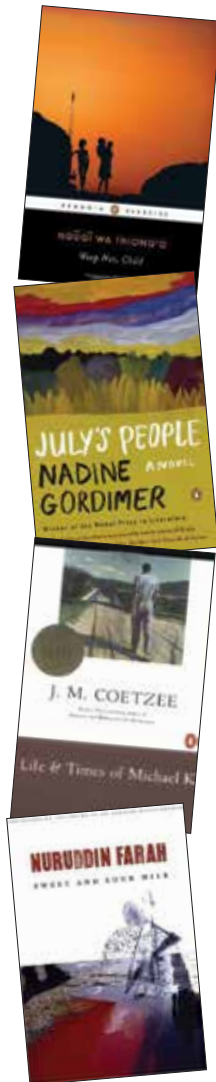
"Writing is making sense of life. You work your whole life and perhaps you've made sense of one small area."

Nadine Gordimer (1923–), who received the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature, has long addressed moral and racial issues, particularly in apartheid South Africa. The daughter of Jewish immigrants and activists, Gordimer grew up surrounded by discrimination and poverty, concerns present in her fiction. *July's People* (1981), which was banned under apartheid, envisions a violent South African revolution by black people against an apartheid government. *The Conservationist* (1974, ♦ BOOKER PRIZE) explores a white conservationist's beliefs and designs for Zulu culture, while *Burger's Daughter* (1979), banned by the South African government, is about the daughter of antiapartheid revolutionaries. Gordimer currently lives in Johannesburg.

J. M. Coetzee (South Africa)

"We must cultivate, all of us, a certain ignorance, a certain blindness, or society will not be tolerable."

"First and last, J. M. Coetzee is the essential novelist of the new South Africa," wrote critic Robert McCrum after Coetzee became the second South African, following Nadine Gordimer, to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. In his nearly two dozen novels, memoirs, and essay collections, Coetzee, born in 1940 and now a citizen of Australia, probes South Africa's dark history with his lean, detached poststructuralist's style. Themes of racism, politics, moral disorder, and tyrannical state power—assaults against apartheid and postapartheid violence—anchor his works. He tackles diverse subjects—from human suffering in *Life and Times of Michael K* to the art of narration in *Foe* (1986). He is also the first writer to have won the Booker prize twice,



for *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), about a Cape Town gardener-turned-squatter accused of terrorist conspiracy, and *Disgrace* (1999), featuring a twice-divorced professor at a thinly disguised University of Cape Town during the Mandela era.

Further Reading

A QUESTION OF POWER (1974) | BESSIE HEAD (BOTSWANA)

MATING BIRDS (1983) | LEWIS NKOSI (SOUTH AFRICA)

TSOTSI (1980) | ATHOL FUGARD (SOUTH AFRICA)

THE NEXT GENERATION African Voices in the 21st Century

Western Africa

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria)

“Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”

Born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1977 to a well-educated Igbo family, Adichie, a MacArthur “genius” grant recipient, is widely regarded as one of the most important voices to emerge in contemporary African literature. Her first novel, the award-winning *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), reflects the violence of postcolonial Nigeria. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (♦ ORANGE PRIZE; ★★★★★ **SELECTION** Nov/Dec 2006) draws on her family’s experience and Nigeria’s history a decade before her birth to explore the Biafran War. Adichie, who divides her time between Nigeria and the United States, explores the incongruities of Nigerian immigrant life in America in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (★★★★ **SELECTION** Sept/Oct 2009), a collection of short stories, and in her most recent novel *Americanah* (★★★★ July/Aug 2013).

Teju Cole (Nigeria)

“To be alive, it seemed to me, as I stood there in all kinds of sorrow, was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be reflection alone.”

After a Nigerian childhood, Cole, a historian, photographer, and writer, moved to the United States, where he is now a writer in residence at Bard College. *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007), a novella, considers a Nigeria in rapid transformation through the eyes of a Nigerian who returns home after many years abroad. *Open City* (♦ HEMINGWAY/PEN AWARD; ★★★★★ July/Aug 2011), Cole’s first full-length novel, features a Nigerian psychiatric resident in New York City

who considers history, politics, race, and what it means to be a foreigner in post-9/11 America.

Uwem Akpan (Nigeria)

“I think fiction allows us to sit for a while with people we would rather not meet.”

Hailed as a major literary debut, *Say You’re One of Them* (★★★★ **SELECTION** Sept/Oct 2008), which is narrated by children, shines light on the worst hardships they and their families experience in all parts of Africa—from selling children into sexual slavery to navigating the Hutu-Tutsi conflict. The short story collection won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, the PEN Open Book Award, and was an Oprah Book Club selection. Akpan, born in Nigeria 1971, received his MFA from the University of Michigan; now a Jesuit priest, he teaches at a seminary in Zimbabwe.

Aminatta Forna (UK; Sierra Leone)

“War had the effect of encouraging people to try to stay alive. Poverty, too. Survival was simply too hard-won to be given up lightly.”

Named by *Vanity Fair* in 2007 as one of Africa’s best new writers, Forna, a Scottish-born British writer and documentary maker born in 1964, uses multiple narrators and shifting chronology to explore the prelude and aftermath to war. She spent much of her childhood in Sierra Leone, where her father worked as a physician and entered government; in 1975, he was hanged on charges of treason. Forna’s investigation into his death inspired her memoir *The Devil that Danced on the Water* (2003). Her fiction offers an equally powerful exploration into the weight of the past: *Ancestor Stones* (2007), a West African family saga that spans village life to civil war; *The Memory of Love* (2010; ♦ COMMONWEALTH PRIZE, ORANGE PRIZE SHORT LIST); and *The Hired Man* (2013).

Eastern Africa

Dinaw Mengestu (Ethiopia; U.S.)

“I’m writing about people from Africa in America, people in a state of migration.”

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1978 and raised in Washington, D.C., Mengestu, a MacArthur “genius” grant recipient, has written two novels about the immigration experience: *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) and *How to Read the Air* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2011), which was excerpted in the *New Yorker* when he was chosen as



one of their “20 under 40” writers in 2010. Mengestu has also written nonfiction pieces on the war in Darfur and the conflict in northern Uganda; he currently teaches at Georgetown University.

Maaza Mengiste (Ethiopia; U.S.)

“When you are convinced that everything that happens is the will of God, what is there to do but wait until God has mercy?”

Mengiste, who was born in Addis Ababa and lived in Nigeria and Kenya before settling in the United States, has portrayed the Ethiopian revolution, the plight of Africans in the diaspora, and human rights in her fiction, nonfiction, and documentaries. In her debut novel, the award-winning *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* (2009), set in the period of upheaval following the Communist revolution in Ethiopia in the 1970s, a family takes different paths in life. Mengiste currently teaches creative writing at Princeton University.

Yvonne Vera (Zimbabwe)

“Time is as necessary for remembering as it is for forgetting.”

Vera’s life was cut tragically short when she died of AIDS-related meningitis in 2005, but it was a life filled with inspiration. Born in 1964 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), Vera studied in Canada and then returned to Zimbabwe in 1995 to direct the national gallery in Bulawayo. She soon became known as a short fiction writer and novelist concerned with female politics and issues such as infanticide, rape, and gender inequality. Her best known novel, the lyrical *Butterfly Burning* (1998), set in the mid-1940s black township of Makokoba in Bulawayo, tells of a doomed love story while capturing the hardships of the would-be lovers’ lives.

Middle Africa

Alain Mabanckou (Congo)

“I’m giving more visibility to the Congo by writing in France. Writers are ambassadors of their countries.”

Franco-Congolese novelist Alain Mabanckou, born in 1966, is among the best known poets and novelists writing in French. Referred to as Africa’s Samuel Beckett, he was selected by *Vanity Fair* as one of Africa’s greatest living writers. His fiction includes *Black Bazaar* (2009), a dark, comic story set in a Parisian Afro-Cuban bar; *Memoirs of a Por-*

cupine (2011), about a Congolese boy and his porcupine double who become accomplices in murder; and *African Psycho* (2007), a monologue of a would-be serial killer. In his best-known novel, *Broken Glass* (2009), a former teacher sits in a derelict Congolese bar and scribbles stories of those who drink beside him.

Northern Africa

Leila Aboulela (Egypt and Sudan)

“There was definitely a weight pushing down on the world. Misfortune was always hovering close around people’s shoulders. But she would fight it off, and keep fighting with all her might.”

Born in 1964 in Cairo, Aboulela grew up in Khartoum, Sudan, and currently lives in Aberdeen, Scotland. Writing novels and plays in English, she explores the Muslim faith, as well as the effects of Sudan’s political instability on its denizens. *Lyrics Alley* (2010) features an affluent Sudanese family torn apart by their country’s politics and the rift between traditional and modern values. In *The Translator* (2006), a young Muslim widow living in Scotland falls in love with a secular academic, and in *Minaret* (2005), a Muslim woman in London—once an upper-class Westernized Sudanese, now a housemaid—gradually embraces her faith. All three novels were long-listed for the Orange Prize.

Further Reading

ON BLACK SISTERS STREET (2009; ♦ NIGERIA PRIZE FOR LITERATURE) | CHIKA UNIGWE (NIGERIA)

THIRTEEN CENTS (2000; ♦ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE FOR BEST FIRST BOOK, AFRICA REGION) | K. SELLO DUIKER (SOUTH AFRICA)

WE NEED NEW NAMES (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2013) | NOVIOLET BULAWAYO (ZIMBABWE)

GHANA MUST GO (2013) | TAIYE SELASI (GHANA)

TROPICAL FISH: STORIES OUT OF ENTEBBE (2005; ♦ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE FOR BEST FIRST BOOK, AFRICA REGION) | DOREEN BAINGANA (UGANDA)

AN ELEGY FOR EASTERLY: STORIES (2009; ♦ GUARDIAN FIRST BOOK AWARD) | PETINA GAPPAN (ZIMBABWE)

HARARE NORTH (2009) | BRIAN CHIKWAVA (ZIMBABWE)

WAITING FOR AN ANGEL (2004; ♦ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE, AFRICA REGION) | HELON HABILA (NIGERIA)

THE SUN BY NIGHT (2006; ♦ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE, BEST BOOK AFRICA REGION) | BENJAMIN KWAKYE (GHANA)

THE HAIRDRESSER OF HARARE (2010) | TENDAI HUCHU (ZIMBABWE)

EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME (2005) | SEFI ATTA (NIGERIA)

GRACELAND (2004) | CHRIS ABANI (NIGERIA)

BEASTS OF NO NATION (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2006) | UZODINMA IWEALA (NIGERIA; UNITED STATES) ■

