

AS 100.445
African Fiction as History
Spring 2013

Professor: Pier M. Larson
Office: 330G Gilman Hall
Tel: 410-516-5582
Email: larsom@jhu.edu
Office Hours: Wednesday 3-5, and by appointment.

Meeting Time: Monday, 2:00 – 3:50
Meeting Place: New Engineering Building, G02

Description and Scope

This is an upper level course in African history requiring extensive reading and analytical writing. Employing the historical novel as its entry point, the course lies on the boundary between literature and history. All the novels selected for the course engage the experiences of Africans in historical context. The reading consists of a particular kind of African fiction: that which lends itself well to illuminating the historical experiences of African peoples. The chronological focus for the reading comprises the pre-colonial, colonial, and early postcolonial eras, or roughly the last two centuries.

By its conception and its assigned readings, this is neither a typical history nor a common literature course. It might best be characterized as an African humanities and historical criticism course whose subject matter is the relation of historical fiction to human experience and social criticism. The coverage of Africa's history and literature presented here is not comprehensive. It is, however, a representative venture into several themes of significance to African history. The joys and conflicts of African life and the political and cultural preoccupations of Africans are especially accessible through literature. Literature is also a useful entry point into historical interpretation, for novelists are by the nature of their work both theorists and historiographers in addition to astute observers of the human condition.

In this course, we will investigate the literary qualities of the works we read but also employ fiction as an entry into understanding the historical forces operating in Africa and the varied experiences of African people over the last two centuries. We will also work to understand the positions that authors take on the themes about which they write. African literature, for example, is often on the cutting edge of postcolonial African political criticism. This is in part because much African literature has been produced and published in the context of decolonization and independence, and has consciously engaged specifically African historical experiences of the recent past. Many a writer has served time in Africa's jails for words interpreted by the powerful as trenchant, unwelcome commentary on modern political, cultural, and social life.

Required Novels, University Bookstore & Reserve

(You may acquire many books less expensively on the internet, including at www.bookdepository.com, which the professor recommends in addition to other sites)

Dalene Matthee. *Fiela's Child*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1985]. 360p.

ISBN 9780226510835. The realities and absurdities of race and identity in nineteenth-century South Africa.

Thomas Mofolo. *Chaka*. Translated by Daniel P. Kunene. London: Heinemann, 1981 [1925]. 168p. ISBN 9780435902292. The rise and fall of an African emperor in southeast Africa, nineteenth century.

Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994 [1959]. 224p. ISBN 9780385474542. A Nigerian farmer experiences the colonization of his society.

Abdulrazak Gurnah. *Paradise*. New York: New Press, 1995 [1994]. 256p. ISBN 9781565841635. The life and travails of a young man in early colonial Tanzania.

Buchi Emecheta. *The Joys of Motherhood*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994 [1979]. 224p. ISBN 9780435913540. A mother's struggles in colonial Lagos, Nigeria.

Ousmane Sembene. *God's Bits of Wood*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996 [1960]. 256p. ISBN 9780435909598. The 1947-48 Dakar-Niger Railway Strike.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child*. New York: Penguin, 2012. [1964]. 176p. ISBN 9780143106692. The effects of the Mau Mau war (Kenya, 1950s) on the lives of ordinary men and women.

Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004 [1988]. 224p. ISBN 9780954702335. Coming of age novel about a girl set in white ruled colonial Rhodesia during the 1960s.

Assia Djebar. *Children of the New World: A Novel of the Algerian War*. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2005 [1962]. 233p. ISBN 9781558615106. The FLN war against French colonization/departmentalization (late 50s & early 60s) and how it affects the lives of men and women in an Algerian town.

Mariama Ba. *So Long a Letter*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1989 [1980]. 96p. ISBN 9780435913526. The life of a middle class Senegalese woman during the late colonial and early independence eras.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007 [2006]. 560p. ISBN 9781400095209. A fictionalized tale of the Biafra war in Nigeria, 1967-69.

Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. New York: Dial Press, Random House, 2008 [2006]. 246p. ISBN 9780385340434. The politics of 1970s Libya and its effects on a family as seen through the eyes of a boy.

Required Coursework:

1. Attend every class. You must notify the professor *beforehand* if you are going to miss a class.

2. Read the assigned novels and be prepared to discuss them each week.

3. Informal weekly reaction/thought papers. These are informal (grammar, spelling, and organization are not checked) but must be typed, not handwritten. One page, single spaced, is adequate. These papers must be turned in to the professor at the end of class. The paper should record your informal reaction to the week's assigned reading. Strive to answer questions listed below in item 4. Each paper should also raise three or more questions or issues for the class to deliberate, and you should raise these verbally during discussion. The questions should be thought-provoking ones for your fellow students to consider, not simple informational questions for the professor to answer. Ten points will be subtracted from your final grade for each reaction paper not turned in *on time*. You must turn in *your own* reaction paper and it is a violation of academic honesty to have another person turn it in for you.

4. Class presentation. Each student must choose a novel in the assigned reading on which to make a presentation at the beginning of the class considering that novel. The presentation should include a discussion of the life (biography) and writings of the author and a discussion of the novel itself. What is the novel about? What historical event or era, and place, is it set in? What background information on this era, event, place, or theme is important to understanding the novel? What positions does the author take? What perspective on the issues or historical period does the author advocate? What do you think about the novel and the positions the author takes? Provide as much information about the author, the historical era, and the author's interpretation as you can based on your research (Wikipedia is only a starting place, if that!). Your presentation should be at least 15 minutes long and you are encouraged to use multimedia if possible. You should prepare for your oral presentation carefully.

5. Research paper on your chosen novel, at least 10 full pages, times new roman font, 12 point, 1 inch margins. This should be an expansion of your class presentation to be a discussion of the novel, the historical event/era it is about, and its interpretations. You have a fair amount of leeway in this paper. The paper is due in class one week after your in-class presentation; it must also be electronically uploaded to Turnitin.com.

6. Research paper on an additional novel of your choice not on the required reading list, at least 10 full pages, times new roman font, 12 point, 1 inch margins. You may choose from novels listed below in the syllabus or suggest a different novel to the professor (subject to his approval). The paper should be of the same nature as your first paper. This paper is due in the professor's office mailbox on or before Wednesday, May 15 at 4 pm; it must also be electronically uploaded to Turnitin.com.

Class Schedule:

Meeting One: January 28: Introduction

Meeting Two: February 4: Matthee, *Fiefa's Child*

Meeting Three: February 11: Mofolo, *Chaka*

Meeting Four: February 18: Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

Meeting Five: February 25: Gurnah, *Paradise*

Meeting Six: March 4: Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*

Meeting Seven: March 11: Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood*

Meeting Eight: March 25: Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child*

Meeting Nine: April 1: Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*

Meeting Ten: April 8: Djebbar, *Children of the New World*

Meeting Eleven: April 15: Ba, *So Long a Letter*

Meeting Twelve: April 22: Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Meeting Thirteen: April 29: Matar, *In the Country of Men*

Additional Literature for your Second Paper:

D. T. Niane, *Sundiata, An Epic of Old Mali* (1960)

Recounts the origins of the Mali empire from oral traditions.

Maryse Condé, *Ségu* (1985)

Islam and the slave trade among the Bambara in the eighteenth century.

Helon Habila, *Waiting for an Angel* (2002)

Detention of a journalist in Sani Abacha's Nigeria (1990s).

Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea* (2001)

A merchant refugee from Zanzibar applies for asylum in England.

Abubaker Tafawa Balewa, *Shaihu Umar* (1955)

A kidnapped and enslaved child in turn-of-the-century northern Nigeria.

Buchi Emecheta, *The Slave Girl* (1977)

The life of a slave girl in southern Nigeria during the early colonial period.

Amadou Hampaté Ba, *The Fortunes of Wangrin* (1973)

The story of a rogue and operator in colonial French West Africa; an interpretation of colonialism.

T. Obinkaram Echewa, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (1992)

The Aba Women's War of 1929 (southeast Nigeria).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (1965)

Christianity and the 1929 "female circumcision crisis" in Kikuyuland, Kenya.

Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962)

The dilemmas of education for a Muslim family in colonial Senegal.

Ferdinand Oyono, *Houseboy* (1956)

Depicts honestly but with humor the often brutal life of a houseboy in the service of a French commandant during the colonial era.

Peter Abrahams, *Mine Boy* (1946)

A young man copes with mine labor and life in Johannesburg in 1940s South Africa.

Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (1974)

Race and the dilemmas of the "coloured" in Apartheid Southern Africa.

Mongo Beti, *Mission to Kala* (1957)

A student who failed his exams returns home in Cameroon and becomes embroiled in local marital politics,

M. G. Vassanji, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003)

Indians in Kenya during the late colonial era, and Mau Mau.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967)

A tale of the secrets of the liberation struggle in Kenya on the eve of independence.

Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes: A Love Story* (1991)

Postindependent Ghana, the dilemmas of gender, love, and sex.

Moses Isegawa, *Abyssinian Chronicles* (1998)

War, rape, poverty, and AIDS in Uganda during and since the rule of Amin.

Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (1966)

Politics in early postcolonial Nigeria.

Meja Mwangi, *Kill Me Quick* (1973)

Educated street youth in Nairobi, Kenya.

Meja Mwangi, *Going Down River Road* (1976)

Life in Nairobi, Kenya.

Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters* (1965)

Six Nigerian academics in the early postcolonial period.

Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968)

Work and moral dilemmas involving corruption in post-independent Africa.

Nuruddin Farah, *Sardines: A Novel* (1981)

Family life and Islam in Somalia under the ruler of a dictator.

Nuruddin Farah, *Maps* (1986)

Somali relationships during the Ogaden war.

Pepetela, *Mayombe* (1980)

Soldiers of the MPLA (Angola) and their war against Portuguese colonialism in the 1960s.

Nawal el Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (1979)

A prostitute is condemned for murdering her pimp; women's lives in post-independent Egypt.

Sony Labou Tansi, *The Antipeople* (1983)

Two young women vie for the attention of a married school principle; a story of postcolonial central Africa in upheaval.

Benjamin Kwakye, *The Clothes of Nakedness* (1998)

The dilemmas of unemployment in postindependent Accra, Ghana.

Mia Couto, *Sleepwalking Land* (1992)

A tale of refugees and Mozambique's postcolonial wars.

Mia Couto, *Last Flight of the Flamingo* (2000)

Mozambique and the international community after the war, with criticism of all.

Sindiwe Magona, *To My Children's Children* (1990)

A young woman comes of age in Apartheid South Africa.

Naguib Mahfouz, *Chitchat on the Nile* (1966)

The decadence of Egyptian society during the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Naguib Mahfouz, *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961)

The life of Said Mahran, a thief recently released from jail and intent on having his vengeance on the people who put him there (Egypt).

Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar* (1967)

In the Miramar guest house (Alexandria, Egypt, 1960s), a young girl hired to do chores for the residents provokes jealousies and conflicts that inevitably lead to violence and tragedy.

Ahmadou Kourouma, *Allah is not Obligated* (2000)

A tale of an orphan who becomes a child soldier when traveling to visit his aunt in Liberia.

Ahmadou Kourouma, *The Suns of Independence* (1968)

A critical treatment of post-colonial governments in Africa.

Tsitsi Dangaremba, *The Book of Not* (2006)

A sequel to *Nervous Conditions*; Tambu's travails in late colonial and early majority-rule Zimbabwe.

J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (1999)

A professor has an affair with a student in post-Apartheid South Africa and his life falls apart.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003)

A new world is opened to two children who visit their aunt in Nsukka (Nigeria) from their religious and dysfunctional home in Enugu.

Chris Abani, *Becoming Abigail* (2006)

Abigail is brought as a teenager by family from Nigeria to London; they subsequently try to force her into prostitution.

Tahar Ben Jelloun, *The Last Friend* (2006)

Two men recount their childhood and imprisonment in Tangier, Morocco, and begin to realize their differences.