

AS 100.445
African Fiction as History
Fall 2008

Professor: Pier M. Larson
Office: 1401D Dell House
Tel: 410-516-5582
Email: larson@jhu.edu
Office Hours: Immediately after class and by appointment.

Meeting Time: Tuesday, 1:30-4:30 (class will typically end well before 4:30)
Meeting Place: Mattin Center 160

Description

This is an upper level course in African history requiring extensive reading and analytical, investigative writing. Using the African historical novel as its entrypoint, this course sits on the boundary between literature and history. All the novels selected for the course engage the experiences of Africans in Africa and in historical context. With the exception of René Maran (born in Martinique), the authors were all born in Africa. The reading consists of a particular kind of African fiction: that which lends itself well to understanding and discussion of the historical experiences of African peoples. The chronological focus is the colonial and early postcolonial eras, roughly the last century.

By its nature and readings, this is neither a normal history course nor a typical literature class. It might be best characterized as an African civilization and historical criticism course whose subject matter is historical fiction. The coverage of Africa's history and literature presented here is not comprehensive. It is eclectic. The flavor of daily life and the civilization of a people can often be experienced through literature. Literature is also an extremely useful entrypoint into historical interpretation. In this course, we will strive to appreciate all of these dimensions of literature, but we will also use fiction as a springboard to further investigate the historical forces and experiences depicted in the novels as well as to understand the positions that particular authors and critics have taken on these through their fictional writing.

Required Novels (University Bookstore & Reserve)

- Dalene Matthee. *Field's Child*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1985]. 360p. 0226510832. The realities and absurdities of race and identity in late nineteenth century South Africa.
- Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994 [1959]. 224p. 0385474547. A Nigerian farmer experiences the colonization of his society.
- René Maran. *Batouala*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1988 [1921]. 156p. 0435901354. The life of a chief in the French colony of Ubangui-Shari, French Equatorial Africa, or AEF.

- Mariama Ba. *So Long a Letter*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1989 [1980]. 96p. 0435905554. The life of a middle class Senegalese woman during the colonial era.
- Ousmane Sembene. *God's Bits of Wood*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996 [1960]. 256p. 0435909592. The 1947-48 Dakar-Niger Railway Strike.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1988 [1964]. 144p. 0435908308. The effects of the Mau Mau war (Kenya, 1950s) on the lives of ordinary men and women.
- Buchi Emecheta. *The Joys of Motherhood*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994 [1979]. 224p. 043590972X. A mother's struggles in 1950s Lagos, Nigeria.
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007 [2006]. 560p. 1400095204. The Biafra war (Nigeria, 1967-69).
- Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004 [1988]. 224p. 0954702336. Coming of age novel about a girl set in white ruled colonial Rhodesia during the 1960s.
- Mia Couto. *Sleepwalking Land*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2006 [1992]. 256p. 185242897X. A tale of refugees and Mozambique's postcolonial wars.
- Helon Habila. *Waiting for an Angel*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004 [2002]. 236p. 0393325113. Detention of a journalist in Sani Abacha's Nigeria (1990s).

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 Monday, December 15 at 10 am; it must also be electronically uploaded to Turnitin.com.

Class Schedule:

Meeting One: September 9: Introduction

Meeting Two: September 16: Matthee, *Fiel's Child*

Meeting Three: September 23: Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

Meeting Four: September 30: Maran, *Batouala*

Meeting Five: October 7: Ba, *So Long a Letter*

Meeting Six: October 14: Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood*

Meeting Seven: October 21: Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child*

Meeting Eight: October 28: Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*

Meeting Nine: November 4: Adichie. *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Meeting Ten: November 11: Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions*

Meeting Eleven: November 18: Couto. *Sleepwalking Land*

November 25: No class meeting.

Meeting Twelve: December 2: Habila. *Waiting for an Angel*

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 Tradition.

Maryse Condé, *Segu (1985)*

Islam and the Slave Trade among the Bambara in the eighteenth century.

Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka (1931)*

The life and times of Shaka Zulu, founder of the Zulu kingdom.

Abubaker Tafawa Balewa, *Shaihu Umar (1955)*

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

Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise (1994)*

The life of young indentured laborer along the Swahili Coast during the first world war.

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)*

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 humour the often brutal life of a houseboy in the service of a French commandant

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.
- Pepetela, *Mayombe* (1980)**
Soldiers of the MPLA (Angola) and their war against Portuguese colonialism.
- Nawal el Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (1979)**
A prostitute in Egypt condemned for murdering her pimp.
- 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 postindependence Accra, Ghana.

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

Mozambique between war and the international community.

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

A young woman comes of age in Apartheid South Africa.

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

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