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Book Reviews

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'O, *Wizard of the Crow: A Novel* Pantheon, 2006.

What are we to make of this huge, hilarious novel? What does it tell us about Kenya? About African history? About African Civilization?

James Ngũgĩ was born in 1938 on a farm 12 miles outside of Nairobi. His father, like the majority of the Gikuyu in this area, was a dispossessed farmer forced to become a squatter on the land of one of the few propertied African landowners. His mother was one of four wives and he had 27 brothers and sisters.

After going to a Mission-run school for two years he was sent to a school of the Karing'a, an independent movement run by Africans. His secondary school, equivalent to high school, was directed by an alliance of Protestant schools in Kenya. During this period the Mau Mau movement began. He was not involved in this, but his primary and secondary education may have provided an inclination toward Kenyan and African liberation.

He went to college at Makerere University in Uganda, the only institution conferring degrees. Here he seems to have participated in literary and creative rather than political activities, though his writing certainly had political implications. While he was an undergraduate, his first novel was published and he also wrote short stories and plays, one of which he helped produce, and an occasional column in a Nairobi newspaper. He also began a partnership that led to marriage and the birth of five children in the next eleven years. His wife's name is Nyambura; the heroine of *The Wizard* is Nyawira.

After several months as a newspaper reporter he went to Leeds University to do graduate work, and in both these activities he met a number of radicals. Leeds gave him the opportunity to visit literary conferences in Europe, Russia, America and the Middle East. Obviously, since he came from a poor family, and had funding for college, overseas graduate work, and world conferences, he must have been an impressive scholar and, from reading Wizard, I infer he had an attractive personality.

Returning to Nairobi, he was in various conflicts, resigning from Nairobi University after a dispute about its colonial curriculum. He acquired a reputation as a leading writer during this period and among other things was a visiting professor at Northwestern, where he became acquainted with the slums of Chicago. He saw the Negro in America as an exploited class, and was not surprised at the riots that occurred in areas he had visited.

He returned to Nairobi University as chair of the renamed "Department of Literature" promoting a focus on world literature, including African, rather than just on English. In 1977, however, he published his fourth novel, *Petals of Blood*; a popular play praising the Mau Mau; and a play in the Gikuyu language in Limuru, his hometown, which was closed by the government after one performance. On New Year's Eve of that year he was arrested. He spent a year in prison without being charged, then was released, ironically, with the accession of Daniel Arap Moi, who succeeded Jomo Kenyatta, and who is mocked, as "The Ruler", in *The Wizard*. After his release, and despite his never having been charged, Nairobi University refused to allow him to return to his position.

Four years later, when he was in London launching one of his novels, he learned that he would be arrested, presumably

for his writing, if he returned to Nairobi. He has been an exile ever since, writing, serving as a visiting professor and as a member of the faculty first in the State University of New York, then at the University of California. He had published six novels as of 1997, some of them written in Gikuyu and later translated to English, along with plays and books on Kenyan and African politics.

The novel *Wizard of the Crow* is long, well written, as compelling as it is funny. Obviously Ngũgĩ is given to exaggeration, but it also seems likely that many of its episodes are based on events. When the government seeks World Bank funds to support a project to build a tower to heaven, completing what the Babylonians failed to do, we know that no such project existed, but expect that funds were requested for the building of something equally unlikely to succeed. When the government seeks to spin the appearance of queues all over the country, you sense exaggeration but can believe that there probably were queues in Kenya, and that these would have been an embarrassment. When the ruler interprets a warning from the Wizard that the country is pregnant with the danger of rebellion to mean that he is pregnant--since is he not the country?—it is easy to believe the impact on a developing country of the combination of sound-bites and literalism.

This last reads differently in the light of Kenyan riots of the past year arising out of tribalism and a glaring failure of democracy. But at the time of the publication of *Wizard of the Crow*, Kenya was perceived in the West as a peaceful and well run country. And, although Ngũgĩ has plenty to mock concerning democracy, corruption, poverty, women's rights and every other problem you can think of, he has virtually nothing to say about tribalism. I could have missed

something in the book's hundreds of pages, but it is not high on his list of problems.

The Wizard is an unemployed college graduate who stumbles into becoming a seer, giving good moral advice that is misinterpreted, he benefits the recipients, and he raises his reputation so that the government first seeks his advice, then fears his power. He loves Nyawira, a secretary, who becomes a leading force in a lively, creative and brave woman's movement.

The novel is too long, as each section suggests two more to Ngũgĩ, but I kept reading, laughing and shaking my (white) head over this magnificent, hilarious portrayal of the foibles of men (women come off better).

Biting humor seems to be a tradition in Kenyan writing that precedes Ngũgĩ. But it infuses the book, even in ghastly situations. It would appear that this sense of humor emerged slowly, as his range spread from villages to the impact of government on village and town, to the whole range of political questions and to the nation's relation to the world.

But can Ngũgĩ tell us about African civilization? In J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, the novelist of the book, meets an African author, and observes that he makes his living giving speeches around the world about Africa, but cannot write in his own language because there would be few readers and no publisher. Therefore, she concludes, he is an unreliable observer. We come to realize in reading further in the novel, however, that she herself is unreliable.

So what about Ngũgĩ? He has written in Gikuyu, a language apparently spoken by a sufficient number of Kenyans to justify publication. But he also has been in exile for three decades and is now approaching 70, a professor of literature in an American university. As compared, say, to the Nobel Prize-winning Nigerian, Wole Soyinka, he is

intelligible. But has he, over the years, absorbed Western culture, and perhaps learned to write for Western readers? Could the joke be on us, as well as on him?

Matthew Melko

Sources

J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, Viking Adult, 2003.

David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe, *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'O*. 2d. ed., 1997, Portsmouth NH, Heinemann: 3-26. Used here as a source for Ngũgĩ's background, but Ngũgĩ is probably the best known Kenyan writer, and there are other books about his life and writing.