

African writers series: celebrating over 40 years of African literature

Part I

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The purpose of introducing the African writers series is to highlight the literary value and the impact of African literature on the political systems of countries in Africa in the continuous struggle for freedom and democracy.

This article will run as a two-part series with the final Africa top 100 Best Books of the 20th Century appearing in part two.

The African writers series comprises a classic collection of literary fiction, short stories, poetry, translations, drama and non-fiction written by authors of African descent. These books have literary value and are mainly used as setwork material in schools. Widely published by Heinemann since 1962, this series recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. The series includes over 60 titles by nearly 40 writers from 19 different countries, ranging from stories and poetry to biographical writings and essays. It has provided an international voice and vehicle to the continent's literary masters, such as Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, (one of the first and key in the establishment of this series) with his highly acclaimed *Things fall apart* (1958), Botswana's Bessie Head with *Maru* (1972), South Africa's Nadine Gordimer with *A guest of honor* (1971), Steve Biko with *Let's talk about Bantustans* (1972), Sol Plaatje with the *They fought for freedom* series (1992), and Nelson Mandela with his popular *Long walk to freedom* (1994).

This classics series created a platform and forum for African writers to highlight their views and thoughts through their works and collections on the political atmosphere and conditions on the African continent. Their collections focussed mainly on the struggle for freedom and provided text with which African universities could begin to redress the colonial bias evident in the teaching of literature. Due to its strong literary value and paperback format, the *African writers* series is well designed for the classroom and is mainly used as set work material for learners.

New arrivals in the *African writers* series (contemporary writers) are Tom Naudé with his *Dance of the rain* and Daniel Ojong with his *Mysteries from Ayukaba Village*.

Driven by the popularity of the series, a list of Africa's Best 100 Books was introduced. Rigorous criteria were applied, which included the assessment of quality, the ability to provide new information and the extent to which a book breaks boundaries. The list comprises 100 best books of Africa depicting the impact of African writing on world literature. Considering the criteria, a surprising number of South African authors and their books were selected. They include: Elsa Joubert with *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*; Nadine Gordimer with *Burger's daughter*; Wally Serote with *Third World express*; Alan Paton with *Cry, the beloved country*; Nelson Mandela with *Long walk to freedom*; Eugene Marais with *Die siel van die mier* and Antjie Krog with *Country of my skull*.

In summary, the importance of the *African writers* series is highlighted by Chinua Achebe when he used the 'fall' in *Things fall apart*, to depict the birth of a whole new age in Nigerian life – one ruled by the most powerful and disillusioning corruption.

Alex la Guma

South Africa

Alex La Guma was a writer, a leader of the South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO) and a defendant in the Treason Trial. He was born in 1925 in Cape Town, and after graduating from the Trafalgar High School, joined the Young Communist League in the 1940s and became a member of the Communist Party a year later. He left South Africa in 1966. He wrote four novels and many short stories in 1969 and received the Lotus Prize for Literature, awarded by the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference.

La Guma is considered one of South Africa's major twentieth century writers. He was also an important political figure, charged with treason,



banned, under house-arrest and eventually forced into exile. He was the chief representative of the African National Congress in the Caribbean at the time of his death in 1985.

Selected works

- A walk in the night** (1962)
- Threefold cord** (1967)
- The stone country** (1969)
- The fog at the season's end** (1972).

He also edited **Apartheid: A collection of writings on African racism by South Africans** (1972).

Flora Nwapa

Nigeria

Florence Nwanzuruahu Nkiru Nwapa was born on 18 January 1931 in Oguta, East Central State, Nigeria. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University College of Ibadan in 1957. She died in 1993 at the age of 62.

Nigerian literature expresses the struggles of a country that has survived the exploitation of colonialism and capitalism as well as the devastation of civil war and authoritarianism.

Since the publication of Flora Nwapa's **Efuru** in 1966, Nigerian women have been prolific writers. Although by Western definitions, these writers would not likely qualify as feminists, their works offer realistic pictures of gender issues in a patriarchal society.



Selected works

- Efuru** (1966)
- Idu** (1970)
- This is Lagos and other stories** (1971)
- Never again** (1975)
- Mammywater** (1979)
- Journey to space** (1980)
- The adventures of Deke** (1980)
- The miracle kittens** (1980)
- Wives at war and other stories** (1980)
- One is enough** (1981)

Cassava song and rice song (1986)

Women are different (1986).

Elechi Amadi

Nigeria

Elechi Amadi was born in 1934 into an Ibo family in Aluu (near Port Harcourt), in the Delta region of Eastern Nigeria, representing a minority nation (tribe), the Ikwere. He studied at the Government College Umuahia, and like other major Nigerian writers, was also educated at the University College of Ibadan, where he received his BSc in physics and mathematics in 1959. His native language was Ekwerri but he published his writings in English.

Amadi's early novels, like Chinua Achebe's, are set in his traditional African world, but they deal with timeless societies which are not poisoned by the effects of colonialism, rationalism, or modern change.



Selected works

- The concubine** (1966)
- Okwukwo Eri** (1969)
- Okupkpe** (1969)
- The great ponds** (1969)
- Isiburu** (1973)
- Sunset Biafra: a civil war diary** (1973)
- Peppersoup** (1977)
- The road to Ibadan** (1977)
- The slave** (1978)
- Dancer of Johannesburg** (1979)

Ethics in Nigerian culture (1982)

Estrangement (1986)

Elechi Amadi at 55: Poems, short stories and papers (1989)

The woman of Calabar (2002)

Speaking and singing (2003).

Chinua Achebe

Nigeria

Born in 1930 in Ogidi, Nigeria, Albert Chinualumogu Achebe is the son of a teacher in a missionary school. He was educated at the University College of Ibadan. At university Achebe rejected his British name, preferring his indigenous name Chinua. In 1953 he graduated with a BA degree. In the 1960s he was the director of External Services in charge of the *Voice of Nigeria*.

Achebe's satire and his keen ear for spoken language have made him one of the most highly esteemed African writers in English.

In 1990 he was paralysed from the waist down in a serious car accident.



Selected works

- The sacrificial egg and other stories** (1953)
- Things fall apart** (1958)
- No longer at ease** (1960)
- Arrow of God** (1964)
- A man of the people** (1966)
- Chike and the river** (1966)
- Beware, soul brother, and other poems** (1971). (Published in the US as **Christmas is Biafra and other poems** (1973)
- Girls at war** (1972)

How the leopard got his claws (1972)

Morning yet on creation day (1975)

The flute (1975)

The drum (1978)

Literature and society (1980)

The trouble with Nigeria (1984)

The world of Ogbanje (1986)

Anthills of the Savanna (1987)

The University and the leadership factor in Nigerian politics (1988)

Hopes and impediments (1989)

Nigerian topics (1989)

The Heinemann book of contemporary African short stories (1992)

Home and exile (2000).

Cyprian Ekwensi

Nigeria

Born in 1921 in Minna, a Nigerian town, Cyprian Ekwensi trained as a pharmacist and served in the Nigerian Medical Service. A Nigerian novelist, short-story writer, and chronicler of traditional tales, he has had a long and successful career as a writer of popular fiction. He received the Dag Hammarskjöld International Award for Literary Merit in 1968. Ekwensi's first full-length novel, **People of the city**, established him as the first West African author of a major novel in English and marked an important development in African writing.



Selected works

People of the city (1954)
Jagua Nana (1961)
Burning grass (1962)
Beautiful feathers (1963)
Survive the peace (1976)
Divided we stand (1980)
In King for ever (1992).

Buchi Emecheta

Nigeria

Buchi Emecheta was born on 21 July 1944 in Yaba near Lagos, Nigeria. She was orphaned and spent her early childhood years being educated at a missionary school.

Her works deal with the portrayal of the African woman.



Selected works

In the ditch (1972)
The bride price (1976)
The slave girl (1977)
Titch the cat (1979)
Nowhere to play (1980)
The moonlight bride (1980)
The wrestling match (1980)
On our freedom (1981)
Destination Biafra (1982)
Double yoke (1982)

Naira power (1982)
Adah's story (1983)
The rape of Shavi (1983)
Head above water (1986)
A kind of marriage (1986)
Family bargain (1987)
Second class citizen (1987)
Gwendolen (1990).

Okot p'Bitek

Uganda

Okot p'Bitek was born in 1931 into a family of Luo people in Gulu, Northern Uganda. An Ugandan poet, anthropologist, and social critic, he wrote in Luo and English. p'Bitek was one of the most vigorous and original voices in East African 20th-century poetry. His satirical monologues dealt with the conflict between European and African cultures. In his most famous poem, *The song of Lawino* (1966), p'Bitek introduced a style that became known as 'comic singing'.



Selected works

Lak Tar Miyo Kinyero wi Lobo (White teeth) (1953)
Song of Lawino: a lament (1966)
The defence of Lawino (1969)
Song of Ocol (1970)
Religion of the Central Luo (1971)
Two songs (1971)
African religions in western scholarship (1972)
Africa's Cultural Revolution (1973)

Horn of my love (1974)
Hare and Hornbill (1978).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Kenya

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born in 1938 in Kamirithu, near Limuru, Kiambu District. His family belonged to the Kenya's largest ethnic group, the Gikuyu.

After receiving a BA in English at Makerere University College in Kampala (Uganda) in 1963, Ngugi worked briefly as a journalist in Nairobi.

A writer of Gikuyu descent, he began a very successful career writing in English before turning to work almost entirely in his native Gikuyu. He was a teacher, novelist, essayist, and playwright, whose works function as an important link between the pioneers of African writing and the younger generation of postcolonial writers. After imprisonment in 1978, Ngugi abandoned English as the primary language of his work in favour of Gikuyu, his native tongue.



Selected works

The black hermit (1963)
Weep not, child (1964)
The river between (1965)
A grain of wheat (1967)
This time tomorrow (1970)
Homecoming: essays on African and Caribbean literature, culture, and politics (1972)
Secret lives, and other stories (1976)

The trial of Dedan Kimathi (1976)
Ngaahika ndeenda (I will marry when I want) (1977)

- Petals of blood (1977)
- Caitani mutharaba-Ini (Devil on the cross) (1980)
- Writers in politics: essays (1981)
- Education for a national culture (1981)
- Detained: a writer's prison diary (1981)
- Barrel of a pen: resistance to repression in neo-colonial Kenya (1983)
- Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African Literature (1986)
- Mother, sing for me (1986)
- Writing against neo-colonialism (1986)
- Njamba Nene and the flying bus (1986)
- Matigari ma Njiruungi (1986)
- Njamba Nene and the cruel chief (1988)
- Matigari (1989)
- Njamba Nene's pistol (1990)
- Moving the centre: the struggle for cultural freedom (1993)
- Penpoints, gunpoints and dreams: the performance on literature and power in post-colonial Africa (1998).

Frank Chipasula

Malawi

Born in 1949, Frank Chipasula, prize-winning Malawian poet, editor, and fiction writer, was for several years an associate professor of Black studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. After receiving his BA from the University of Zambia he emigrated to the United States, where he earned an MA from Yale and a PhD in English literature from Brown University.

Selected works



- Nightwatcher, whisper in the wings (1986)
- Visions and reflections (1972)
- O earth, wait for me (1984)
- In a dark season [n.d.] (in progress)
- When my brothers come home: poems from Central and Southern Africa (1985)
- The Heinemann book of African women's poetry (editor) (1995)

His work has also appeared in the periodicals mentioned below.

Carleton miscellany

Ariel

New writings

Poetry review

Stand.

* Note: Titles in stock are indicated in Part 2 of the series in the booklist.

African writers series

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Dennis Hirson [South Africa] | • The Heinemann Book of South African short stories |
| Rayda Jacobs [South Africa] | • The new Tribe |
| | • Second class citizen |
| | • The slave girl |
| Dambudzo Marechera [Zimbabwe] | • Black twilight |
| | • House of hunger |
| Ngugi Wa Thiong'o [Kenya] | • Devil on the cross |
| | • A grain of wheat |
| | • Matigari |
| | • Petals of blood |
| | • The river between |
| | • Secret lives |
| | • Weep not, child. |

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| Steve Biko [South Africa] | • I write what I like |
| Shimmer Chinodya [Zimbabwe] | • Can we talk and other stories |
| | • Harvest of thorns |
| Seslie Head [Botswana] | • The Cardinals |
| | • When rain clouds gather |
| Sol Plaatje [South Africa: Kimberley] | • Mhuridi |
| Nelson Mandela [South Africa: Soweto] | • No easy walk to freedom |
| Veronique Tadjo [Ivory Coast] | • As the crow flies |
| Nadine Gordimer [South Africa] | • Crimes of conscience |
| Peter Abrahams [South Africa] | • Mine Boy |
| W P B Botha [South Africa] | • A duty of memory |

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|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Lella Aboulela [Sudan] | • The Translator |
| Neshani Andreas [Namibia] | • The purple violet of Oshaanu |
| Lilla Mompole [Mozambique] | • The story of a murder |
| Michael Anthony [Trinidad] | • High tide of intrigue |
| Jack Mapanje [Malawi] | • Gathering seaweed |
| Pepetelela [Angola] | • Reflexes of the water spirit |
| | • Mayombe |
| | • Yaka |
| Chinua Achebe [Nigeria] | • Arrow of God |
| | • A man of the people |
| | • Things fall apart |
| | • Anthills of the Savannah |

The importance of the african writers series

The African Writers series is important for the following reasons:

- Literary value of its material
- Is regarded as classical material in public libraries
- It has a huge impact on the culture and political systems of its country of origin
- This classic material is often used as setwork material in schools