

In *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series & The Launch of African Literature*, Currey provides a rich narrative of the emergence of the African Writers Series as part of Heinemann Educational Books and of the authors that were published in the series. In addition, he provides insight into the historical contexts of the works, brief synopses of the contents of the works themselves, excerpts from reports by readers, pre- and post-publication correspondence with authors and, even more interestingly, descriptions of the active literary scene of 1960s and 70s London, where it all began. Readers of *Africa Writes Back* have the opportunity to revisit imaginatively the times in which the bulk of what is called African literature today was conceived and produced.

The book opens with the introduction of what Chinua Achebe termed the ‘conspirators’ in the conceptualizing of the African Writers Series: Alan Hill and Keith Sambrook of Heinemann Educational Books in Britain, Aigboje (Aig) Higo, the manager and publisher of Heinemann Educational Books in Nigeria, James Currey, then with Oxford University Press in Cape Town, and Henry Chakava, the editor at Heinemann Educational Books in Nairobi and initiator of what would later form the East African Educational Publishers in 1992. Currey also acknowledges the efforts of various advisers: Ros Ainslie (South Africa), Richard Lister and John Wyllie (both novelists from Britain) and Robert Fraser (an academic). Also among this group were Akin Thomas (editorial director in Ibadan, Nigeria), who commissioned reports to Ogun-dipe-Leslie and Michael Echeruo (editors), Ann Scorgie (who joined from William Heinemann), Penny Butler (who ran the African and Caribbean department) and Ingrid Crewdson (who liaised with the writers). Others who read manuscripts for the Series included Simon Gikandi and Laban Erapu (East Africa). These last two joined Achebe, Higo, Chakava and Thomas in a revamped consultative system in which the decision to publish no longer rested with the Editorial Adviser. Perhaps the most notable feature of the Series was its cover design, with the dominant orange colour

‘The Orange Revolution’
Sikhumbuzo Mngadi
Africa Writes Back:
The African Writers Series & the Launch of African Literature
by James Currey
James Currey Ltd/ Wits University Press/ Ohio University Press/ Weaver
Press/ East African Educational Publishers Ltd/ HEBN Ltd/
Mkuki na Nyota, 2008, paperback, 318 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-84701-502-0

and the photograph of writers on the back. George Hallet was responsible for the photos and we are told that the idea for the orange colour came from the more established Penguin publishing house.

The above testifies to the importance of two things in publishing: organic structures that can accommodate the growth of a publishing house, and the successful creation of what in industry terms is called a brand that can be recognised at a glance - without undercutting the socio-political nature and implications of the very tricky project of publishing African literature in London. This last point, namely, the publishing of African literature in London, particularly at a time when Britain’s African colonies were asserting their independence, is an issue that Currey is painfully conscious of, as evident in the title of the book. His recollection of Wole Soyinka’s discomfort with what he dubbed the “orange ghetto” where people are treated as “African writers” rather than just as “writers” (22), and Ayi Kwei Armah’s sharp critique of Charles Larson’s views on African literature, and of foreign publishing of African literature in general, illuminate this unease further. As is all too clear from Currey’s treatment of these critical issues, it would be naïve to think of writing and publishing as a transaction that is free of material and symbolic contradictions.

Issues of publishing African writing are weaved in throughout the narrative of the growth of the corpus of works spanning the Anglophone (and, in translation, Francophone, Lusophone, Arabic,

Amharic, Zulu, etc.) worlds, but the book’s essential value is its evaluation of the strategic necessity of ‘show[ing] how Africans achieved the confidence to write back in novels, plays and poetry about what was happening to them’ (2). Put differently, *Africa Writes Back*, a phrase inspired by Salman Rushdie’s characterisation of the postcolonial, *The Empire Writes Back* (24), speaks not so much of the invention of African writing in English and English translation by the African Writers Series, as it does of the invention of the Series by African writing. Currey recalls this scenario in the following terms:

Gareth Griffiths in his book *African Literatures in English* (Longman 2000 p. 79) credits Heinemann with far greater ability to ‘control’ African literature than was the day-to-day reality. He writes: ‘it is arguable that ... the aim of a series like the African Writers Series was not so much to publish existing contemporary African English writing as to create it’ (22).

To which he responds:

It was much more fun than that. All of us in Ibadan, Nairobi or London could only respond to what work was available either from other publishers or in manuscript. It was a long way from carefully constructed textbook publishing. As individuals we were all concerned with the provision of a range of worthwhile books for people to read, not just for education, but for pleasure and entertainment – to help create in Africa what is known elsewhere as ‘a general market’ (22-3).

To borrow from the title of Ngugi’s reflections on cultural politics (*Moving The Centre: Towards Cultural Freedoms*) – a book which was to come out under the new imprint of James Currey Publishers in 1993 – the whole purpose of Currey’s book is to specify the strategic worth of ‘moving the [cultural] centre’ from the European metropolis. The Series helped consolidate this shift. But the book also serves as a record for posterity of the often-overlooked fact that the colonial and postcolonial libraries, in the most general but also most specific senses, were as much the result of collaboration between citizens and subjects of the British empire. In this sense, *Africa Writes Back* reflects as much on the English language (or, generally, colonial languages) as material and symbolic currency in the production of postcolonial writing, as it does on the unease with which it also created and entrenched a new, predominantly male, intellectual vanguard that increasingly became conscious of its own socio-political and cultural isolation.

In the case of Jomo Kenyatta, the contradictions of ‘writing back’ in the charged postcolonial environment of Kenya manifested itself in his increasing alienation from ‘Mount Kenya’ (part of the title of Kenyatta’s nationalist treatise, *Facing Mount Kenya*, AWS 219), so to speak, while with Kwame Nkrumah, Currey recalls Basil Davidson’s comment on why Nkrumah’s titles sold worse than any of his (Davidson’s) titles; ‘after his death, nobody wished to remember Nkrumah’ (71).

If the above signals the perils of the intellectual and political vanguardism of the very idea of ‘writing back,’ *Africa Writes Back* further shows that from the point of view of local issues, this reactive stance elided issues of language and gender by investing its lexicon with a combative, rather than epistemological, significance. Yet, as Currey is quick to show, this was not the whole picture of African writing. There are memorable entries in the book on Nuruddin Farah and Dambudzo Marechera, for instance, which convey these writers’ suspicious attitudes towards the very notions ‘African’ and ‘culture,’ thus indicating that a more complex process of

self-investigation was also underway, alongside some of the more conservative Africanist and/or culturalist tendencies in African writing. This issue of the diversity of themes and formal concerns in African writing comes in the form of entries on individual authors who, needless to say, also reflect the urgent questions of their times and contexts. For a scholar of African literature, this is also the most insightful aspect of the book, within the limits of what it can achieve in this direction and given the fact that it is not a *study* of individual authors and their texts.

The aspect of *Africa Writes Back* that delves at some length into the publishing of individual authors takes the form of three basic features: writers who made it their task to explain Africa to the world by challenging prevailing stereotypes (for example, Achebe), writers who documented the

increasing disillusionment with the managerialism of postcolonial socio-politics (for example, Achebe, Ngugi and Armah), and those who challenged the local investments of culture and politics (for example, Farah, Miriama Bâ, the book also highlights the peculiar case of mainly black South African writing, produced as it was in conditions of socio-political incarceration and exile by authors who could not be read or quoted openly in their own country. Indeed, much has been said about the pariah status of South Africa in Africa during the heady years of apartheid rule, and Currey provides valuable insights into how this dovetailed with the issues of relevance and authorship – for instance, Modikwe Dikobe, whose real name was Marks Rammitloa, or Dennis Brutus writing as John Bruin, had to conceal their identities behind pseudonyms.

Yet, this review does not aim to pre-empt the dialogue that Currey hopes his book will engender with the old African literary library that is still very much part of what constitutes African writing today. In this sense, the question that Currey asks in the conclusion of the book, that is, ‘Is there still a role for the African Writers Series?’ becomes both necessary and unnecessary. It is a necessary question at a time when African writing of the earlier periods is conflated with the category ‘African,’ where important distinctions regarding style, philosophy and topicality are hardly ever made. It is unnecessary because the dialogue that *Africa Writes Back* initiates is still very much alive. It is evident, in South Africa anyway, that the new post-apartheid literatures reflect and, most importantly for the continued relevance of the Series started decades ago, refract timeless questions about identity (class, race,

March/Mars 2009

gender, generation, place, etc.), politics and writing for new audiences and new priorities (which are, in some sense, old).

Africa Writes Back is, essentially, a publisher’s book. However, scholars and students of African literature will undoubtedly find in this engaging memoir by a key figure, many invaluable insights into the formation of what became an iconic body of African writing in English and English translation launched with its first novel, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, in 1962 (published in hardback by William Heinemann in 1958). In this respect, it would not make sense to ask for more than the already rich narrative that Currey provides in this finely-researched book and, perhaps more importantly, engaging story.

