A Slender Hope

FOR NIGERIAN AUTHOR CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHE, LITERARY STARDOM HAS YIELDED MORE THAN THE CONFIDENCE TO KEEP WRITING. MUCH MORE.

CHIMAMANDA Ngozi Adiche received the call on her thirty-first birthday, last September. She was taking a bath at her sister's house in Lagos, preparing to go to dinner, when her brother told her she had an important call from Chicago. Wrapped in a towel, she grabbed the phone through a barely open door and heard from the MacArthur Foundation that she'd received one of its five-hundred-thousand-dollar fellowships, known as genius grants. With that call, Adiche joined a diverse group of scientists, artists, humanists, teachers, and entrepreneurs, as well as writers—company that still amazes her: "Half the time I think I shouldn't be there. When I was in Lagos, anytime something happened, like the TV wouldn't work, my friends would ask, 'Well, what does the genius think?'"

Although she was shocked at receiving a MacArthur, Adiche should have been used to hearing such news. Her debut novel, Purple Hibiscus (Algonquin Books, 2003), a coming-of-age story about a Nigerian girl who must endure the cruelty of her evangelist father, was long-listed for the Booker Prize, short-listed for the Orange Prize, and won both the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Three years later, her follow-up novel, Half of a Yellow Sun (Knopf, 2006), a story set in Nigeria during the Biafran War in the late 1960s, won the Orange Broadband Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. More than that, its publication marked her arrival as one of Nigeria's most important voices.

Recently she returned to the United States, where she lives part time, to promote her June release, The Thing Around Your Neck (Knopf), a collection of short stories, some originally published in magazines such as the New Yorker, Granta, the Virginia Quarterly Review, and Zoetrope. She had been on tour in England, Scandinavia, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada for the book's overseas publication earlier this year. Accustomed to being in transit, she divides her
time between Nigeria and Maryland, where she lives with her partner, a family physician, who practices there. “I’m so emotionally invested in Nigeria as a country and society, which I feel has so much potential it hasn’t lived up to, that sometimes it gets exhausting. There’s so much to do, and I want to be involved. But then I find I need to leave to have some space. I quite like America, my home of convenience, where I don’t have to deal with things like electricity shortages.”

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DICHIE grew up piecing together “tiny stories,” as she describes them, about the Biafran War, which raged from 1967 to 1970 and ended almost a decade before she was born. The conflict resulted from ethnic tensions among the Christian Igbo population in eastern Nigeria, which seceded to form the Republic of Biafra, and the largely Muslim Fulani-Hausa in the north. At least a million people, mostly Igbo, died from massacres and starvation during this brutally violent period, though some estimates put that figure as high as three million. Both of Adichie’s Igbo grandfathers died as refugees who had to flee their hometowns. Her grandmothers survived and, as she says, “somehow kept children and relatives together. My parents, part of the postindependent [Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1960], hopeful middle class when the war started, lost most of their property”—in addition to family and friends.

Her parents rebuilt their lives and raised a family of six children. Her father was professor of statistics at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he was appointed vice-chancellor in 1982, and her mother became the first woman registrar. The fifth of the six children, Adichie grew up speaking both Igbo and English. She recalls the thrill of reading Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, the groundbreaking novel about the clash between Igbo tradition and British colonialism, when she was ten years old. “I realized that people who looked like me could live in books.” But her parents encouraged her to pursue a practical career, so writing had to wait.

She began studying to be a doctor in Nigeria but, urged by her sister Ijoma, came to the United States on a scholarship to Drexel University, in Philadelphia. She transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University, in Willimantic, where she lived with her sister and her sister’s husband, and took care of their son while they started a medical practice. During that time, she wrote Purple Hibiscus, reworking it during her tenure as an MFA student at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore.
Set around the mid-1990s, when Nigeria was under the control of a junta led by General Sani Abacha, "Purple Hibiscus" is narrated by fifteen-year-old Kambili Achike, whose father, Eugene, is both a courageous champion of human rights and a religious zealot who terrorizes his wife and children. Kambili, though desperate for her father's approval, cannot measure up to his impossibly high standards: "I needed him to hug me close and say that to whom much is given, much is also expected. I needed him to smile at me, in that way that lit up his face, that warmed something inside me. But I had come second. I was stained by failure." After a military coup, Eugene sends his children to stay with their Aunty Ifeoma, an outspoken university teacher, who introduces Kambili to "a different kind of freedom," including traditional religious beliefs and more humane and expansive relationships. Even in this debut novel, Adichie depicts characters whose personal lives are played out on the larger canvas of society beset by corruption and violence.

Moving back in time, "Half of a Yellow Sun" takes its title from the flag of the doomed Republic of Biafra and tells the story of the civil war from three interconnected perspectives. The main characters move back and forth between the earlier more peaceful part of the decade and the bloodshed that ended the 1960s. Adichie, who spent four years researching and writing the novel, tells the political saga through the lives of well-to-do twin sisters Kainene and Olanna, the urbane, intellectual Odenigbo, and the white British journalist Richard as their comfortable lives unravel into a struggle for survival. At the center of the novel is Ukwu, a thirteen-year-old who comes from a poor rural village to work as Odenigbo's houseboy and is eventually conscripted into the Biafran army. Reviewers praised the novel for its epic scope. Rob Nixon, writing in the New York Times, lauded Adichie for positioning "her characters at crossroads where public and private allegiances threaten to collide."

Adichie says she always knew she would write a novel about Biafra. At sixteen, she wrote what she describes as an "awfully melodramatic play" called "For Love of Biafra," and earlier in her career, she wrote short stories that dealt with the war. In "Ghostly," one of the stories in The Thing Around Your Neck, she revisits this time period with a meeting between a seventy-one-year-old mathematics professor retired from the University of Nigeria and a colleague, who was assumed to have died as a result of the 1967 violence but had, in fact, been living in exile. Adichie says this story is "in some ways a love letter to my father," and the tenderness of that tribute comes through in the professor's reflections on his past:

We hardly talked about the war. When we did, it was with an implacable vagueness, as if what mattered were not that we had drowned in muddy bunkers during air raids after which we buried corpses with bits of pink on their charred skin, not that we had eaten cassava peels and watched our children's bellies swell from malnutrition, but that we had survived. It was a tacit agreement among all of us, the survivors of Biafra.

That period has remained a powerful political issue in Nigerian society, but Adichie felt that the conversation about it retained "an implacable vagueness" and was largely uninformed, particularly for her generation. "Half of a Yellow Sun," which was well received in Nigeria, changed that to some extent. "I often get feedback from friends, from friends of friends, about how the novel has become a starting point for talking about the war. My Nigerian publisher told me about a family in Lagos—the man is a newspaper publisher. Their daughter read the book and asked her mother about the war. To the husband's surprise, she began to tell their daughter stories of what her family went through—yet he had never heard these in all the years of their marriage."

In a 2007 article, Vanity Fair featured Adichie—along with Doreen Baingana, Uzodimma Iweala, and Helon Habila—as part of the new generation of young writers leading an African literary renaissance. The piece described Adichie at a literary festival in Nairobi, looking "radiant, fresh off her rock-star-style tour of Nigeria and splashy New Yorker debut... part[ing] the crowds, Cleopatra-style" and hailed her as the heir to her compatriot Achebe, whose Things Fall Apart celebrated in 2008 fifty years of continued popularity and influence.

Adichie says Achebe is her hero and guiding literary spirit. While there is remarkable variety in the work being written by the Nigerian authors in her generation, Adichie believes they all share a certain freedom that was forged by Achebe's writing. "When Achebe published Things Fall Apart in 1958, it was a novelty," she says. "There may have been five other African writers writing in English. I can't imagine what it must have been like for people like him, feeling they had this burden of responsibility, of being a pioneer, thinking, 'the dignity of my people rests on my shoulders.' I don't have that burden. I'm not representing anyone—and I owe this freedom to that generation."

### REEXPERIENCE LOITA

Listen to the audio version of Nabokov's classic, read by Jeremy Irons (Random House Audio, 2005).

Most of the twelve stories in The Thing Around Your Neck focus on contemporary situations, whether the setting is Nigeria or the United States. They explore the subjects of immigration and exile, shifting values, and cross-cultural communication among families and communities. In "A Private Experience," two Nigerian women—one a privileged Igbo student who is visiting her aunt while on holiday from her medical studies, the other a poor Hausa trader from the marketplace—find themselves hiding together during a violent riot provoked by a man who drives over a copy of the Koran that had dropped on the street. Based on an actual incident in northern Nigeria, the story explores the brief intersection of these women's lives during a dramatic moment that links them regardless of their tribal, religious, economic, and educational differences. "Sometimes we like to say we're really not different," says Adichie. "I think we are, yet what interests me is that we still can make connections."

"Cell One," one of two stories previously published in the New Yorker, depicts a well-off family whose son, Nnamibia, is a member of a gang whose members "had mastered the swagger of American rap videos [and] were undergoing secret and strange initiations that sometimes left one or two of them dead." Nnamibia, the spoiled brother of the female narrator, is arrested after a gang shooting. Although it is unclear whether he is guilty, in prison he experiences the corruption of the prison guards and finally confronts his own selfish and irresponsible behavior when

Excerpt

The Thing Around Your Neck

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don't buy a gun like those Americans.

They trooped into the room in Lagos where you lived with your father and mother and three siblings, leaning against the unpainted walls because there weren't enough chairs to go round, to say goodbye in loud voices and tell you with lowered voices what they wanted you to send them. In comparison to the big car and house (and possibly gun), the things they wanted were minor—handbags and shoes and perfumes and clothes. You said okay, no problem.

Your uncle in America, who had put in the names of all your family members for the American visa lottery, said you could live with him until you got on your feet. He picked you up at the airport and bought you a big hot dog with yellow mustard that nauseated you. Introduction to America, he said with a laugh. He lived in a small white town in Maine, in a thirty-year-old house by a lake. He told you that the company he worked for had offered him a few thousand more than the average salary plus stock options because they were desperately trying to look diverse. They included a photo of him in every brochure, even those that had nothing to do with his unit. He laughed and said the job was good, was worth living in an all-white town even though his wife had to drive an hour to find a hair salon that did black hair. The trick was to understand America, to know that America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot, too.

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he speaks up for another inmate who is being brutalized by them. At the story's end, he seems deeply changed, but can he sustain this transformation? "I believe in redemption," Adichie says quietly, then adds, "I'm very suspicious of excessive happiness. The way the world works is a struggle, but I believe in hope—in slender hope."

In many of these stories, hope seems in scarce supply when it comes to marriage. The wife in "Imitation" tries to take in, via long distance, the news that her husband's mistress has moved into their home in Lagos while she waits for him in their affluent home on Cherrywood Lane in suburban Pennsylvania. In "The Arrangements of Marriage," a new wife resists changing her name from Chinaza to the Americanized Agatha, only one demand made by her husband in an effort to speed up her assimilation—and acceptability. Patriarchal attitudes seem to dominate, regardless of the Nigerian or American setting, as an expression of the imbalance of power, particularly when sex is part of the bargain.

"I've always had a problem with marriage as an institution," says Adichie. "The way it's set up, women automatically make more compromises than men." Despite the inspiring model of her parents' forty-five-year marriage, she gets angry at the way our society makes a fetish of marriage. "Undue privilege is awarded to married people in so many ways. I'm all for partnerships as long as they're mutually beneficial, satisfying, respectful. I'm part of a couple and I'm quite happy, but I also think I could be quite happy if I were not part of a couple. In Nigeria, sometimes women act as if their lives are complete because they're married—and it's just not true. Maybe it's the feminist in me, but I see the lies that people tell themselves about marriage and think how unwilling we are to admit that it's not always a perfect thing."

Although the subject is different, a similar fierceness fuels the story "Jumping Monkey Hill," whose title refers to the name of a resort, where an aging British intellectual and his wife lead an African writers workshop. As two narratives unfold—the third-person narrative that describes the workshop and the story that the Nigerian participant Ujunwa Ogundu is writing—so does a brutal indictment of postcolonial paternalism. In the final scene, the pompous academic dismisses Ogundu's story, saying, "This is agenda writing, it isn't a story of real people."

"That is the one story propelled by rage," Adichie says. "I'm not interested in writing about myself, but that one is personally based on what really did happen to me. I felt diminished." In fact, she had to change her thinly disguised portrayal of the workshop leader before Granta would publish it because of fear of a lawsuit. She still makes no apology for the unflattering depiction: "For me it's about who is policing the production of literature, who is saying what is acceptable, especially for Africans. If someone tries to tell you what your own story should be, that's ridiculous."

Adichie takes her commitment to authentic storytelling well beyond her own writing. Along with her efforts to promote literacy in Nigeria, for the past two years she has led workshops in Lagos for aspiring writers. In 2007, when Fidelity Bank invited her to give a reading, she agreed but said she wanted to do more for the community. She proposed a series of workshops "to help writers polish their craft, to give them a chance to be with other writers, to demystify the publishing process—and hopefully to get them comfortable with the idea of being read by others." The first workshop was advertised with no requirement other than a brief writing sample—and over two hundred applied. Adichie chose twenty-five participants and had enough success that the bank agreed to expand the project. In 2008, applicants exceeded seven hundred, mostly from Nigeria but a few from Cameroon and Zimbabwe. Dave Eggers from the United States, Binyavanga Wainaina from Kenya, and Marie-Elena John from Antigua joined her as guest faculty serving a group ranging in age from eighteen to fifty. "Friendships formed. People exchanged books and stories. One person from the first summer ended up at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, another just published his first novel in Nigeria," Adichie says. "Some participants formed Web groups where they continue to read and support one another. So I like to think that their writing lives are better, in general, because of the workshop."

Nigerian Breweries has signed on as sponsor for the next three years, and this September Eggers will return along with other international writers. The workshops received wide media notice, and the accompanying literary events during the evenings drew substantial crowds. Adichie says the attention has been both "moving and humbling" but also useful. "Being known has given me a platform to talk about the things I care about, which is an incredible luxury." For Adichie, success has meant more than making a name for herself as an author. It has given her the ability to see her slender hope realized in the lives of her fellow Nigerians—and to see the rest of us inspired by her work.

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