

TALKING VOLUMES ; early bloomer; "Purple Hibiscus," a dark but affirming novel about coming of age in Nigeria, marks the debut of young Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.: [METRO Edition]

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[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Adichie uses her hometown, the university town of Nsukka, and her ancestral village as principal settings for "Purple Hibiscus." Her father taught in Nsukka and her mother rose through the college administration to become its dean of students. Two of her sisters were born in the United States when their father attended the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1960s. With dual citizenship, one is a pharmacist in Nigeria, the other is a doctor in Connecticut. One of her brothers, an engineer, lives outside London. Another is studying computer science at Adichie's alma mater in Connecticut and living with their sister. The third just graduated from college in Nigeria, in agricultural engineering, and hasn't yet decided where to settle.

"I would've liked to be in Nigeria with everyone in my family there," said Adichie. "My book wouldn't have happened, though. My sister is a doctor and she has a practice that's doing well in Connecticut and she probably wouldn't have that if she had stayed in Nigeria. So you make those choices, just because Nigeria is truly crumbling and I don't know that it will come back together."

FULL TEXT

As a girl in Nigeria, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote story after story about the sort of people she read about in books: "white people with blue eyes who ate apples and had winter." Only as a teenager, after reading Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" and realizing her people's own stories were worth telling, did she begin describing the world she knew. Yet when she graduated first in her high school class, she abandoned writing to enroll in pre-med. Doctors could always find work, and in her troubled homeland, Sunday churchgoers pray not only for peace and love, but also for U.S. visas.

"I have noticed about my people that we tend not really to put emphasis on what we would like to do; instead we do what we have to do," said Adichie, 26. "It happens with being Nigerian that you have to make sacrifices. I thought maybe I should be a doctor and write part-time because writing isn't that serious," she said.

Dissecting frogs made her realize that the sacrifice would be too great. Adichie came to the United States in 1998 to study her first love, writing. Her extraordinary debut novel, "Purple Hibiscus," is the new selection of the Talking Volumes regional book club, a public service project to build community through reading, founded by the Star Tribune, Minnesota Public Radio and the Loft Literary Center.

The story, recounted by a 14-year-old girl, captures the love and conflict of a family whose patriarch is staunchly Catholic. Against the backdrop of a corrupt, crumbling society, the implacable force of religious fundamentalism plays out not against secular humanism, but against the animist practices of tribal elders.

"I wanted to write about how I wish that people would be more accommodating in their faith," said Adichie (whose name is pronounced chee-ma-MON-da ah-DEECH-yeh). "It's fine to be Catholic, but people who choose to follow the old way of ancestral worship are not devils."

Nigeria made headlines recently when a woman was sentenced to death by stoning for adultery under the law of Sharia. While the nation of 120 million is mainly Islamic in the north, where that controversial case arose, in the south it is mostly Christian, with Pentecostals gaining rapidly on the dominant Catholics.

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When she attended Drexel University in Philadelphia, Adichie was a lay reader at "a lovely, warm church with all kinds of people, open and embracing and Catholic." After she transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University, where she lived with her older sister, she quit attending except when their parents visited, because she disliked the hard-line attitude at the local parish.

She blames religion for "feeding people so much nonsense" in God's name. In Nigeria, on a continent where AIDS education and treatment are especially critical, it is considered improper to talk about sexually transmitted diseases - except to brand them the devil's work - and taboo even to acknowledge the existence of homosexuality, she said.

Her 71-year-old father remembers when the first missionaries arrived in his hometown in the late 1930s. Until then, the indigenous beliefs were not institutionalized via churches and schools. "Sometimes I wonder if they recognized it as religion, in the sense that it was just the way things were; it wasn't apart. 'That stream is dedicated to the goddess so you don't go there to bathe, you go to the other stream.'

"Maybe I idealize it, but there's something purer and true about that time," she said, bursting into peals of laughter. "My dad would be horrified to hear me say that."

Home and away

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The economy and the educational system were much stronger when she was a child, attending schools for children of the university faculty. In fifth grade, she wrote a play and her class performed it. She won a writing prize and her teacher, Mrs. Kalu, pronounced her destiny. "She said to everybody there, 'She's going to be our star!' and I remember thinking, 'Oh, I hope so!' I would write things and give them to her and she actually took her time with my little stories."

Her family teased her when she boasted that they would one day read her books, said her sister Dr. Rosemary Maduka. One brother called Adichie "Joseph the Dreamer" after the biblical character. "When a lot of her age-mates were hanging out going to parties, that wasn't my sister," Maduka said. "She found more joy in reading, reading, reading."

Even in their relatively isolated hometown, Adichie and her family felt the aftershocks of violence that erupted in the capital of Abuja and in Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, with 12 million inhabitants. Coups were staged in 1983 and 1993, and an abortive coup in 1990 resulted in the execution of 69 alleged plotters.

"It's not like we heard the shelling," said Adichie, "but it affects you when you hear the announcement on the radio that you have a new head of state. Then you see the prices rising in the markets, you see the people lose jobs and soldiers seem to rule, literally rule, over everything."

Ten years ago, Defense Minister Sani Abacha took power and dissolved all democratic political institutions. A year later, after a strike in Nigeria's giant oil industry, Abacha closed down media. Only after his death in 1998 did the situation change. When Olusegun Obasanjo took over a newly democratic nation in 1999, he faced "a dysfunctional bureaucracy, collapsed infrastructure" and periodic communal violence, according to the U.S. State Department.

Bribery has become an everyday occurrence. Laughing musically, Adichie recounted an incident she transposed into her novel, when she and her mother were driving behind a car that was flagged down by police. Rather than pull over to pay a bribe, as is customary, the driver just rolled down his window and threw money out. "Then again, these [police] men are very poor and have poor training," she said. "It's all part of a bigger thing."

Nigeria was at the forefront of the emergence of the African novel, through the work of such eminent authors as Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and Achebe, whose most famous book is echoed in "Purple Hibiscus" from its opening line: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion. . . ."

The country does not have much of a "reading culture" anymore, Adichie said. Visiting home this summer, she found only a few bookstores in Lagos, selling mostly imported books, mostly self-help titles such as "How to Become a Millionaire in Five Days."

Part of the problem, as here, is the juggernaut of visual culture - TV and movies - and the downplaying of education, said Cyril Ibe, the Nigerian-born host of Chicago's "Afriscope Radio" show.

"Writing in Africa has been seriously affected by the erosion of institutions over the past 30 years," said Binyavanga Wainaina, the Kenyan winner of this year's Caine Prize for African writing, an award for which Adichie was shortlisted. "There is very little faith that ordinary Africans can create any form of art, and that our own issues will

emerge through such a process. In my own country, anything that comes from grass-roots creativity is discouraged. Ideas must come from above. This does not make for good writing."

"It makes me sad," said Adichie, "but even for the Nigerian rich there's an uncertainty about life that I don't see when I'm in the so-called West. It's like, 'We have money, but we don't know what will happen tomorrow.' " She wants to try to make "Purple Hibiscus" affordable in her homeland. "If you translate \$20 to Nigerian money, that's about how much many people make in a month."

It was college that provided the way out for her. Marilyn Piety, who teaches philosophy at Drexel, remembers her as "very political and fairly religious, too, intellectually and emotionally mature," a student with strong opinions whose first paper decried U.S. oil companies for fomenting civil unrest and despoiling the environment in Nigeria.

School keeps her here on a work visa, since last month teaching at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. With fewer than a dozen stories published, she had a story chosen for the annual O. Henry collection. Ibe believes a boom in popularity for African-born writers is near at hand, already taking root in Europe.

Adichie is building her next novel around the Nigerian civil war of the late 1960s, which Americans know mostly from news photographs of starving Biafran children. Most of her research is oral, coaxing stories from village elders.

In a few years she plans to return home, to give back to Nigeria, maybe by starting a writers' colony. Besides watching news shows and voicing her strong political opinions, Adichie has no passion other than writing. "Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't for my writing, I don't think I would be me," she said. "It's just such a part of me that there isn't room in my life for anything else."

Her values were forged in the adversity of a nation tottering between tyranny and freedom, colonialism and self-worth, order and chaos. Those values inform her fiction but do not overwhelm it. "Unlike many African writers," said Wainaina, "she does not let ideologies influence the engagement of her characters. Her concern is the human condition. Ideology can only be an offshoot of human conditions."

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Purple Hibiscus

The book: The first novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the coming-of-age story of a teenage girl in a wealthy Nigerian family whose patriarch is a sternly conservative Catholic, a hero in some ways and a tyrant in others.

Publisher: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 307 pages, \$23.95.

Author event: 7 p.m. Nov. 13 at the Fitzgerald Theater, 10 E. Exchange St., St. Paul. \$12; \$10 for members of Talking Volumes, Minnesota Public Radio or the Loft Literary Center. 651-290-1221. To register free for Talking Volumes, visit <http://www.startribune.com/talkingvolumes>.

Radio broadcast: Hear the author event on MPR's "Midmorning" at 10 a.m. Nov. 14.

Excerpts: Monday through next Sunday in Variety and at <http://www.startribune.com/talkingvolumes>.

"Kevin said you stayed up to 25 minutes with your grandfather. Is that what I told you?" Papa's voice was low.

"I wasted time, it was my fault." Jaja said.

"What did you do there? Did you eat food sacrificed to idols? Did you desecrate your Christian tongue?"

I sat frozen; I did not know that tongues could be Christian, too.

"No," Jaja said.

Papa was walking toward Jaja. He spoke entirely in Igbo now. I thought he would pull at Jaja's ears, that he would tug and yank at the same pace as he spoke, that he would slap Jaja's face and his palm would make that sound, like a heavy book falling from a library shelf in school. And then he would reach across and slap me on the face with the casualness of reaching for the pepper shaker.

But he said, "I want ou to finish that food and go to your rooms and pray for forgiveness," before turning to go back downstairs. The silence he left was heavy but comfortable, like a well-worn, prickly cardigan on a bitter morning.

- From "Purple Hibiscus," 2003 by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Illustration

Photo: PHOTO

DETAILS

Location:	Nigeria
People:	Achebe, Chinua
Publication title:	Star Tribune; Minneapolis, Minn.
Pages:	1E
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2003
Publication date:	Oct 19, 2003
column:	TALKING VOLUMES
Section:	VARIETY
Publisher:	Star Tribune Media Company LLC

Place of publication:	Minneapolis, Minn.
Country of publication:	United States, Minneapolis, Minn.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	08952825
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	427586921
Document URL:	http://ezproxy2.library.drexel.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/talking-volumes-early-bloomer-purple-hibiscus/docview/427586921/se-2?accountid=10559
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Last updated:	2019-04-16
Database:	ProQuest One Academic

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