

99 ESSENTIAL AFRICAN BOOKS: THE GEOFF WISNER INTERVIEW

Interview by **Scott Esposito**

Tags: [African literature](#), [interviews](#)

Discussed in this interview:

- **[A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books that Capture the Spirit of Africa](#), Geoff Wisner. Jacana Media. \$25.95. 292 pp.**

Although it is certain to one day be outmoded by Africa's ever-changing national boundaries, for now Geoff Wisner's book *A Basket of Leaves* offers a guide to literature from every country in the African continent. Wisner reviews 99 books total, covering the biggest homegrown authors (Achebe, Coetzee, Ngugi), some notable foreigners (Kapusinski, Chatwin, Bowles), and a host of lesser-knowns. The books were selected from hundreds of works of African literature that Wisner has read: how to whittle hundreds down to just 99 books to represent an entire continent? Wisner says reading widely was key, as was developing a "bullshit detector" for the "false" and "fraudulent" in African lit by living there and working with the legal defense of political prisoners in South Africa and Namibia. Full of sharp opinions and oft-overlooked gems, *A Basket of Leaves* offers a compelling overview of a continent and its literature—an overview one that Wisner is eager to supplement and discuss in person.

—Scott Esposito

Scott Esposito: To start, how did you conceive and develop *A Basket of Leaves*?

Geoff Wisner: The idea developed rather slowly. For several years I was raising money for political prisoners in South Africa and Namibia. I edited a newsletter on Southern Africa and started to read authors like Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee. I also met writers and journalists who were active in the struggle, like Donald Woods and Dennis Brutus and Zwelakhe Sisulu. Around this time I was also starting to publish book reviews. In fact, my review of *Another Day of Life* by Ryszard Kapuscinski, about the battle over Angolan independence, is the oldest thing in my book. In 1990 I spent six months as a volunteer in Zimbabwe, and I started reading local authors like Dambudzo Marechera and Chenjerai Hove and [Tsitsi Dangarembga](#). I realized how much interesting writing you could find in out-of-the-way places, and at some point I set out to read at least one book from or about every country in Africa. So my reading gradually spread out from South Africa and Namibia to the rest of the continent. I'd actually completed the project of reading my way around Africa before it occurred to me that if I wrote reviews of all those books, or the best of them, I'd have a useful sort of literary tour of Africa. In fact, "A Literary Tour of Africa" was the working title. I had a handful of actual book reviews to start with, but most of the book had to be written fresh. I had read several hundred books on Africa by then, so I had a good basis for deciding what to include or not. But on the other hand, I had to reread most of the books I decided to cover before I could write about them.

SE: What is it about African literature that pulled you in to the point that could take on a project like this?

GW: Well, the literature of Africa gives me a window on worlds that I might never get a chance to see. I did spend several months in Zimbabwe, and although it's just one corner of the continent, I think my time there gave me a greater appreciation of what's been written about Africa, and a better bullshit detector for what's false or fraudulent.

I've always been a voracious reader, so I'm constantly asking myself what I should read next. For a few years, while I was working on *A Basket of Leaves*, it was easier to answer that question because I was always on the look-out for something good from Chad or Libya or Equatorial Guinea. And my reward was to turn up gems that I never would have known about otherwise.

SE: You mentioned Kapuscinski, and I'd like to follow up on that. In addition to him, there are a number of non-African writers here, among them Paul Bowles, Norman Rush, V.S. Naipaul, and Graham Greene. Is their perspective on Africa as valid as that of someone who grew up there?

GW: A visitor to a country doesn't get the whole picture, even if he or she lives in a country for many years. But it's also true that someone who is born and raised in a country misses things, because they're too familiar. *A Basket of Leaves* is about the literature of Africa, not just African literature per se, and part of what I wanted to convey was the flavor of a place to someone who might be coming to it for the first time.

In many cases, I thought the perspectives of outsiders and insiders complemented each other, and I was especially pleased when I could include a book by a traveler along with one by a native of a country. From a traveler you might get details of landscape, wildlife, weather, architecture, and so on, while the work of a native—and when I say “native” this could mean someone of any ethnic group—might give more of the inner life of the people.

I don't think it's an accident that one of the classic works on American society is by Tocqueville, a Frenchman. Not all outsider's viewpoints are as perceptive as his, but an outsider can have access to insights that a native might never have. And I think most people would agree that the authors you mention wrote some extraordinary and illuminating books.

SE: I thought your entry on Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* was an interesting variation on this subject. It's about an African-American—Angelou herself—returning to Africa, and you quote David Bradley on the book's purpose: to address “the question at the heart of the African-American dilemma: what's in a hyphen?”

GW: It was startling to me to find that African-Americans visiting Africa are so often tougher on the place than anybody else. I'm thinking about books like *Out of America* by Keith Richburg, *Native Stranger* by Eddy L. Harris, and *Black Power* by Richard Wright.

Other African-Americans, like Maya Angelou and Reginald McKnight, present a more complicated picture. Maya Angelou arrived in Ghana, like many other black Americans, with very high expectations. She suffered some disillusionment but ended up with a more realistic appreciation of the people of Ghana.

The hero of McKnight's novel *I Get on the Bus* is a black American in Senegal. He sees that the Senegalese are more “literate in the tao of humans” than anyone he has met, but that insight has a sinister side. Of course, *I Get on the Bus* is a psychological thriller, not a work of journalism, so one shouldn't draw too many sweeping conclusions from it!

SE: Speaking of quasi-journalistic works, I thought the inclusion of Chatwin's *The Viceroy of Ouidah* was interesting because it presents something not often seen in slave literature: the slave era on the African continent, as opposed to in the countries to which the slaves were brought. It seems like this would be an important viewpoint. Is this something African authors have written a lot about?

GW: From what I've seen, African authors haven't addressed slavery as much as you might think they would. But there are some exceptions, like *The Slave Girl* by Buchi Emecheta. The young girl in that book is given an elaborate facial tattoo in order to make her less appealing to slave traders. But she ends up sold into slavery anyway, by her own brother. The scenes in which he takes her to the market to sell her, not entirely realizing what he's doing, are really heartbreaking. And that's true even because she's being sold into the indigenous version of slavery, where the slave might be treated almost as a member of the family, and her descendants wouldn't necessarily be slaves themselves.

SE: And do you think Chatwin's portrait is valuable? The “mosaic” approach you describe sounds a lot like *In Patagonia*.

GW: Chatwin's novel is fragmentary and impressionistic, as you suggest, but I think it does convey the brutality and corruption of the coastal slave-trading posts of West Africa. For a firsthand account of that you can read Sir Richard Burton's book *Wanderings in West Africa*, which came out in 1863.

A truly great novel about the slave trade is *Sacred Hunger* by Barry Unsworth, and much of that takes place in Africa itself. He captures the moral decay of the whole enterprise in a way that makes your skin crawl, and with impressive detail. The book doesn't concentrate on one particular country, though, so I didn't end up covering it in *A Basket of Leaves*.

SE: If not slavery, then I imagine that colonialism would be the major concern of African authors in the 20th century . . .

GW: The colonial legacy . . . that's an inescapable subject for 20th-century writing about Africa. It probably is the single biggest concern. It's not only a question of what slavery and colonialism did to Africa, but also the aftereffects of the struggle for liberation. Independence left a lot of countries with a strong man in charge. Some of these were relatively benign, like Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia, and others were not, like Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

There are a couple of plots that you see fairly often in African fiction. One is about the young man from the village—it's usually a young man—who goes to the city and loses himself. Another is about two boys who grow up as friends. One becomes an intellectual—a writer or professor or journalist—and the other becomes a dictator, and they move toward an inevitable confrontation.

The authors who have dealt with these themes most directly and realistically are also some of the best-known: people like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. But there is also a strong current of magical realist writing that doesn't have much to do with these themes: writers like Ben Okri of Nigeria, Mia Couto of Mozambique, and Sony Labou Tansi of Congo-Brazzaville.

SE: Ngugi has been very vocal about the importance of writing African literature in an African language—he himself switched from English to Gikuyu, and he also rechristened himself with a non-Westernized name. As you were picking books for your list, did you consider what languages they were originally written in?

GW: *A Basket of Leaves* is all about diversity. Picking at least one book from each country guaranteed a certain amount of geographic and cultural diversity, but I was also interested in a mix of books by men and women, books by people of various backgrounds and ethnic groups, and so on. I was sorry to find that none of the books by African writers that made my final cut were written in indigenous languages. I've read several books by Ngugi, and I was hoping to be bowled over by *Devil on the Cross*, which was written in Gikuyu. The book was written on toilet paper while Ngugi was in prison, which made me want to like it even more. But in the end, it was the earlier novels, written in English, that I thought were more accomplished. Ngugi published *Wizard of the Crow* after I finished writing *A Basket of Leaves*, and I look forward to reading it.

I also enjoyed the work of D.O. Fagunwa, translated from Yoruba, but there was so much other excellent work from Nigeria that I wasn't able to make room for it. I talk about nine books from Nigeria, by the way, more than any other single country. There are some wonderful writers coming out of Nigeria these days, like Helon Habila, Chris Abani, Helen Oyeyemi, and Chimamanda. She seems to have become such a star that she goes by one name, like Madonna.

SE: What do you attribute Nigeria's fecundity to?

GW: Well, I could speculate. Sheer population probably has something to do with it. Nigeria has a population of about 148 million. Lagos alone has about 8 million. So there's the human material for a thriving cultural scene. Nigeria has been independent since 1960—and despite war and corruption and military dictatorships, I think that helps build a sense of national identity. And because English is the colonial language, there's a worldwide English-speaking audience for books from Nigeria. The enormous success of *Things Fall Apart* and Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize must have also played a role in inspiring young writers.

SE: I wanted to get back to the African magical realists you mentioned earlier. Any relation to the Latin American magical realists?

GW: I think it would be difficult for any writer of magical realism to avoid the influence of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, but in Sony Labou Tansi the influence is unmistakable. Though it's a much longer book, *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* is like *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* in that it revolves around a murder that everyone knows will happen but that nobody seems able to prevent. It takes place in an imaginary land where time doesn't follow the usual rules. Supernatural creatures appear, and the language has the detail and sensuality that you find in Garcia Márquez, which makes fantastic occurrences feel convincing. Tansi has created a mythic version of Congo-Brazzaville, as Garcia Márquez created a mythic version of Colombia.

Ben Okri is probably the African writer who has made the most sophisticated use of magical realism. He hasn't just retold traditional tales, or invented imaginary countries. He has incorporated magical events into modern life in Nigeria and the effect is very powerful.

Ben Okri is best known for *The Famished Road*, but the book I think readers should start with, and the one I discuss in my book, is his collection of stories *Stars of the New Curfew*. The title story is about a young man who goes to work selling patent medicines in Lagos. He is profiting from the misery of the poor, but it's worse than that: his medicines actually make certain ailments worse. He's a convincing salesman, and he falls into the trap of believing his own pitch. He begins taking his own drugs to keep up his energy, but they give him nightmarish visions. It's a scary descent into the abyss that ends up blurring the boundaries of reality.

SE: Is there a figure in African literature that you consider as central as Garcia Márquez is to Latin American literature? Or would you say that elevating one figure is counterproductive?

GW: I'd have to say that Chinua Achebe is the central figure in African literature, on the strength of *Things Fall Apart*. The 50th anniversary of *Things Fall Apart* is being celebrated in a way that's hard to imagine for any other work of fiction by an African, and it seems to be the only African novel that everybody knows. I'm happy about that in a way, because it's a fine novel about a key theme: the conflict between a traditional society and the colonial power. But I'm less happy because people sometimes appear to think that it's the only book about Africa that they need to read.

The premise of *A Basket of Leaves* is that it takes quite a few books to read your way through Africa. And that includes African fiction writers like Tahar ben Jelloun, Nuruddin Farah, J.M. Coetzee, Yvonne Vera, Mia Couto, Chimamanda, and so on—just to name a few. When you go on that kind of literary journey, you understand what Kapuscinski said in *The Shadow of the Sun*, that the continent is so diverse that it is practically another planet. And that diversity is reflected in its literature.

SE: I think that diversity is pretty clear in one book in *A Basket of Leaves*, a book that I would not call magical realist but simply magical: *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola. As you mentioned, none of the authors in *Basket* are translated from an African language, although reading Tutuola you might think he was.

GW: You're right—there isn't really enough realism in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* to qualify it as a magical realist work. Tutuola's parents were cocoa farmers, and he only had about six years of formal education, so it would make sense that his work is rooted in Yoruba folk tales. And there's a certain similarity between his work and a book like Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Demons*, which was written in Yoruba.

SE: Beyond Fagunwa, whom else would you recommend alongside Tutuola?

GW: In addition to Tutuola, Ben Okri is an author who has drawn on his African roots while writing in a European language. Emmanuel Dongala writes a kind of African creation myth in his book *The Fire of Origins*. There's Ahmadou Kourouma from Ivory Coast, and Zakes Mda from South Africa. And Malidoma Patrice Somé from Burkina Faso is a kind of African version of Carlos Castaneda. His book *Of Water and the Spirit* claims to be a memoir, but the things that happen in it defy belief. You have to decide whether to take it as fiction or nonfiction, but either way it's very absorbing.

There are non-African writers who succeed at giving their language an African flavor, too. Norman Rush, for instance, is dead-on in conveying the way English is spoken in Southern Africa. I spent several months in

Zimbabwe, not far from Botswana where Norman Rush sets his stories, and so I recognize some of the language his characters use in *Whites* and *Mating*. You see some of his white characters adopting some of the useful local phrases, as I noticed in real life — like the distinction between “now,” which usually means pretty soon, and “now-now,” which means this instant.

SE: Speaking of Malidoma Patrice Somé, in your write-up of his book you note that he deals with the disconnect between oral and written culture in Africa; he even goes so far to suggest that in some ways the two are incompatible. This is something I've heard others express in reference to literary culture in Africa—that Africa's oral culture make it difficult for a literary culture to become established and flourish. What's your opinion on this?

GW: This is a question that really goes beyond my expertise, but I wouldn't be inclined to see oral cultures as the problem. Oral cultures seem to be the soil from which fiction emerges. The first written literature that appears in a Western language is often a retelling of traditional stories, and those stories and themes persist as a national literature develops.

I'd say that the real obstacles to the creation of a literary culture are social and economic. You need enough educated people to write books, and publish them, and read them, and you need enough prosperity and stability for those things to happen. It doesn't surprise me that educated people in developing countries may feel it's more important for them to become doctors and lawyers and engineers rather than writers. And it's notable that a great number of African writers don't live in their own countries anymore.

SE: With all this migration, do you notice specific national/regional differences to African fiction? Is it possible to generalize?

GW: You can generalize, but with the understanding that there are always going to be exceptions. There's an exuberance to a lot of Nigerian fiction, for instance: a lot of action, a lot of wordplay and creativity. Whereas the fiction of Ghana is quieter. Books like *A Woman in Her Prime* by Asare Konadu and *Beyond the Horizon* by Amma Darko are beautiful, but have been easier to overlook.

There's a cruel streak in North African fiction that you see in Mohammed Dib and Tahar ben Jelloun and others, and that someone like Paul Bowles absorbed as well. And there's a lot of melancholy in fiction from Southern Africa. South African books like *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* and *To Every Birth Its Blood*, and Zimbabwean books like *Nervous Conditions* and *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World* are some of the saddest that I ran across anywhere.

Naturally the emotional tone of a country's literature doesn't come out of nowhere. It comes from social conditions. Living under apartheid, for instance, was surely pretty depressing. It's probably no accident that a South African writer who's emerged more recently, like Zakes Mda, has some of the energy and apparent optimism that you might associate with Nigeria.

SE: Coetzee is, of course, another South African whose writing is informed by apartheid. I found it interesting that you picked his generally neglected *Age of Iron* over *Disgrace*.

GW: I chose *Age of Iron* because I liked it, of course, but also because I thought it shed more light on South Africa (at least in a more obvious way) than the earlier, more allegorical works. I also hadn't read *Disgrace* at the time—if I had, it might have been a difficult choice.

SE: So, as someone who seems to have read it all in regards to African fiction, what's next for you?

GW: I was a little concerned that I would never want to read another book about Africa, but I've found I was wrong. Since my book came out, I've read things like *The Book of Chameleons* by Jose Eduardo Agualusa, from Angola, and a charming graphic novel called *Aya*, by a writer from the Ivory Coast. Just today, I went to the library and checked

out *Say You're One of Them* by Uwem Akpan. If I get the chance to update my book, I'll have to think hard about what to add and what to leave out.

But as far as my own projects go, I've changed course. I've been spending a lot of time with Thoreau's Journal, which I first read in college, and particularly with his writings on animals. I've actually put together two manuscripts. One of them includes nearly all the four hundred or so creatures that he wrote about. The other focuses on the animals that had a spiritual meaning to him and organizes the excerpts by day of the year. Thoreau thought of the song of the cricket, for instance, as the earth's pulse. The relationships he saw between nature, the seasons, and the cycle of death and resurrection become apparent when you key what he wrote about crickets and other animals to the time of the year.

Scott Esposito edits *The Quarterly Conversation*.