



## Gods and Soldiers by Rob Spillman (editor)

Review by Geoff Wisner

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



**Gods and Soldiers: The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary African Writing, edited by Rob Spillman. Penguin. 368pp, \$16.00.**

African literature has been enjoying a boom, or at least a boomlet, in recent years. In his new anthology, *Gods and Soldiers*, Rob Spillman seeks to capture that phenomenon between two covers.

The boomlet has been dominated—at least for those of us in the Anglophone world—by South Africa and Nigeria. Those two countries loom over this collection, with five Nigerian authors opening the book and six South Africans closing it. Altogether, the thirty authors in *Gods and Soldiers* come from seventeen of Africa’s fifty-four countries: less than a third, but par for the course among African anthologies.

Many previous anthologies of African literature have been devoted to short stories. They have the advantage of presenting self-contained works, but they leave out a world of interesting essays, memoirs, novels, and even poetry. Spillman, to his credit, casts his net wider.

“This anthology,” he writes, “is intended as a snapshot of recent writing as seen through the lens of one editor, after consulting with many, many other editors, writers, scholars, critics, and everyday passionate readers.” There’s no poetry in *Gods and Soldiers*, but Spillman does include excerpts from novels and works of nonfiction. Unfortunately, his methods of organization and selection make his anthology narrower and less satisfying than it might have been.

*Gods and Soldiers* is divided into an odd mix of geographic and linguistic categories: West Africa, Francophone Africa, North Africa, East Africa, Former Portuguese Colonies, and Southern Africa. Each section includes several works of fiction and one essay, which is intended to provide context. For the most part, though, the essays don’t provide background on the authors and regions they introduce, and they sometimes head off on tangents.

The first piece in the book is Chinua Achebe’s classic essay “The African Writer and the English Language.” First published in 1965, it is not exactly recent writing—but no matter. The essay makes a strong argument that African writers can express themselves just as well, and reach a wider audience, by writing in a global language like English rather than an indigenous language. We don’t, however, get to read an argument by Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the most prominent advocate of the opposing view. (Ngugi’s novel *Wizard of the Crow*, translated from the Gikuyu, is excerpted later).

Also included is J.M. Coetzee’s review of a memoir by the Afrikaner poet and writer Breyten Breytenbach. But

wouldn't it have been better to feature what each of these writers does best: a few pages of a novel by Coetzee, and an excerpt from Breytenbach's memoir itself?

Spillman includes a sharply written section from a forthcoming memoir by Kenyan writer and editor Binyavanga Wainaina, best known for his essay "How to Write About Africa." First published in *Granta* in 2005, "How to Write About Africa" offers a set of bitingly ironic rules for those who would write about the continent:

Make sure you show how Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls, and eat things no other humans eat. Do not mention rice and beef and wheat; monkey-brain is an African's cuisine of choice, along with goat, snake, worms and grubs and all manner of game meat. Make sure you show that you are able to eat such food without flinching, and describe how you learn to enjoy it—because you care.

More literary nonfiction like this would have been welcome. By making room for work by Nega Mezlekia, Malidoma Patrice Somé, and Aminatta Forna, for instance, he could have added Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and Sierra Leone to the list of countries represented.

Spillman features some accomplished fiction writers who are relatively young and little known. E.C. Osondu of Nigeria contributes a wistful story about a Nigerian boy and his fickle American pen pal. Mohamed Magani of Algeria writes about a coffee drinker's revenge on the soldiers who tortured him. And Niq Mhlongo of South Africa describes a young man's less successful attempt to turn the tables on a group of corrupt policemen.

There is fine work here by more established authors as well: excerpts from *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Broken Glass* by Alain Mabanckou, and *The Book of Chameleons* by José Eduardo Agualusa, and stories by Leila Aboulela, Doreen Baingana, and the late Yvonne Vera.

It is disconcerting, though, to have nothing from M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah (or anything else from their country, Tanzania) and nothing from world-class authors like Tahar ben Jelloun, Wole Soyinka, and the prolific Naguib Mahfouz, who was writing until his death in 2006. The only work from Egypt, in fact, is an excerpt from the 1979 feminist novel *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi. In it, a prostitute stabs her pimp to death, then strides down the street—conscience clear, hair and makeup flawless, and apparently without a spot of blood on her.

When we turn to the six writers from South Africa, the picture is even stranger. In his introduction, Spillman points out that "the entire region is still coping with the aftershocks of apartheid." Yet none of the six selections from South Africa address the devastation of apartheid more than glancingly.

J.M. Coetzee, as noted above, is represented not by *Age of Iron* or *Disgrace* but by a book review. Nadine Gordimer is represented not by *Burger's Daughter* or *July's People* but by an innocuous story about a white woman who discovers her real father is a famous actor. In the final story of the book, the well-meaning employees of a museum face embarrassment when they must find a genuine whites-only bench to put on display.

*Gods and Soldiers* offers a lot of good writing, but if it is meant to be more than a snapshot—if it seeks to show modern Africa as comprehensively as possible through the lens of its literature—it falls short in that aim.

Geoff Wisner is the author of *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa*. He blogs at [his eponymous website](#) and at [Words Without Borders](#).