



The Thing Around Your Neck by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Review by Geoff Wisner

Tags: [African literature](#), [Nigeria](#), [short stories](#)

The Thing Around Your Neck, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Knopf. 224pp, \$24.95.

The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, just thirty-one years old, has won an extraordinary reputation—along with the Orange Prize and a MacArthur Fellowship—on the strength of her first two novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

The Thing Around Your Neck, her first collection of short stories, demonstrates that Chimamanda takes short fiction as seriously as she does the novel. These are not outtakes or false starts from novels past or to come, or finger exercises by an author relaxing between bigger projects. The stories stand on their own. Their characters are as intriguing as those in the novels, and although these stories are not particularly long, there is something important at stake in each one.

The stories mostly shuttle between Nigeria and the United States. Several are set in Nsukka, the university town where the author grew up. Several take place under the brutal regime of Sani Abacha, who ruled Nigeria from 1993 to 1998.

In “Cell One,” the popular and reckless teenage brother of the narrator is rounded up by police eager to show the government they are cracking down on gangs. In “A Private Experience,” two women take shelter from a riot in a deserted store—one of them an educated Igbo Christian and the other a Hausa Muslim from the north—and find some common ground as the hours pass. In “The American Embassy,” the wife of a crusading newspaper editor starts the process of seeking political asylum, but cannot bring herself to turn her murdered son into a story that might help her save herself.

Several of the stories concern the struggles of Nigerian women to make new lives in America. Like the stories in Jhumpa Lahiri’s debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, they probe the dislocations and melancholies of being an immigrant in America.

In “Imitation,” the wife of a businessman and art collector, ensconced in a house on Cherrywood Lane in a Philadelphia suburb, learns that her husband has acquired a girlfriend back in Nigeria. In “On Monday of Last Week,” an educated Nigerian woman working as a housekeeper struggles with the overanxious parenting of a lawyer father and the false intimacy of his artist wife.

Chimamanda has a clear, deceptively plain style that is well suited for investigating the subtleties of her characters’ motivations. Only rarely does a phrase call attention to itself and make you notice that what she is

doing is far from easy.

One of these moments comes in the title story, “The Thing Around Your Neck,” shortly after the female narrator had been subjected to an unwanted sexual advance.

“You locked yourself in the bathroom until he went back upstairs,” says the narrator, “and the next morning, you left, walking the long windy road, smelling the baby fish in the lake.”

I’m not sure why the smell of the baby fish is so peculiar, yet so right. It may have something to do with the clean, lonely smell of a lake and its alien life in the early morning when no one else is around.

“The Thing Around Your Neck” is one of two stories written in the seldom-used second person. Chimamanda employs the second person so deftly that despite the hint in the title, I was well into the story before I realized what she was doing. The device of telling a story about “you” can seem gimmicky (Italo Calvino and Jay McInerney have used it for comic effect), but here it adds to the reader’s sense of intimacy with the narrator. In the other second-person story, “Tomorrow Is Too Far,” that intimacy turns nightmarish as “you” learn more about who “you” really are.

Chimamanda has a gift for uncovering insights about people, especially white people, that can make them squirm. While waiting tables, the African narrator of “The Thing Around Your Neck” meets a young white man who takes an informed interest in her and her culture: but is it the right kind of interest?

He told you he had been to Ghana and Uganda and Tanzania, loved the poetry of Okot p’Bitek and the novels of Amos Tutuola and had read a lot about sub-Saharan African countries, their histories, their complexities. You wanted to feel disdain, to show it as you brought his order, because white people who liked Africa too much and those who liked Africa too little were the same—
condescending.

“Jumping Monkey Hill,” which takes place at a writers’ retreat somewhere in Africa, provides more to squirm about than any other story in the collection. Edward Campbell, the aging academic who runs the program, is a pipe-smoking snob and a lecher. The white South African woman in the group wears only “kente-print caftans” and has a “too-earnest face, humorless and free of makeup.”

But the African characters are not much better. While the Ugandan writer is currying favor with Edward and his wife, the others trade ethnic stereotypes and conventional wisdom:

They slapped at flying insects and drank wine and laughed and teased one another: You Kenyans are too submissive! You Nigerians are too aggressive! You Tanzanians have no fashion sense! You Senegalese are too brainwashed by the French! They talked about the war in the Sudan, about the decline of the African Writers Series, about books and writers. They agreed that Dambudzo Marechera was astonishing, that Alan Paton was patronizing, that Isak Dinesen was unforgivable.

Yet Chimamanda has a heart to go with her gimlet eye. She sees the strengths and virtues of her characters as well as their faults. *The Thing Around Your Neck* is a moving, unsettling, and ambitious addition to an impressive body of work.

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](#).