

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Fortunes of war and peace

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has attracted widespread acclaim for her fiction about her native Nigeria. Christina Patterson meets a writer wise beyond her years.

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie nearly missed the e-mail announcing that Africa's greatest living novelist was her latest fan. "I was sitting in an internet café," she explains, "and I was about to pass this one by, when I clicked on it and saw it was from Chinua Achebe's son, Chidi. 'Daddy read your Purple Hibiscus and loves it' he said. I couldn't believe it!". When she heard his response to her second novel, she cried. "We do not usually associate wisdom with beginners," said Achebe, in a quote now emblazoned on the colourful cover of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, (Fourth Estate, £14.99), "but here is a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers". Adichie, he adds "came almost fully made".

"He sent that quote to my editor in New York," says Adichie. "Afterwards, he told her that he didn't believe that a person that age could write that book." I, too, am finding it quite hard to believe that the girl sitting opposite me is the author of this magisterial novel about one of the most painful episodes in Nigeria's history, a novel that could - should - have made the Booker longlist this week. Adichie is 28, but she looks much younger. Almond-eyed, dewy-skinned and with a perfectly proportioned, heart-shaped face, she is one of the most beautiful human beings I have ever seen. "I know, I look about 18," she laughs. "Actually," she adds, in her precise, upper-class English accent, "it can be a bit irritating. People don't always take you seriously."

They are certainly starting to now. *Purple Hibiscus*, a subtle and gripping tale of an abusive childhood in a Nigeria shaken by a military coup, was shortlisted for the Orange prize in 2004 and last year won the Commonwealth Writers' Best First Book Prize. *Half of a Yellow Sun* has attracted tributes not just from Achebe, but from Joyce Carol Oates, who hailed it as "a worthy successor" to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and VS Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, and Edmund White. "I look," said White, "with awe and envy at this young woman from Africa who is recording the history of her country."

It all started with Enid Blyton. Growing up in the university town of Nsukka in the 1980s, Adichie devoured those tales of 1950s nuclear families in the English home counties. She soon started writing her own, with custom-made covers and middle-class white characters, "exactly like Enid Blyton's". It was only when she started reading African writers - Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Camara Laye's *The African Child* - that she realised that black Africans "could actually exist" in books. "It changed everything," she says. "As a child you're not brave enough to change things - until something makes you realise that you can actually write your own story."

It never occurred to her, however, that writing could be anything other than a sideline. "In Nigeria, as in most developing countries," she explains, "if you're smart in school you're supposed to be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer. It was just assumed I would be a doctor." After two years of half-hearted medicine at the University of Nigeria, she gave up. Escape came in the form of her older sister in Connecticut and a scholarship to study

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communication and political science.

It was then that she started writing Purple Hibiscus. She would go to lectures in the morning, look after her nephew in the afternoon and write at night. "I wrote another book first," she confesses, "which is horrible. I'd been reading a lot of contemporary fiction and I was very keen to get published. I noticed that the cool thing to do was the ethnic thing, the foreigner come to the US, so I wrote the Nigerian version of that. Really," she adds, "it was very bad." What she really wanted to write about, of course, was Nigeria, but "Americans don't want to know about Nigeria, they don't know where it is." One agent actually suggested that she "use the African material as background". Instead, she decided to cut her losses and start again. "I thought: 'Why don't I write something true and see what happens?'".

Purple Hibiscus draws on certain aspects of her background - her home town and her Catholicism, for example - but it is very far from autobiographical. It is an evocative and moving portrayal of a childhood in a fanatically religious household, one ruled by a charismatic and violent Catholic patriarch. A rich businessman, Eugene weeps for love of his children, Kambili and Jaja, but polices their every waking moment and punishes - brutally and at times nearly fatally - their every minor misdemeanour. During stays with their relatives in Nsukka, the children learn that there is an alternative to the terror of their home.

It's a gripping story, but also a metaphor for all kinds of oppression, personal and political. For the purposes of the novel, Adichie merged two regimes, the Babangida regime of the late 1980s and the Abacha regime of the 1990s. The novel even begins with a sentence - "Things started to fall apart at home" - which is clearly a homage to Achebe.

That, at least, is what critics assumed. In fact, says Adichie, it was entirely unconscious. "My editor pointed it out and then we decided to say it was, but really," she confesses with endearing honesty, "it wasn't. I could see that in a way it was true. Achebe is the most important writer for me, and so every opportunity I have to pay tribute to him I'll take it".

Both her parents liked Purple Hibiscus. Her mother even keeps a box of it in the boot of her car. "She's very excited," says Adichie, "about having her daughter in the newspapers." Nigerians are excited, too, and often stop her in the street. "They know I'm the writer who has beads in her braids. And apparently people are naming their daughters Chimamanda. It's very humbling."

Adichie herself is remarkably level-headed and remarkably calm. Having just completed a year as a fellow at Princeton, she plans to study African history at Yale. "Africa has long been written about, long been maligned, long been seen in a particular way," she explains, "and I feel that to counter that I want to be knowledgeable. My responsibility is to be truthful. I love Nigeria, but I want to be clear-eyed about it. It's so imperfect. But," she adds with another dazzling smile, "we don't choose where we're born."

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