

VOLUME 71

NUMBER 2

SPRING 1997

# WORLD LITERATURE TODAY

FORMERLY BOOKS ABROAD

*A Literary Quarterly of The University of Oklahoma • Founded 1927*

*Interim Editor:* William Riggan

*Managing Editor:* David Draper Clark

*Editorial Assistant:* Marla Johnson

*Circulation Manager:* Victoria Vaughn

*Editorial Board:* Roger Allen, E. J. Czerwinski, Antônio Dimas, Manuel Durán, Wlad Godzich, George Gömöri, Talat S. Halman, Elrud Ibsch, Charles R. Larson, Elaine Marks, Vasa D. Mihailovich, V. Y. Mudimbé, Meenakshi Mukherjee, M. Byron Raizis, Eric Sellin, Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Rebecca West, Y. H. Zhao.

*Board of Visitors:* Molly Shi Boren, Doris Bratton, S. Ross Clarke, Allece Garrard, Martha Griffin, Sarah C. Hogan, Judy Zarrow Kishner, Mary Nichols, Julian J. Rothbaum, Susan Neustadt Schwartz, Lela Sullivan, James R. Tolbert III, Lew O. Ward.

These journals, as they gradually reach a wider public, will contribute most effectively to the universal world literature we hope for; we repeat however that there can be no question of the nations thinking alike, the aim is simply that they shall grow aware of one another, understand each other, and even where they may not be able to love, may at least tolerate one another.

GOETHE

WORLD LITERATURE TODAY [ISSN: 0196-3570] is published quarterly at the University of Oklahoma. Subscription rates: individuals \$35 per year, \$60 for two years; libraries and other institutions \$45 per year, \$70 for two years; postage \$10 per year Canada, \$15 per year elsewhere. Single copies \$10; postage \$2.50 Canada, \$3.75 elsewhere. Second-class postage paid at Norman, Ok. 73070. Copyright 1997 by World Literature Today. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to *World Literature Today*, 110 Monnet Hall, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok. 73069. Phone: (405) 325-4531. Fax: (405) 325-7495.

JOURNAL ISSUES are published in February, May, August, and November. An annual index is published and mailed separately following the Autumn issue. Address orders and inquiries to the Editorial Office, 110 Monnet Hall, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok. 73019-0375. Individual issues and volumes of *Books Abroad* (1927-76) can be ordered from Periodical Service Co., 11 Main Street, Germantown, N.Y. 12526. Microfilms of all *BA/WLT* issues and volumes are available from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mi. 48106.

ESTABLISHED AS BOOKS ABROAD in 1927 by Roy T. House to promote international understanding by disseminating literary information, *World Literature Today* is devoted to comment on recent belles lettres in all the major and many of the minor languages of the world. The Editors will be glad to examine articles on contemporary writers and literary movements in any geographic region or language area. Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by return postage.

THE EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS assume no responsibility for contributors' opinions.

ADVERTISING RATES may be obtained through the Editorial Office.

THE ARTICLES in *World Literature Today* are indexed in *The Social Science and Humanities Index*, *Book Reviews Index*, *Hispanic American Periodicals Index*, *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*, and *International Bibliography of Book Reviews*.

THE UNIVERSITY is an Equal Opportunity Institution.

This publication is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.



## Kenya

Monica Genya. *Links of a Chain*. Nairobi. East African Educational Publishers (African Books Collective, distr.). 1996. 292 pages. \$8.50/£4.95. ISBN 9966-46-956-7.

According to the cover blurb, *Links of a Chain* is a "compelling story of love, romance, deceit, murder and death." It is the thirty-sixth title in the Spear Books series, which began with *Sugar Daddy's Lover* and includes work by such popular Kenyan authors as Charles Mangua and David Maillu. It is the sort of book that is read rather than reviewed.

The outsider coming to Monica Genya's novel is immediately struck by the imported elements. This is a thriller in which Susan Juma, the gutsy, talented young employee of a Kenyan state-security organization, stands against a ruthless international conspiracy that is determined to destroy the nation's political system and divide up the resulting United States of Kenya. There are a few references to places in and around Nairobi, and there are occasional linguistic features that may reflect an East African usage. For example, we read, "No case had ever baffled him" (for "baffled"), "clattering up" (for "cluttering up"), and the odd-sounding "flunged," as in "Susan was flunged against the dashboard."

But these are overwhelmed by the Americanisms. On the phone to a potential colleague, Susan says "Listen buster, you may think that you are the reincarnation of a Greek god but let me tell you that you come in a poor second, or third, or even nineteenth." She continues in a similar vein—surely with a North American metropolitan twang—concluding, "I didn't call to discuss your hang-ups pal. Either say yes or no." To this conversational style should be added references to diapers, allusions to baseball, and the convention of reading suspects their rights before arresting them ("You have the right to an attorney . . ."). Even more striking than the individual Americanisms are the exhausted narrative usages borrowed from "hard-boiled" detective fiction, from the dialogue employed in books by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and others of their school. Vehicles are forever being "gunned" into action, and an investigator who turns up valuable information inevitably is said to have "hit pay dirt." All this reinforces the impression that the author has used foreign models to jump-start her creative muse.

The basic situation explored in *Links of a Chain*, and the factors at work in the drama, owe minor details only to the Kenyan setting. For example, the conspiracy is a foreign-style affair dressed up with a little local color. There is minimal reference to the deprivation of the Kenyan masses, or the political system in which the nation is seeking a place. Genya's Nairobi stands beside the Hudson.

There is no reason why the detective-fiction and thriller conventions should not be taken over by African writers. Indeed, Kole Omotoso in *Fella's Choice* and Kodwo Abaïdoo in *Black Fury* have already experimented with the domestication of the tradition. To be successful, however, there must be a willingness to master basic elements, and this includes the requirement that both plotters and sleuths should comport themselves with intelligence. Only if this is the case does the story become "compelling."

Genya's tale is pushed beyond the bounds of credibility time and again by the failure of either side to behave with a modicum of understandable self-interest: the villains pursue their plans to assassinate cabinet ministers despite indications that their alliance is crumbling, and the "goodies" slaughter those who might provide clues to links in the criminal chain with reckless abandon.

The element of "expatriation" is also indicated by the fact that the protagonist is only half Kenyan—she has an Irish mother. And Chris Mathenge, known as "Chain" and sometimes addressed as "buster," the ace operative whom she draws out of retirement, is described as having a bronze torso. On the whole, Genya does not convey much sense of what her characters look like, but the pigmentation of her leading characters seems to betray a recognition that she is not really writing about Kenya and Kenyans.

The author is more interested in action than in character or community. As in other examples of the convention, there is, for example, little attempt to show the repercussions of violence on the wider community, and agents undertake casually dangerous assignments with inadequate backup. There is almost no attempt to explore the impact of brutal killings and scenes of carnage on the perpetrators and witnesses. The youthful supersleuth moves away from scene after scene of carnage with little more than a gulp. Genya is also interested in the "compelling story of love" referred to on the back cover of her book.

As the threat posed by the villains is first challenged, then exposed, and finally "neutralised," Susan and Chain fall in love. Although there is much that is predictable in the details of the romance, Genya does not allow herself to be drawn into describing sex scenes. Indeed, the one respect in which she does not follow recent American models is in the restraint with which she handles descriptions of the affection that grows. For this, much thanks.

Monica Genya has written a novel of over 290 pages. It must have taken her months of hard work, and I can only hope that good sales give her the confidence to write another book, this time radically scrutinizing the principles on which she is working. If Genya is a Kenyan, I would suggest she used her own experience, reflected the realities of East Africa, and practiced "speaking" in her own voice.

James Gibbs  
University of the West of England, Bristol

## Madagascar

Raharimanana. *Lucarne*. Paris. Le Serpent à Plumes. 1996. 139 pages. 80 F. ISBN 2-908957-86-8.

From 1983 to 1991, six of nine Radio France International short-story prizes have gone to Malgache writers. This activity is a far cry from the period before 1970, when *strictu sensu* only two short stories were published (in 1935 and 1938). In the 1980s a new generation of writers adopted the genre, and, although they grew up in the shadow of *malgachisation* (post-1972), many are writing in French. If they are meeting no official opposition, it is be-

cause their desire to write in French coincides with a political decision to reintroduce French and *francophonie* as vehicles for social and economic development. Many earlier francophone Malgache works are now being republished, the number of literary circles is growing, and type-written manuscripts are widely circulated.

This nurturing atmosphere notwithstanding, the Madagascar readership for short-story collections is limited. This in part explains the decision of (Jean-Luc) Raharimanana (b. 1967) to move to France in 1989. Being in Paris has, however, in no way diluted the author's visceral writing about Madagascar's urban misery. Action is focused on murderous alleys and public squares; suffocating tenements; putrid plots of abandoned, undeveloped land; dim, smoke-filled bars; rubbish dumps; and heaps of refuse. His cities, unnamed but recognizable, are peopled by anonymous characters: the "quat-mi" (street kids who do not have "quatre murs," the four walls of a home), the corrupt, prostitutes, the homeless, psychopaths, the forgotten, the downtrodden, even corpses.

Death and humiliation are often the outcome of encounters between Raharimanana's characters, for many of whom life is cheap and cheapened. In the title story, for instance, a prostitute is lynched by a group of rich kids in search of something to do, and a man is knifed and thrown out a window like a piece of garbage. In the ironically and poignantly entitled "L'enfant riche," a child is beaten mercilessly to try and make him spit out a coin he has swallowed in desperation. His hunger and the coin combine to cause unbearable pain. Indeed, unconscionable suffering and disturbing violence are a preoccupation of Raharimanana's and the subject of the most powerful stories in this twelve-story collection: "Souffrir, qu'est-ce? Une effroyable envie de crever pour que vivre ne soit plus le lot de personne."

Much as Raharimanana focuses on the stomach in "L'enfant riche," in all his stories attention is on the body and bodily fluids. Frequent evocations of blood, vomit, semen, and sweat are turned almost into a litany. He tries to purge with violence a corporal misery which, in his own words, "kills beauty," to replicate in his prose the "déchirements" in Malgache society and in the people themselves. His writing is thus brutal and violent, often scatological, always sensual and graphic: "Ma vomissure jaillit torrentielle, inexorable, gluante, comme un cœur dégeulé."

In a 1992 interview Raharimanana explained that, for him, writing is a process of self-brutalization that engenders violence. Even in the stories where the subject is love-making, the author cannot banish its violence: "Celles [nos nuits d'amour] d'avant où la pluie ne pénétrait ton sang, celles d'avant où la malaria ne venait éclater tes veines." This brutalization reaches its climax in the most disturbing piece of the collection, "Affaire classée," in which a couple smuggle drugs in the corpses of infants. When they are driven to use their own stillborn child, they go mad.

Raharimanana's first collection of short stories—in a fractured prose replete with exclamation marks, capital letters, single-word sentences ("Passer. Passer. Fuir. Franchir la dune"), and vocatives—leaves an indelible mark on Malgache letters.

Shawkat M. Toorawa  
University of Mauritius

## Martinique

Raphaël Confiant. *La vierge du grand retour*. Paris. Grasset. 1996. 396 pages. 139 F. ISBN 2-246-51251-4.

Like his character, Dictionneur, who has memorized his stolen *Littre* (dictionary), Raphaël Confiant loves words. And like the poets of the Pleiade who enriched the lexicon of French by importing words, Confiant is "re-inventing" French by grafting upon it the Creole words (and concepts) related to the *Créolité* he postulated in his *Eloge de la Créolité* (1989) and *Lettres créoles* (1991; see *WLT* 66:4, p. 758).

In his prolific output of novels in both French and Creole, Confiant has elaborated his own campy "Creole" world, a sort of commedia dell'arte with such stock characters as Solibo le Magnifique, the local storyteller, Dictionneur, Fils-du-Diable-en-Personne, and the Negritude prophet Cham. Two female Harlequins are central to the plot of *La vierge du grand retour*: their antivirginal characters dramatize the paradoxical farce essential to the pseudo-epic romance. The prostitute Philomène, labeled the "Péripatéucienne," is the most complex of these rather simple characters, and eventually emerges as the leader of the forces antithetical to the grand conspiracy.

The ruling classes of Martinique are fearful that social currents unleashed during the war have weakened their control of the island. The bishop, the doctor, and the richest plantation owner conspire in 1948 to bring the "Virgin of Boulogne" to Martinique to stir the fervor of the locals and reassert their power. *Vierge* recounts the "hystérie religieuse qui s'était emparé de la négraille." Philomène becomes one of the most fervent followers of the statue's pilgrimage around the island; "Péripatéucienne," but also "Notre Dame des Sept Douleurs" who wears the robe of a Carmelite, she undergoes a conversion experience. Her niece Adélise is long overdue; her expected child, whose father is as mysterious as the eleven-month term, comes soon to be thought of as the Creole Messiah. She finally births a dead girl, but her stomach still does not deflate!

Plot and history are subordinate, however, to style and grandiloquence, as is proper according to the postmodernist dictum (diktat?) of "language is all there is." In fact, the form, a parody of the Bible, overwhelms the historical detail, the cultural and sociopolitical analysis, and tends to trivialize them. The author is so tickled with such words as *belleté*, *câpresse*, and *chienaille* that he fails to develop satisfactorily such events as the death of the strike leader, leaving the plot too episodic and fragmented. Confiant seems to be a serious young man, genuinely concerned about the fate of his overseas department of France. But *Créolité*, which seems to have become a series of burlesque black comedies, has swept all in its current, so that it is impossible to know what the author thinks or intends with his biblical parody.

Since nothing is other than a bitter joke in the postmodern Creole zeitgeist of *La vierge du grand retour*, do the strikers' deaths or Cham's religious resistance matter?

Hal Wylie  
University of Texas, Austin