

“Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi (1977-)”

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Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi (1977–), Nigerian creative writer and essayist, was born on 15 September 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria, the fifth of six children, to James Nwoye and Grace Ifeoma Adichie. The Igbo family's ancestral hometown was Abba in Anambra State, but Adichie grew up in Nsukka, where her parents worked. Her father was professor of statistics at the University of Nigeria and later became the institution's deputy vice-chancellor, while her mother, a graduate in sociology, was its first female registrar.

Adichie began writing stories as a child. Her first pieces were heavily influenced by the British children's literature of which she was an avid reader; her early prose was, more specifically, modeled on the books of English author Enid Blyton. When Adichie was about ten years old, she discovered African novels such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Nigerian Chinua Achebe and *The African Child* (originally published in French as *L'enfant noir* in 1953) by Guinean Camara Laye. In later essays and interviews, she described the reading of these books as a turning point in her development as a writer, for they led her to understand that her own literary creations need not be cast in European molds but could mirror her own African experiences.

Adichie completed her primary and secondary education at the University of Nigeria School, winning several awards for her academic excellence. She then studied pharmacy and medicine at the university for a year and a half but rapidly realized that she did not want to enter the medical profession. In 1997 she published a collection of poems entitled *Decisions* and left Nigeria for the United States to study communication at Drexel University in Philadelphia on a scholarship. The following year she published a play, *For Love of Biafra*, which deals with the Nigerian civil war. This work marked the author's first imaginative exploration of the Biafran conflict, which had divided the country between 1967 and 1970 and had claimed both of her grandfathers.

After two years at Drexel, Adichie moved to Connecticut to live with her sister Ijeoma, who had recently established a medical practice in Coventry. The writer transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University and graduated summa cum laude in 2001 with a major in communication and a minor in political science. When she was a senior at Eastern, she started writing *Purple Hibiscus*, a narrative that was to become her first published novel in 2003. The story, set in Nigeria in the late twentieth century, focuses on a fifteen-year-old Igbo girl, Kambili, and follows the evolution of the heroine's attitude toward her father – a highly respected businessman who, as an extremist Catholic, rules his family with a rod of iron.

Shortly before the publication of her debut novel, Adichie began to gain recognition on the international literary scene as several of her short stories won, or were nominated for, prestigious awards. In 2002, she was declared joint winner of the BBC Short Story Competition for "That Harmattan Morning" and made the short list of the Caine Prize for African Writing with her piece "You in America." She further won the 2002-2003 David T. Wong International Short Story Prize for "Half of a Yellow Sun" and the 2003 O. Henry Prize for "The American Embassy."

Adichie's reputation was further enhanced by the critical success of *Purple Hibiscus*. Among other distinctions, the novel won the 2004 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Best Debut Fiction and the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book; in 2004 it was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction and long-listed for the Booker Prize. Significantly, the narrative was also praised by Adichie's illustrious compatriot Chinua Achebe, whose own *Arrow of God* (1964) she had by then consistently cited as her favorite novel.

Meanwhile, Adichie continued to combine her literary and academic work. In 2004 she obtained a master's degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University; in 2005-2006 she was granted a Hodder Fellowship from the University of Princeton, where she taught a class in introductory fiction. In the fall of 2006 she enrolled in a master's program in African history at Yale University. At the same time, she pursued her writing career, publishing numerous stories in international journals such as *Granta* and the *New Yorker* and several essays in prestigious newspapers, including the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post*. Although her short fiction has dealt with themes ranging from the Biafran war to contemporary Nigeria and Igbo immigrants in the United States, her essays often express her complicated attachment to her country of origin, fiercely denouncing its corrupt political system and the hypocrisy of its religious leaders.

The late summer of 2006 saw the publication of Adichie's second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which once again testified to the author's concern with the complexities of the

Biafran war. Indeed, the book centers on several Nigerian protagonists and an English character before and during the conflict and masterfully associates a vigorous condemnation of the brutalities of war with a sensitive portrayal of individual destinies. The novel, blurbed by Achebe, gained instant critical praise and received major accolades. Most notably, it won the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction in 2007 and was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book (Africa region) the same year. *Half of a Yellow Sun* was also a commercial success, especially in the United Kingdom, and sealed the writer's status as one of the leading figures of early twenty-first-century African literature.

While studying in the United States and touring the world to promote her work, Adichie regularly returned to Nigeria, actively supporting emerging local literary talent by organizing workshops for aspiring writers in Lagos. In May 2008 she graduated from Yale and moved to Columbia, Maryland. In September of the same year, she received a fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation, a \$500,000 so-called genius grant awarded to promising researchers and artists.

Adichie's first collection of short stories, *The Thing around Your Neck*, was published in April 2009. The book features revised versions of eleven previously published pieces and a new thought-provoking story that interweaves themes such as religion, homosexuality, and illegal immigration to the United States.

[See also Achebe, Chinua; and Laye, Camara.]

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Tunca, Daria. *The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website*. <http://www.L3.ulg.ac.be/adichie>. An academic page including a biography of Adichie, an introduction to her writing and a full bibliography of works by and about the author.