

# Stories Matter

## *Homegoing*

By Yaa Gyasi

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016,

305 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

## *Under the Udala Trees*

By Chinelo Okparanta

New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015,

328 pp., \$26.00, hardcover

## *The Book of Memory*

By Petina Gappah

New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015,

276 pp., \$26.00, hardcover

*Reviewed by Heather Hewett*

In her now-famous 2009 TED Talk, the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains the “danger” of knowing only a “single story.” When we lack enough perspectives and narratives to complicate our understanding, we are left with stereotypes. Making her case for reading and listening to a diverse array of writers and storytellers, Adichie says,

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

Three debut novels published over the last year—*Homegoing*, *Under the Udala Trees*, and *The Book of Memory*—share this vision of storytelling. While radically different in style and structure, their authors set out to tell stories not often heard or acknowledged. The results, boldly conceived and consummately realized, deserve a place on readers’ bookshelves and establish all three writers as authors to watch.

Yaa Gyasi’s masterful *Homegoing* undertakes the daunting job of delving into the individual horrors of slavery as well as how these traumas ricocheted across generations. Her story begins in mid-1700s West Africa with two events: the birth of a girl named Effia during a raging fire in Fanteland, and the subsequent alliance forged between her village’s chief and an Asante village in order to sell slaves to the white man. Raised by her father’s first wife, “Effia the Beautiful” is soon caught up in a cycle of beatings and partial neglect. Married off to



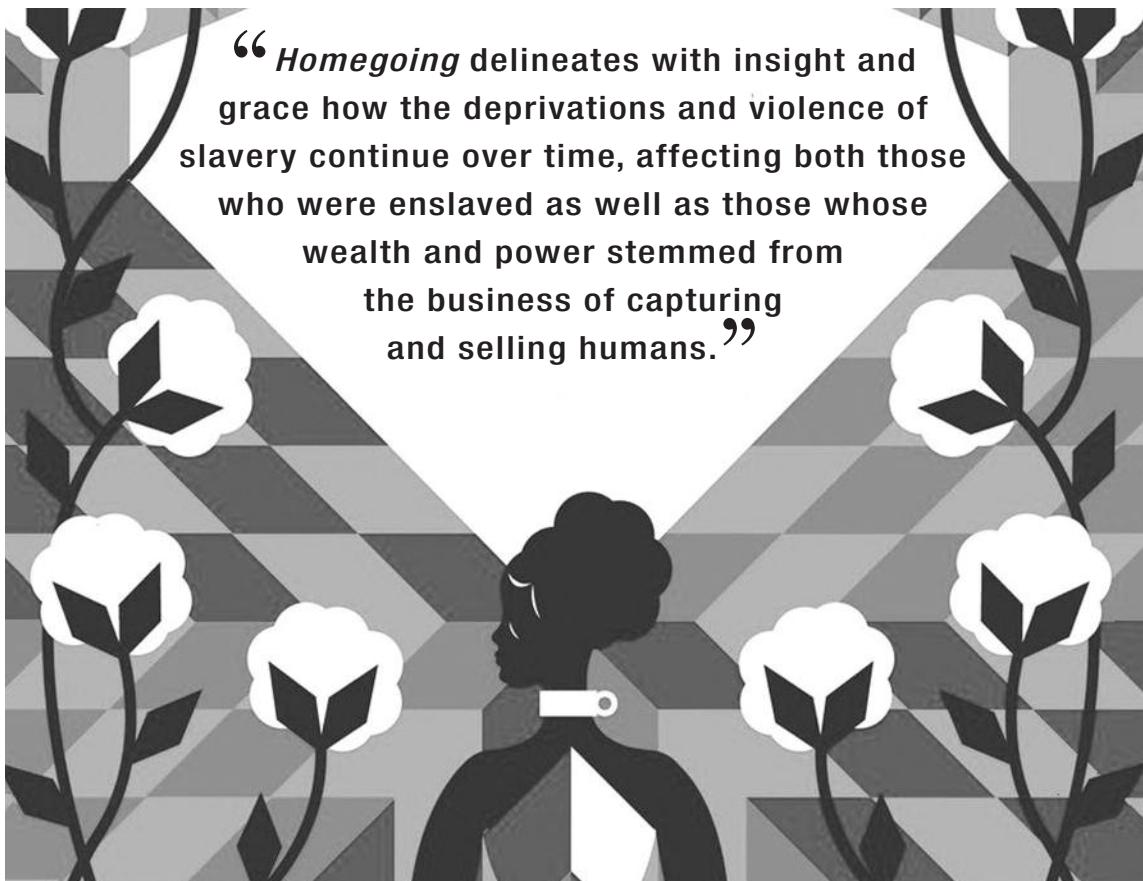
the newly appointed British governor, she bears a son and makes a new life for herself in the upper floors of Cape Coast Castle, the infamous fortress whose dungeons held men and women captive for weeks or months until they boarded slave ships for the New World. Their cries pierce the daily activities of the families living above them. Troubled by these voices, Effia eventually discovers the secrets that have haunted her own life: the enslavement of her own mother, Maame, who has another child and family in Asanteland.

*Homegoing* is the epic story of Maame’s family over the next several hundred years: Effia’s descendants, who remain in West Africa for several generations, and the descendants of her half-sister, Esi, an Asante woman who is kidnapped, enslaved, and shipped to Mississippi from Cape Coast Castle. Gyasi meets the challenge of writing a story that spans space and time by focusing each chapter on a single character, moving forward from one generation to the next and alternating between members of two familial branches now separated by the Atlantic ocean. In the hands of a lesser writer, this approach might yield thinly developed characters, but Gyasi excels at creating distinctive characters with depth, and she deftly crafts a narrative containing both the panorama of historical fiction and the intimate gaze of individual portraits. Again and again I was moved by the poignant details captured by Gyasi: the scarred body of Esi’s daughter Ness, who stands up for love and forever bears the marks of her master’s

retaliation; the same-sex desire of Effia’s son for his childhood friend in a family whose fortune is linked with slavery and political (heterosexual) marriage; the heartbreak of Ness’s son, a freed Baltimore man who works hard at caulking ships and fatherhood under the shadow of the Fugitive Slave Act; the enslavements and deprivations that continue after the Civil War, as his unnamed son “H.” is sold to an Alabama chain gang; the nightmarish visions of fire that haunt Effia’s “crazy” great-great-granddaughter, Akua; and the anger and heroin addiction that plague H.’s grandson in Harlem as he struggles with the absence of his father and the racism he encounters daily. *Homegoing* delineates with insight and grace how the deprivations and violence of slavery continue over time, affecting both those who were enslaved as well as those whose wealth and power stemmed from the business of capturing and selling humans. As “Crazy Woman” Akua says to her adult son, “evil begets evil. It grows. It transmutes, so that sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home.”

Gyasi courageously imagines the suffering of her characters at the same time that she shows us their strength and resilience. In the face of great loss—of freedom, family, and self-identity—Gyasi’s characters preserve whatever they can. Many of them possess creativity and visionary powers that reappear through the generations. The sweeping perspective of her story allows us a glimpse of the recurring traits and deep connections that endure

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to the present moment. Both an African and a quintessentially American story, *Homegoing* unsparingly portrays the lingering effects of violence at the same time that it charts the convergences and inheritances that enable healing and love.

The question of how history impacts individual lives also underlies Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. Like Gyasi, Chinelo Okparanta was born in West Africa and educated in the US (both received MFAs from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and live in the US), but the similarities end there. Okparanta's distinctive voice in *Under the Udala Trees* propels the first-person story of Ijeoma, an eleven-year-old girl whose life is torn apart by the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967 – 1970, which pitted the predominantly Igbo population in southeastern Nigeria against the rest of the country. Looking back on her life, the narrator understands that her own history flows from this larger, national one: the “story ... before the story.” Yet the battle lines separating the Igbo and Hausa tribes are not the only boundaries she encounters; equally rigid are the lines separating men from women, and heterosexuality from the “sin” of homosexuality. As Okparanta writes in her Author's Note, *Under the Udala Trees* “attempts to give Nigeria's marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation's history.” This is no small commitment; as the author herself notes, in 2014 the president signed a bill criminalizing same-sex relationships.

Okparanta has already received acclaim for writing about same-sex desire; her first collection of short stories, *Happiness, Like Water*, won the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction in 2014. Undertaking a novel enables her to tell a more sustained story, and she creates a narrative arc that mirrors her character's own emotional experience rather than chronological events. Although occasionally forced, this strategy generally serves the story well. As a writer, Okparanta shines most when exploring her narrator's journey toward self-

acceptance, which unfolds against a backdrop of cultural conservatism and Pentecostal Christianity. While at times painful to witness, Ijeoma's slow evolution is propelled forward by experiences of sexual awakening, convincingly rendered as deeply embodied moments of connection and discovery.

As an adult, Ijeoma longs for the love she has lost and struggles to reconcile her sexual identity with the punitive religious teachings of her mother about her “abomination.” Facing strong social pressures to be “normal” (as well as the very real threat of homophobic violence), Ijeoma makes a series of decisions that take her to Port Harcourt, Nigeria, and cause her deep unhappiness. Eventually she must decide what to do with the judgmental God of her mother and how to come out from “under the weight of tradition and superstition.” Her musings about theology and scripture reflect Okparanta's commitment to take her character's faith seriously as well as her understanding that rewriting cultural scripts and becoming the author of one's life, while essential for survival, require tremendous effort and courage.

“The story that you have asked me to tell you does not begin with the pitiful ugliness of Lloyd's death. It begins on a long-ago day in August when the sun seared my blistered face and I was nine years old and my father and mother sold me to a strange man.” Thus begins Petina Gappah's riveting *The Book of Memory*, narrated by a woman named Memory who is sentenced to death and imprisoned at Chikurubi, a maximum-security prison in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Gappah, a Zimbabwean writer, previously published a beautiful collection of short stories entitled *Elegy for Easterly* (which I reviewed in the March/April 2010 issue of *WRB*). Once again, she proves herself an accomplished writer with *The Book of Memory*, whose unforgettable protagonist pulls the reader along with dark humor and a razor-sharp intelligence. Memory records her strange tale in a series of notebooks addressed to an

American journalist who has expressed interest in her situation. But this is Memory's story, not anyone else's, and the notebooks capture her coming of age as an author who is realizing her powers of self-expression and intellect. “I had not expected that I would enjoy this,” she tells the journalist. “I am enjoying these words, crafting sentences, seeing paragraphs form. I am well into the first notebook already, but I already feel like I could write all day, and every day.”

Memory's voice—mesmerizing, educated, unafraid—is fully realized. She recounts the sequence of events that have led to her imprisonment: an impoverished childhood in the black township of Mufakose, outside of Harare; the taunts of other children calling her “*murungudunhu*,” a derogatory term for albino; the mysterious day her parents sell her to Lloyd, a white academic who speaks Shona; her privileged life with him in the wealthy suburb of Umwinsdale during the early years of Independence, where she is “saved by books”; the grotesque murder that lands her in prison. She frequently leavens the tragic circumstances of her life with dry wit, noting the malapropisms and misunderstandings of her fellow prisoners, the pettiness of the prison guards, and the many absurdities of a judicial system run by a failing state. At other moments, she faces what she doesn't know: the unanswered questions, perplexing memories, strange incidents, and myriad secrets of her unusual life. Well aware of these gaps, the narrator muses on the workings of memory itself. Random remembrances “intrude” upon her narrative, and she gives herself over to these wanderings; again and again, she revisits certain moments in her past—the “shards of memory,” to use Salman Rushdie's phrase—in her quest for coherence. In the spirit of Nabokov's 1951 autobiography, *Invitation of a Memory* (appropriately quoted by Lloyd when he first meets her and asks her to “speak”), *The Book of Memory* brings the delights of a fierce consciousness to bear on the confusing past and stunning revelations of its protagonist's existence.

Gappah's novel explores the challenge of living a complex and, at times, transgressive life in a society that relentlessly reduces identity to binary categories such as white/black, male/female, straight/gay. It weaves a story that embraces the in-between and the indeterminate, and it artfully shows how the present (and, by extension, the future) are interwoven with the past. Yet how we understand that history, particularly for those who live without the archives and keepsakes afforded to those more privileged, is entirely up for grabs. Meaning shifts as our memories recede and crystallize. *The Book of Memory* shimmers with moments of clarity even as it plumbs the murky waters, reminding us how the act of storytelling may not only save lives but also, in a fundamental way, create them. 📖

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