Ten Years of the Caine Prize for African Writing
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Preface

The Caine Prize for African Writing

Founded in 1999, the Caine Prize was named in celebration of the late Sir Michael Caine, former Chairman of Booker plc, who for nearly 25 years chaired the Booker Prize management committee. Shortly before he died he was working on the idea of a prize to encourage the growing recognition of the worth of African writing in English, its richness and diversity, by bringing it to a wider audience. His friends and colleagues decided to carry this idea forward and establish a prize of £10,000 to be awarded annually in his memory. They asked his widow Emma, Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne, to be its President.

In the ten years since it was founded, the Caine Prize has won widespread recognition throughout Africa, in the UK and increasingly in the US. It is the only literary prize open to all African writers from whatever part of the continent, and the only African literary prize awarded exclusively for short stories, the medium in which budding African fiction writers find it easiest to express themselves and attract attention, given the difficulties they face in devoting time to creative writing and in getting their work published. It is Africa’s leading prize for literature published in English; and its winners and shortlisted candidates have seen their careers immeasurably enhanced, typically by attracting the interest of leading literary agents, having their books published by mainstream publishers, and winning further prizes with them.

In addition to awarding the Prize, for the past seven years we have held an annual Caine Prize Workshop for African Writers, gathering in an African location 12 writers from African countries, including our shortlisted candidates and others, to work together and each produce a short story, with guidance from more experienced writers. These stories are then published in the annual Caine Prize anthology, alongside those shortlisted for the Prize.

In a new development, since 2007 Caine Prize winners are invited
to spend a month’s residence at Georgetown University, Washington DC, as guests of the Department of English Literature, an extremely valuable stimulus to their writing careers.

That the Prize has been awarded regularly over the past ten years is thanks to the generosity of the donors who have contributed funds, most notably the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust, whose ninth year of generous support approaches in 2010, and the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, which provided similarly valuable support from 2002 to 2007. And Celtel BV International – latterly Zain Africa – have sponsored three of the Caine Prize Workshops for African Writers.

We are especially grateful to the African winners of the Booker Prize, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Ben Okri, who have graciously contributed stories of their own to this anthology.

Jonathan Taylor                       Nick Elam
Chairman                                     Administrator

“I believe that a literary prize for African writers both honours Michael's work for Africa and will show the creative spirit of Africa and her humanity more globally.”
**Archbishop Desmond Tutu** June 1999

“This Prize is the result of a love story. Of Emma Nicholson’s love for Michael Caine, and Michael Caine’s love for Africa. It is the result of fidelity to their shared ideals. A translation of grief into a dream, and a dream into the reality of this Prize, which we celebrate in this volume. It has successfully helped the renaissance of a new African literature – and in just ten years.”
**Ben Okri** July 2009
Introduction by Ben Okri

O ye who invest in futures

1

It is easy to dismiss Africa. It is easy to patronise Africa. It is easy to profess to like Africa. It is easy to exploit Africa. And it is easy to insult Africa.

But it is difficult to see Africa truly. It is difficult to see its variety, its complexity, its simplicity, its individuals. It is difficult to see its ideas, its contributions, its literature. It is difficult to hear its laughter, understand its cruelties, witness its spirituality, withstand its suffering, and grasp its ancient philosophies.

Africa is difficult to see because it takes heart to see her. It takes simplicity of spirit to see her without confusion. And it takes a developed human being to see her without prejudice.

2

Africa is a challenge to the humanity and sleeping wisdom of the world. It is an eyeball-challenging enigma. Africa reveals what most hides in people. It reveals their courage or cowardice, their complacency or their conscience, their smallness or their generosity. Faced with Africa, nothing of what you truly are can hide. Africa brings to light the true person beneath their politeness, their diplomacy, or their apparent good intentions.

Africa is the challenge of the human race in the 21st century because, through her, humanity can begin to feel at peace with itself. Africa is our conscience. There can be no true progress for humanity till the sufferings of our brother and sister continents are overcome, till people everywhere live reasonably good lives, free from vile diseases, undernourishment, illiteracy and tyranny.

3

There is another sense in which Africa is difficult to see. To see Africa one must first see oneself.
The laziness of the eyes has to go. It won’t do any more to let our hearts and minds be affected by the colour of someone’s skin. This problem, amazingly, is still here. It is one of the silent tragedies of our times. It prevents people making true friends. It prevents them reading the literature of others. It hinders the flow of ideas and the mutual enrichment of our lives. More often than not culture is colour-biased. We are still primitives in the art of being human.

This is what gives literature its sublime importance. Literature makes it possible to encounter others in the mind first. Literature is the encounter of possibilities, the encounter of the work and the heart. It is the true ambassador of the unity of humankind.

When I visit the houses of acquaintances a cursory glance at their bookshelves reveals everything I need to know, regardless of what they profess.

It is easy enough to have bookshelves weighed down with formidable rows of Shakespeare, Dickens, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, or Henry James, and all else that has acquired the patina of the classical. It is easy enough to have a fashionable collection of Toni Morrison, Rushdie, Marquez, and all else that displays a progressive tendency, alongside the popular books of the day.

But to have novels by Ukrainians, Iranians, Indians, Egyptians, poems by an unknown Samoan, a Dutch collection of stories, works by Kenyan, Nigerian, Jamaican novelists, plays from Portugal, Japanese elegies, all mixed in with books that reveal a healthy interest in what the human spirit is dreaming, now that is something special. For here would be a person that Goethe might have thought a citizen of the world. Here would be a person one would hope to have as a friend, a person keen on humanity, fascinated by its varied genius.

That’s what the Caine Prize is about: celebrating the genius of human diversity. The idea is to enrich the world through its greater contact with Africa, and to enrich Africa through its greater contact with the
world. The dream is to create a bridge of the imagination. The hope is to share in the fun and the marvel of the creative spirit.

But it is not enough to just pass one’s eyes over the words, to merely read literature. That would be like what Mozart said about his mother-in-law: “She would see the opera, but not hear it.” We should read this literature with an open mind, an intelligent heart.

True literature tears up the script of what we think humanity to be. It transcends the limitations we impose on the possibilities of being human. It dissolves preconceptions. True literature makes us deal with something partly new and partly known. That is why we can’t ask new literature to be like the old, to give us the same pleasures as those that have gone before. That wouldn’t be living literature, which surprises and redefines. That would be mere repetition.

Literature mirrors, reveals, liberates.

Literature from Africa has long been in the margins. One of the benefits of this is that it has much to do. It has so many new moods, possibilities, philosophies to bring into being. This literature will bring many unsuspected gifts and wonderful surprises to the world in the fullness of time.

O ye who invest in futures, pay heed to Africa. Today she is wounded and is somewhat downcast. But tomorrow she will flower and bear fruit, like the Nile once flowered into the pyramids, or like the savannahs after the rains.

Africa has a weird resilience. Her future bristles with possibilities. When she heals, Africa will amaze. I should know.

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