

Literary Excavation: A Conversation with Peter Kimani

We had the opportunity to talk with Peter Kimani, a UH CWP alumnus (PhD Fiction, 2014), whose third novel *Dance of the Jakaranda* was recently released to great acclaim. Cited as a Notable Book of the Year, a NYT reviewer writes: "I've never read a novel about my own country that's so funny, so perceptive, so subversive and so sly." *Dance of the Jakaranda* is set in the shadow of Kenya's independence from Great Britain, reimagining special circumstances that brought black, brown, and white men together to lay the railroad that heralded the birth of the nation.



Alumni Profile

For how long did this novel percolate?

Ten years between the initial spark of idea and actual publication. I wrote the first few lines in the fall of 2007 in Iowa; the book came out in New York in spring 2017. When Kenya had a prolonged political crisis in 2007-2008, I abandoned the *Jakaranda* project, but produced poetry and a children's book in between. And lots of journalism. I was a full-time newspaper editor. I did not return to the *Jakaranda* until 2011, when I went to UH. I completed a first draft in time for my PhD defense.

Did you get support from specific people at UH?

J Kastely, of course, was a bedrock, especially when I had to return home to be with my family. Alex Parsons was a steady base for encouragement, wisdom, and insights. He pointed me to books that proved useful in understanding the scope of my assignment, and what I needed to complete my draft. Chitra Divakaruni was my thesis director, and she was very supportive and provided helpful suggestions. Hosam Aboul-Ela's topics on postcolonial lit made me think deeply what my book would be contributing to the discourse on Africa. Thomas Calder offered me rides on many rainy nights, and our ruminations on writing helped clarify many ideas on the work in progress. I would add the gang that featured in all my workshops contributed in one way or another to making the *Jakaranda* a better book.

Should you have queries or wish to support the CWP: cwp@uh.edu

Did you know from the outset that you wanted about a historical episode that brought together different cultures?

I was simply harking to James Baldwin's call: the responsibility of a writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produced him. I was born in independent Kenya, which remains a neocolony of the British. The book returns to the founding of the nation to understand this complexity. I am aware, however, that history is never recorded by the victims, but the victors. And I am aware there is quite a bit of fiction in our history books, especially that recorded by white historians. So I am using the power of imagine to challenge a reconsideration of that history.

Look at the man occupying the White House today. His claim to fame is a fiction that he peddled for five years: that his predecessor, Barack Obama, was born in Kenya!

What informed your decision to use untranslated dialogue?

That's literary indigenization -- a deliberate importation of expressions that convey a cultural experience that's specific to a geographic space. That was a trope to subvert the primacy of English language and insist that this, while a "global" story appealing to audiences in New York and London, is a local story about a community in Kenya. I also used oral narrative tropes in the book to insist of on its Kenyan roots.

What do you wish people knew about African writers in English today?

In Africa, there are 54 countries -- some parts publish in Arabic, French, Portuguese, English, and many local languages. Actually, Africa has over 2,000 languages that are in active use. I wish the rest of the world was aware about this diversity and complexity, and tap into the knowledge systems that have kept those societies thriving for thousands of years.

From *Dance of the Jakaranda*

In that year, the glowworms in the marshes were replaced by light bulbs, villagers were roused out of their hamlets by a massive rumbling that many mistook for seismic shifts of the earth. These were not uncommon occurrences—locals experienced earthquakes across the Rift Valley so often they even had an explanation for it. They said it was God taking a walk in His universe. They believed this without needing to see it, but on that day the villagers saw the source of the noise as well. It was a monstrous, snakelike creature whose black head, erect like a cobra's, pulled rusty brown boxes and slithered down the savanna, coughing spasmodically as it emitted blue-black smoke. The villagers clasped their hands and walked: Yu kiini! Come and see the strips of iron that those strange men planted seasons earlier...

Come hear Peter and current MFA student Wanjiku Ngunji read as part of UH's Poetry & Prose Reading Series on April 17th at 5:30 in the UH Honors Commons.