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An Interview with Award Winning Author, Manu Herbstein

January 26, 2011 By [Daniel Musiitwa](#)



Manu Herbstein, Commonwealth Writers' Prize Winner 2002

In this month's Writer's Spotlight, Africa Book Club interviews South African author, Manu Herbstein, whose book [Ama, A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade](#) won the Best First Book: Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2002.

Tell us a little about yourself, and your background.

My grandparents arrived in what was then the Cape Colony in the last decade of the nineteenth century. They had fled religious persecution in Eastern Europe. (I was brought up as a Zionist but I now look forward, though with faint hope, to the day when Palestinians and Israeli Jews can agree to live together in a single secular state.) I grew up near Cape Town and studied there until I left South Africa in 1959. I planned to return after the demise of apartheid, which seemed unlikely to survive the sixties. It took longer than expected and in the meantime I put down roots in Ghana. These days I try to spend December and January in Cape Town.

What's the story behind your dual-citizenship? We understand you are both South African and Ghanaian.

I first went to Ghana in 1961, drawn there by the charisma of Kwame Nkrumah. I worked there until 1963; and again from 1965 to the end of 1966. I have lived in Ghana since 1970, so when the citizenship requirements were relaxed it made sense to apply. I've had a Ghana passport since 2006. I retained my South African citizenship throughout the years of apartheid, though it sometimes required subterfuge to have my passport renewed.

Is it true you played a role in the anti-apartheid struggle?

A very minor peripheral role. In the late 1950s I was making a small regular monthly

contribution to the ANC through the London bank account of OR Tambo and TX Makiwane who were then setting up the ANC's external mission.

In 1960-1 I worked with Es'kia Mphahlele in Nigeria, raising funds for the Defence and Aid Fund, setting up a campaign to boycott South African goods and writing an occasional anti-apartheid article for Alade Odunewu's Service Magazine in Lagos.

In 1963-65 I worked with Arun Gandhi in Bombay, India, sending a regular anti-apartheid newsletter to members of the Lok Sabha and others and speaking at at least one public meeting.

In 1967-68 I served on the ANC's fundraising committee in Lusaka, Zambia.

In 1968-70 I helped to revive the Glasgow, Scotland committee of the Anti-Apartheid movement.

From 1970 I lived in Ghana where Anti-Apartheid activities were in the capable hands of my good friend the late David Acquah.

So, how did you – a structural engineer – start out as a writer?

Starting out as a creative writer had nothing to do with being a structural engineer. It was the 1994 "Guinea Fowl war" in northern Ghana that set me off.

Is writing a full-time pursuit for you? Do you have other interests?

I spend most of my time writing, though I've had only limited success in getting published. My wife runs a furniture factory and a real estate development company in Accra and I give her business some technical support. I read, mostly African fiction, and spend too much time on the Internet.

How did you get your first break?

I sent New York literary agent Richard Curtis an e-mail complaining that a book he had written had been re-published, unchanged, under a new title. I already had the original version and was angry at having wasted money on buying the new one. He responded at once asking me to send him the manuscript of Ama. In the event, in spite of auctioning the novel, he failed to find a publisher. Then he set up E-Reads, a pioneer electronic publishing company and offered to publish Ama as his first e-book original. <http://ereads.com/index.php?s=manu+herbstein&x=17&y=17> and <http://ereads.com/ecms/books.php?id=22>

Was Ama: a Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, your first book?

Yes. E-Reads' print-on-demand edition, which is still in print in the U.S., went on to win the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Book.

What was your inspiration for this book?

Inspiration? It was hardly that. The first chapter I wrote, one near the centre of the novel, attempts to recapture the experience of an abused female slave in Elmina

Castle. Once I had created Ama and given her a name, she challenged me to discover her history and trace her future in the Middle Passage and Brazil. Writing the novel was something of a journey of discovery for me.

What do you want your readers to take away from reading Ama's story?

In common with most novelists, I guess, I would like my characters, in this case particularly Ama, to remain embedded in their consciousness.

Beyond that I would like readers to reflect on the thesis that the Atlantic slave trade is the foundation upon which what we used to call imperialism and now call globalization was constructed. Slave plantations were prototypes both for the factories of the industrial revolution in the West and for the British and Nazi concentration camps. We must resist the collective historical amnesia which the West has imposed upon us.

The stories of hardly any of the millions of Africans who, over a period of four centuries, were subjected to forced migration across the ocean, have survived. We know the names of the Jews, Roma, homosexuals and communists who were sent to the Nazi gas chambers. The names of almost all the twelve million enslaved Africans are irretrievably lost. We need to conjure up their spirits, give them back their names and listen to their voices.

One review has described Ama as “a monumental work, epic in scope and design, and clearly the result of extensive research”, Can you speak to what went into writing the novel, and how long it took you?

Sadly, few contemporary West Africans have more than a cursory knowledge of their history. As an immigrant to Ghana I was even more ignorant. After four years scouring libraries for primary and secondary texts which I thought might have some bearing on Ama's story, I am a little less ignorant now. Once the book was published I placed all my notes and sources in a web site www.ama.africatoday.com It is badly in need of revision and updating but readers of Ama might find interesting background reading there.

What has been the response to the book since you published it?

Reader response has been almost entirely favourable. Mainstream publishers in the West have refused to publish it. I don't know why. Pan Macmillan published it in South Africa but that edition is now out of print. It has been published in India and there is now an African edition published in Ghana.

It's been a few years since Ama, what have you been working on since?

I have an unpublished novel, Ramseyer's Ghost, set in Ghana in 2050. A sequel to Ama entitled The Brave Music of a Distant Drum won an honourable mention in the 2010 Burt Award for Ghana and will be published in Canada in late 2011 or early 2012. The Cape Town based literary magazine Chimurenga published a memoir of the two years I spent in India, Jai Hind! African Writing, the academic journal Slavery and Abolition and The New Legon Observer published different versions of

Reflections in a Shattered Glass: The British Council's Celebrations of the Bicentenary of the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Ghana. I'm presently working on a teenage love story set in contemporary Ghana. I've failed to find an American publisher for a long short story, Ten Days Which Shook the World, in which Michelle Obama is elected president of the U.S. in 2012.

You have been doing some work to promote local writers in Ghana. How is that coming along?

The Ghana Association of Writers recently held its first AGM for many years and elected a new President and a completely new executive. I am optimistic that they will inject new life into the local literary scene and I hope that they will help to discover and nurture new literary talent.

Any words of advice to aspiring writers out there?

Don't give up your day job. It's a tough world. But when most of today's politicians are forgotten, it's the writers and their works who will be remembered. We have stories to tell. If we don't tell them, who will?

Are there African writers you admire? If so, who and why?

Too many to list. Here's a selection with a book each. Es'kia Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue was a formative influence in my youth. Is there a better novel of the Biafran War than Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy? I read Elsa Joubert's Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena in the original Afrikaans. A powerful, touching novel by a courageous writer. Yvette Christiansë's Unconfessed is one of the most moving works I've read in recent years. I found Toyin Falola's splendid memoir of his boyhood in Ibadan, A Mouth Sweeter than Salt unputdownable.

Any final thoughts you would like to share?

The Burt Award is a great idea. First Ethiopia, next Tanzania, then Ghana and now Kenya hosts an annual contest for a novel targeted at 12-15 year olds with a first prize of \$10,000. The writers have to be resident citizens. All honour to the generous Canadian, Bill Burt, whose idea this was and who funds it. The Japanese funded Noma Prize is no more. The Caine Prize is British funded. What a pity and shame that with all their talk of an African Renaissance, our political leaders have been so mean in their patronage of the arts and creative writing in particular. Mo Ibrahim should consider giving up his futile search for ex-presidents worthy of his prize and devote his philanthropy to the recognition and nurturing of African literary and other creative achievement.

And then there is China, but that's another story.



About Daniel Musiitwa

Daniel Musiitwa has lived and worked in numerous African countries. An avid reader, he maintains a keen interest in Africa, and started the Africa Book Club blog as a space to promote interest in African writing.