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Book Review: Wizard of the Crow

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Book Review

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Wizard of the Crow. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.
New York: Pantheon Books, 2006.

Written in Kikuyu and translated into English by the author, *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o will not disappoint anyone familiar with the author's prolific body of work. This work of fiction sears with truth and lays bare the international foibles of postcolonial African politics. Pregnant with humor and irony, this allegory leaves nothing sacred as when one of the characters is cured of the disease of white-ache. It is a most human story examining both the character of leadership and the desires of the common citizen. Farcical characters become believable, while women, especially, are portrayed with complexity. The story challenges many stereotypes. For example, the main character, the Wizard of the Crow, is a "witchdoctor" or traditional healer or "Afrochiatrist" (p. 622), and proves to be the voice of reason and sanity.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who loves storytelling or is interested in international relations and African culture and society. The story tells of a megalomaniacal African ruler with a grandiose development scheme surrounded by conniving sycophants obsessed with greed who try to control the masses and outmaneuver each other. The trials of these politicians are interwoven with a love story involving the Wizard of the Crow and an underground activist posing as a secretary. The roles of thinly disguised entities such as the Global Bank also figure into this brazen exposé of the "politics of poverty" (p. 87), while many other novel characters populate the landscape such as the "professors of parrotology" (p. 572).

The work is cynical, critical, insightful, and inspiring. Describing the fictional place, Ngugi writes, "If there were no beggars in the streets, tourists might start doubting whether Aburiria was an authentic African country" (p. 35). Contrast this with the line, "The world has no soul" (p. 62). The calculating ruler muses,

“Many a government in the world has been brought to ruin because it has been lax and allowed students, youth, and women to say and do whatever without proper guidance and supervision” (p. 557). And Ngugi observes, “Disorder reigned supreme, for any attempt on the part of the people to organize themselves was deemed by the Ruler’s government as a challenge to its authority” (p. 576). Describing the actions of one of the rich and successful political appointees, he writes, “How does one find humor in humiliating the already humiliated?” (p. 383). He also asks, “Why does needy Africa continue to let its wealth meet the needs of those outside its borders and then follow behind with hands outstretched for a loan of the very wealth it let go?” (p. 681). He also states, “It will not do for any region or community to keep silent when the people of another region and community are being slaughtered” (p. 726).

There is so much to highlight in this wide-ranging engaging story that no review could possibly do it justice. Don’t let the book’s size or the author’s reputation intimidate you. It’s a fun, easy read, and you may learn a lot. As always, Ngugi places the primary burden of resolving Africa’s maladies solely on Africa without shying away from the complex, detrimental influence of the colonial past. The question of whether Africa will experience globalization as the latest reincarnation of an oppressive colonial past or participate actively as a contributing voice of reason may in some small part be presaged through the reception of this telling book. Thank you for this gift of a book and for holding up a mirror in which to exorcise so many daemons.