the WORLD SPLIT OPEN

Great Authors on How and Why We Write
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Does writing matter?

Let’s assume for a second that it doesn’t. Writing of the literary variety—poetry, fiction, nonfiction, all of it—persists as a marginal cultural activity, at best. It doesn’t generate much in the way of wealth, or almost anything in the way of usable technical knowledge for humankind. Eclipsed long ago by film and television, eclipsed again by interactive gaming technologies, the well-wrought verses, long-form narratives, and digressive essays of quote unquote literature are by now boutique luxury items, spun for elite buyers, going the way of chamber music and the regional ballet company. Mostly it’s ladies who dig it.

A basic indifference to serious writing has probably always been the de facto attitude in our culture and has manifested over the years in many forms and with many shadings. There’s the bedrock know-nothing-ism of the silent majority who never recovered from the oppression of high school English class; there’s the countercultural antielitism that’s often just anti-intellectualism in disguise,
always ready to dismiss anything a book could teach; there’s the idea of good writing as, pace Dick Cheney on the topic of conservationism, a private virtue but not a matter of public concern. Good for you, you’re in a book club; I prefer this copy of *Sports Illustrated*. And now, added to the various postures of disregard, is a new typology—the barely covert contempt of our overlords, the engineers of the Internet. The *New York Times* recently profiled a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who had this to say about the secret of his success: “If you can't measure it, you’re asking the wrong questions.” Such is the metric-based mentality that dominates our world and shapes our postliterary future.

This book is a rebuttal to all that. Literary Arts, an organization founded in 1984, is a bulwark of bookish culture devoted expressly to the proposal that writing does in fact matter. Beginning as a lecture series, in 1993 it joined forces with a sympathetic organization called the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts, founded by Portland lawyer Brian Booth and a group of Oregon writers including Ken Kesey, Ursula K. Le Guin, William Stafford, and Barry Lopez. Together, the fused institutions concurred on a basic, happy mission: namely, to honor and encourage good writing under the presumption that the fruits of the local imagination are a resource on par with Douglas fir trees and marionberries, something to cultivate and protect.

Over the years, Literary Arts has grown into a multipronged nonprofit advocating for writers and writing on numerous fronts. Every year it presents the Oregon Book Awards, an honorific that serves as a main focal point for the local writing community. Every year it delivers fellowships to local writers in the throes of their unfinished work (over $700,000 to over five hundred writers and publishers, as of this writing). It also administers Writers in the Schools, a residency program placing professional writers in public high school
classrooms around the city, as well as organizing teen readings and poetry slams in off-campus locales. And, most famously, it curates Portland Arts and Lectures, bringing some of the world’s most notable writers to Portland to share their thoughts before audiences in a gigantic, gilded, Italian rococo revival–style auditorium.

This book is a collection of some of those talks. Does writing matter? Find here if not proof then at least some highly convincing anecdotal evidence in support of the proposition. These essays take for granted that serious writing and serious reading are fundamental to life. They don’t constitute a defense of “literature” per se—who’d want to go to the barricades for a word as abstract and high-minded as that?—but instead simply perform the very activity Literary Arts was designed to promote, i.e., the passionate engagement of the human soul with the written word. Open these pages and witness professionals at work. This is how we think clearly. This is how we describe vividly. This is how we moralize deeply. This is how we figure out our politics. This is how we perform all those mental activities that never lose relevance or value, no matter the platform, be it papyrus or a plasma screen.

Some things you have to look forward to in these pages: Wallace Stegner, late in his career, speaking with great honesty and humility about the writing of Crossing to Safety and the ongoing adventure of improvising a writing life. Marilynne Robinson, angry and unbowed, preaching with fiery moral clarity on the experience of beauty in contemporary society. Edward P. Jones, on the heels of publishing The Known World, waxing wise and self-aware about the wellsprings of his inspiration. Uniting all these writers is a sense of profound modesty in the face of writing’s daily difficulty and mystery, and joyful identification as lifelong students of language, history, and human behavior. Over and over again, they genuflect to writing as the visible struggle of humans engaged
in moral reflection—indeed, as the very index of consciousness understanding itself. As Robert Stone states, with blazing simplicity: “Storytelling is not a luxury to humanity; it’s almost as necessary as bread. We cannot imagine ourselves without it, because the self is a story.” Amen.

It’s true—the universe would survive without decent writing, much as it did for a trillion or so years before writing was born. And it’s true that the vast majority of people on earth will continue to live full, eventful lives without the benefit of Jane Austen or W. S. Merwin. But by this reasoning, you could also argue that almost nothing matters. (Or, rather, you could argue that if you knew how to write well.) People can live without basketball, domestic pets, and real butter, too. If the question is simply one of literal survival in its ultimate sense, eating twigs in the wilderness or Pringles in front of the Xbox, we can survive with almost nothing, we’ve demonstrated that. For those who want to live in a deeper, funnier, wilder, more troubled, more colorful, more interesting way, a way in which not only writing matters but also beauty, memory, politics, family, and everything else, put on your reading glasses and turn the page. Your people have something to tell you . . .
I’d like to start with what I’ll call a cultural history of my writing, which is also the story of the house in which I grew up. So I’d like to start by talking about bagels. As a child in Nigeria, I once read an American novel in which a character ate something called a “bagel” for breakfast. I had no idea what a bagel was, but I thought it sounded very elegant, and very exotic. I pronounced it “ba-gelle.” I desperately wanted to have a ba-gelle. My family visited the US for the first time when I was nine, and at the airport in New York, I told my mother that, as a matter of the gravest urgency, we had to buy a ba-gelle. And so my mother went to a café and bought one. Finally, I would have a ba-gelle. Now you can imagine my disappointed surprise when I discovered that this ba-gelle, this wonderful, glorious ba-gelle, was really just a dense doughnut. I should say I’ve come to like bagels, but I love to tell this story because I think it illustrates how wonderful books are at enlarging our
imaginations. So even though a bagel ended up not being some sort of exquisite confection, the moments in which I thought it was were well worth it, because my imagination soared in delight. And there was also something comforting and instructive in that discovery of a bagel, in the demystifying ordinariness of a bagel—the realization that other people, like me, ate boring food.

As a child, books were the center of my world; stories entranced me, both reading them and writing them. I’ve been writing since I was old enough to spell. My writing, when it is going well, gives me what I like to describe as “extravagant joy.” It is my life’s one true passion. It is, in addition to the people I love, what makes me truly happy. And like all real passions, my writing has enormous power over me. There is the extravagant joy when it is going well, and when it is not going well—when I sit in front of my computer and the words simply refuse to come—I feel a soul-crushing anxiety, and I sink into varying levels of depression. Most times, in response to this, I read. I read the authors I love—the poems of Derek Walcott, the prose of John Gregory Brown, the poems of Tanure Ojaide, the prose of Ama Ata Aidoo—and I hope that their words will water my mind, as it were, and get my own words growing again. But if that doesn’t work, I take to my bed and eat a lot of ice cream. Or I watch YouTube videos about natural black hair. Or I simply spend all of my time online, shopping—and I particularly favor websites that offer free returns, because I end up returning most of what I buy. But all of this I do with the hope that my words will come back soon, and also with the always hovering fear at the back of my mind that they will not. But so far, the words have always come back.

I write because I have to. I write because I cannot imagine my life without the ability to write, or to imagine, or to dream. I write because I love the solitude of writing, because I love the
near-mystical sense of creating characters who sometimes speak to me. I write because I love the possibility of touching another human being with my work, and because I spend a large amount of time in the spaces between the imaginary and the concrete. My writing comes from hope, from melancholy, from rage, and from curiosity. Writing is this wondrous, inexplicable gift that I have been blessed with, but it is also a craft, a steely determination to sit down for hours and write and rewrite until my neck muscles tighten and throb with pain. And then I need a massage.

I have read of some writers’ elaborate rituals, and I have also sometimes been tempted to claim an equally elaborate ritual of my own. I’ve been tempted, for example, to claim that I light red candles, and that I hold incredible yoga positions for hours, or that I recite an Igbo chant and fall into a trance before I actually begin to write. But although my ritual is in truth significantly less colorful than what I would like it to be, it exists, and it involves, among other things, wandering around the house. My husband and I joke about how, when I am at home, and all is quiet, and all distraction turned off, and I am supposed to be writing, I’m instead spending most of the time wandering around the house—from the study, to the bedroom, to the kitchen, and all over again. And my husband will come home from work and say to me, “So how did the wandering go today?” This brings to mind a wonderful quote from Don DeLillo, which goes like this: “Writers go out of their way to secure their solitude. And then, having secured it, they go out of their way to squander it.” I feel like Don DeLillo is my kindred spirit. But my wandering, really, is in itself part of the process of trying to get into a creative space. And while I do not light red candles, and there are no particular objects that are central to my creativity, there is a house that is, and that is the house in which I grew up: number 305 Marguerite Cartwright Avenue, at the University of Nigeria, in Nsukka.
Some years ago while I was on book tour, I was asked by an earnest American boy: “Will you always write about Nigeria, or will you write about normal places?” Until then, I had not realized that Nigeria was not normal. I often say that I love Nigeria. Sometimes I’m defensive in professing this love. Yes, there are problems of corruption and inequality, I say, but there’s a wonderful proverb from Mali, which says: “Your mother is your mother, even if one of her legs is broken.” Of course, this love I profess must be qualified. There is much I do not love about Nigeria, much I wish I could change, much about which I feel by turns anger and shame and bewilderment and disgust. But love is an emotion that does not depend on perfection. And so to say I love Nigeria is to say that I love some kernels of it: my ancestral hometown, Aba; the university primary school—the wonderful, wonderful school where I learned almost everything I know today; and, most of all, the house in which I grew up, number 305 Marguerite Cartwright Avenue.

And so now, a little history. A hundred years ago, West Africa was a diverse, vibrant place. In what is now called Nigeria, there were great kingdoms like the Benin kingdom, the Oyo kingdom; there were small republican groups like the Igbo. Then the Europeans decided that Africa was a rather interesting cake that they wanted to share among themselves, and they met in Berlin and they laid Africa on the table and cut it up like a birthday cake, and one of the slices that went to Britain was in West Africa, and it was a country that they would name after the river Niger: Nigeria. Under British colonialism, Christianity came, and with it Western education. Nigeria had a university college, which was part of the University of London, but shortly before Nigeria became independent in 1960, the government decided that it wanted to establish the first indigenous university, one that would not be affiliated
to the University of London, or to any British university. And it chose, for the site of this first university, a town of rolling hills and red dust called Nsukka. A founding committee was set up for the new university, and this committee consisted of Nigerians, British, and Americans. One of the Americans was a woman named Marguerite Cartwright. She was a sociologist and a journalist. When the university was finally started, the first streets on its campus were named after the members of this founding committee. So one of those streets had two-story buildings and large yards and whistling-pine hedges, and it was called Marguerite Cartwright Avenue.

My father was part of the first wave of Nigerian academics who began teaching at Nsukka in 1960. He had a degree in pure and advanced mathematics, but the university already had mathematicians, and so they wanted to start a statistics department, and so my father was hired to teach statistics, even though he really had very little idea what statistics was. And he says that he sometimes just learned as he taught. I wonder how his students are faring now. He lived, at first, in a flat on Elias Avenue. Mr. Elias was a Nigerian member of the founding committee. Then my father married my mother in 1964. He became a senior lecturer and they moved to a new house on Odim Street, into a small bungalow with a tiny veranda and a cluster of flowers by the front door. In 1976, he became a full professor. At this point I think he had gotten the hang of statistics. And because I am a hopeless and utter daddy’s girl, I would like to describe my father. He is a quiet, unassuming man. He’s a gentle man and a gentleman. He’s a committed university teacher; he’s a man of immense integrity. And he was also Nigeria’s first professor of statistics. I adore him. He turned eighty a few months ago and he still lives in Nsukka. And so when he became a full professor, they moved to another house, a large,
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spacious bungalow on Mbanefo Street. In September of 1977, after I was born at the university teaching hospital, I was brought back to this house, wrapped in a soft blanket in my mother’s arms. I spent the first five years of my life there; I don’t remember it very much.

Then, in 1982, my father was appointed deputy vice-chancellor of the university and assigned a new house: number 305 Marguerite Cartwright Avenue. It had a gracious, graveled driveway, a wide yard that in front was bright with red hibiscus and purple bougainvillea, and at the back was dense with avocado, mango, and cashew trees. The first time we saw the house, we looked at the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, and then it was time to go upstairs. I began to cry when I saw the stairs: endless, gleaming a deep burgundy, and insurmountably high. I stood there and refused to climb. Finally my big sister, Uche, held my hand and we took it one step at a time until we got to the top. Only weeks later I was whooping and sliding on a pillow down the banister with my brothers, to see who could do it the fastest before my mother came home.

I remember playing football—I mean what Americans call “soccer”—with my brothers on the lawn outside, and I remember the gardener, whose name was Jumu, asking us not to trample the baby flowers. I remember the frangipani tree that we climbed, and from which I once fell, and the guava tree, to which we tied chickens before they were killed for Sunday lunch. I remember riding bicycles up and down the slope of Marguerite Cartwright Avenue. I remember the horridly flat, oversize cockroaches that crawled in with the rainy season and smelled like something rotten. We called them “American cockroaches.” They were not the usual small size of Nigerian cockroaches, and I’m not sure whether they were called American cockroaches because they were larger than normal, but I think the story was that they were not indigenous to
Nigeria and that they had been brought by one of the American staff of the university.

My brother Okey, a keen animal lover, had a collection of rabbits, guinea pigs, and turtles. He kept them in the back, which was also where our house help lived and where we roasted cashew nuts. A rickety shed made of corrugated iron stood at the entrance to the compound, a booth for the security guards—old men in brown uniforms and matching berets who often slept through hot afternoons. I would come to know one of them well, the gentle, ashy-skinned Vincent, who would ask my brothers and me to sit beside him in the shed and would tell us Igbo folk stories about the cunning tortoise. I shared the biggest room upstairs with my brothers Okey and Kene. It had three beds, dressers, a wardrobe. It did not have a desk. It led out to a veranda where we played, where I read Enid Blyton, where I skulked and watched the older, handsome boy from next door. The veranda had a second door that led to the study, my father’s dusty lair, lined with shelves of statistics journals and dominated by a large desk on which were placed files, books, paper clips, pens, and, at the farthest corner, the black rotary phone. I wonder now why the phone was kept in the study instead of the corridor downstairs, but it was, and so throughout secondary school I had uncomfortable conversations with friends while my father sat there, marking his students’ papers. Parts of the desk were so dusty, I wrote down phone numbers with my finger, or I just doodled. I wrote my first book, at ten, at that desk, in a lined exercise notebook; it was titled *Down Macintosh Lane*.

Before we moved into number 305 Marguerite Cartwright Avenue, Chinua Achebe and his family lived there. I realize now what an interesting coincidence it is, that I grew up in a house previously occupied by the writer whose work is most important to me. There must have been literary spirits in the bathroom
upstairs, and I say this because I often got story ideas after I had bucket baths in that bathroom. But the only manifest Achebe legacy was on a window ledge in the dining room, scratch-written in the childish hand of his daughter—her name, Nwando Achebe. I did not find it particularly remarkable at the time that I lived in this house. The university campus was a small place; people moved in and out of university housing; the academic community was a small one. Years later, when my first novel was published, I told my editor, “You know, it’s kind of interesting—I lived in the house previously occupied by Chinua Achebe.” I said it as sort of a passing comment, and she stopped and stared at me and she said, “What? This is the most interesting thing you’ve told me about yourself.”

So now two little stories about Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*: I read a lot of British children’s literature when I was growing up, and I was particularly enamored of Enid Blyton. I think Enid Blyton must be turning over and over in her grave because I talk about her all the time. And so I thought that books had to have white people in them, by their very nature. When I started to write, as soon as I was old enough to spell, I wrote the kinds of stories that I was reading. I had all of these characters who were white, and who lived on Macintosh Lane, and who had dogs called “Socks,” which was an improbable name for a dog in Nigeria. And also my characters drank a lot of ginger beer, because Blyton’s characters spent a lot of time drinking ginger beer, never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was. And for many years afterward I would have this intense desire for ginger beer, but that’s another story. And then I read Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and I like to describe it as a glorious shock of discovery. Here were characters who had Igbo names, and who ate yams, and who inhabited a world that was similar to mine. His novel taught me that my world was wor-
thy of literature, that books could also be about people like me. It was about the same time that I read Camara Laye’s novel *The African Child*, a beautiful, beautiful book that is elegiac and wonderfully defensive, and that also made me think of my world as worthy of literature. But I like to think of Chinua Achebe as the writer who gave me permission to write my stories. Although his characters were familiar in many ways, their world was also incredibly exotic in other ways, because they lived without the things that I saw as the norm in my life. They did not have cars, or electricity, or phones. They did not eat fried rice. In fact, I was horrified that they had *fufu* for breakfast, because I consider *fufu* too heavy for breakfast. In other words, they lived the life that my great-grandfather might have lived.

And this brings me to my second *Things Fall Apart* story. I came to the US to go to school because I was fleeing the study of medicine. When you do well in school in Nigeria, you’re expected to become what we call “a professional,” which really means a doctor. An engineer if you’re a boy, or maybe a lawyer. So I was expected to become a doctor, and I had been in what was called a “science track” in secondary school, which means that I had done the chemistries and the physics and the biologies, because that’s what you did if you did well in school. And then I started the college of medicine, and after a year I realized that I would be a very unhappy doctor. And so, to prevent the future inadvertent deaths of patients, I fled. And America was my escape. But before I arrived in Philadelphia, my friend Ada, who was also Nigerian but who had been in the US for a number of years, found me a room in a four-bedroom apartment that I would share with some American students. I remember how surprised my roommates were to see me. They said I was wearing “American clothes,” by which they meant the pair of jeans I had bought at the market in Nsukka. And then I realized that
maybe *Things Fall Apart* had played a role in this. They might have read it in high school, but maybe their teacher forgot to tell them that it was set in the Nigeria of a hundred years ago.

But back to number 305 Marguerite Cartwright Avenue. The campus of the University of Nigeria was a small, safe, and happy place. Everybody knew everybody else; the children of the staff all attended the staff primary school, and all went to the staff children’s library, and so in that house, number 305 Marguerite Cartwright Avenue, I began to write. I wrote at the dining table when I could not use the study desk because my father was working or because a sibling was on the phone. The dining table was light green and long, and it was the family dumping ground of newspapers, university circulars, wedding invitations, magazines, bananas, ground nuts—and the tiny ants that lived underneath it appeared after breakfast to crowd around bits of sugar or bread. I always cleared a space for myself at one end, opposite the grand old wood-paneled air conditioner, which was used so rarely that a puff of dust always burst out first, before cool air followed. I remember that we seemed to put it on only during birthday parties. And it was noisy—it made a loud whooshing sound—and so, during birthday parties when the living room was full of friends, there was always that loud sound of the air conditioner in the background.

Okey and Kene and I had separate bedrooms after our older siblings left home. Mine had a girlish table where I displayed my lotions, my creams, my powder compacts. It still did not have a desk. In 1997 I left home, and when I returned four years later with the final page proofs of my first novel, my parents had put a writing desk in my room. It was square and sturdy, and I spread out my page proofs and edited them there. A few years later, when I was writing my second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is set during the Nigeria-Biafra War, I knew I needed to write a large
part of it in Nigeria. I needed to go to my ancestral hometown; I
needed to smell the dust there. And I also needed to be in num-
ber 305 Marguerite Cartwright, that house that had nurtured me,
where I believed the literary spirits still hovered. When I returned,
my parents had installed an air conditioner in my room. It was
more modern, less noisy, and the lights blinked when I turned it
on. I transcribed interviews at the dining table or at my father’s
desk in the study, but I wrote only in my room, and from time to
time I would look out at the veranda, which was no longer used
much. Years of rain had stained the floor a dull gray. And I finished
my novel there, sitting in my room and looking out at the veranda
that had witnessed my childhood.

I have often been asked why I chose to write about Biafra, and
I like to say that I did not choose Biafra, but it chose me. I cannot
honestly intellectualize my interest in the war; it is a subject I have
known for very long that I would write about. I was born seven years
after the Nigeria-Biafra War ended, and yet the war is not mere his-
tory for me. It is also memory. I grew up in the shadow of Biafra. I
knew vaguely about the war as a child—that my grandfathers had
died, that my parents had lost everything they owned. But long
before my parents—particularly my father—began to talk under
my keen questioning about their specific experiences, I was very
much aware of how this war had haunted my family, how it colored
the paths our lives had taken. My paternal grandfather died more
than a year before the war ended. Because he was in Biafra I, and
my father was in a region called Biafra II, and they were separated
by an occupied road, my father could not go to the refugee camp
where his father was buried. My father is the first son, and he takes
his first-son responsibilities very seriously. In Igbo culture, one of
the responsibilities of the first son is to ensure that his father gets a
proper funeral. And so it broke my father’s heart that his father died
and he couldn’t even go to see where he was buried. When the war ended in 1970, the first thing he wanted to do was to go and see where his father was buried. He went to the refugee camp, which used to be a secondary school before the war, and asked where the grave was, and somebody pointed to this vague expanse and said, “We buried the people there.” It was a mass grave. My father, who is the most undramatic of people, bent down and took a handful of sand, and he has kept the sand ever since.

My mother has still not spoken very much about losing her father, also in a refugee camp, but she has spoken about the other things she lost—her wig, her china that she had brought back from London. She has spoken about going from making toast and scrambled eggs for her two little daughters to standing in line and fighting for dried egg yolk from the relief center. I am still known to cry stupidly about some of these stories, about the tiny losses that so many people endured, about this trail of physical and metaphysical losses. But I wanted to write a novel. I wanted to write about what I like to call the “grittiness” of being human. I wanted to write a book about relationships, about people who have sex, and eat food, and laugh. Because in addition to those terrible stories about the war, I also heard stories about weddings, about people falling in love. I was concerned with certain questions about what it means to be human. When you are deprived of the comforts of the life you know, when you go from eating sandwiches to eating rats, how does it change your relationship with yourself, with the people you love?

After the novel was published, I was stunned by how many people embraced it as their own personal story. At my readings, particularly in Nigeria, women would start to cry, and say, “Thank you for writing this, because finally I can tell my family what I went through.” Men would get choked up talking about how they
had been conscripted in the war as boys, and young people of my
generation would get emotional talking about how they finally
understood their parents, or how they finally understood our his-
tory as Nigerians. The novel started a conversation about a part of
our history that remains contested and contentious. It humbled
me and it made me very happy.

There is much that I cannot explain about my writing pro-
cess. I find it difficult, for example, to answer what I think is the
laziest question that anyone can ask a writer: Where do you get
your inspiration? The question itself assumes that inspiration
can somehow be explained and packaged into logical and digest-
able bits. But anything can be a source of inspiration. I’m a keen
watcher of people, for example, and I carry with me a notebook
to record whatever strikes me: the color of a woman’s lipstick, an
overheard conversation between strangers in a café, the slump of
a man’s shoulders in the departure lounge of an airport—all of
which may become part of a piece of fiction. To write realistic
fiction as I do, is, I think, to try and make sense of the world by
storytelling, by streamlining the chaotic nature of life into some
sort of narrative with emotive points, and hopefully by doing that,
we remind ourselves what it means to be human. The process is
a mix of the conscious and the unconscious—I’m not always in
control of what I write. And for me, one of the magical things
about writing fiction is that you start a story and you are in con-
trol and then sometimes the story just overtakes you and charac-
ters do things that surprise you. But when I tell my brothers this,
that sometimes a character did something, my brothers look at
me as though I’m just a little crazy and they say, “What do you
mean? You wrote the book. What do you mean, the characters did
something?” It’s the sort of thing that’s difficult for people who
don’t write to understand.
My first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, came organically—and the story more or less wrote itself—but it helped that I was miserable. In the middle of a freezing Connecticut winter, I was homesick for the warmth of Nsukka. I was thrilled that somebody actually wanted to publish the book, and I thought that maybe three people would buy it—my sister, my brother, and my best friend. And I was wonderfully surprised when more than three people bought it. But I also quickly realized that to be a Nigerian and an African, and to be published outside of home, was often to have my work looked at through a political lens. I would do readings outside of the continent of Africa and often be asked—or even be told—that my novel was a political allegory, that my abusive father character represented Nigeria’s brutal dictator. Which was news to me.

I sometimes wondered why nobody asked me about love and about personal motivations and why I constantly had to be asked about the sociopolitical. Of course I know the reason: so little is known about the part of the world from which I come that it is not very surprising that a novel would be seen as some kind of native explanation. But it does not change the truth, which is that when I sat down to write that father character in *Purple Hibiscus*, I was not thinking, “I shall now write an important allegorical representation of Nigeria’s military culture.” I just wanted to write a human story about a man who was struggling with his demons.

I think there are two ways to think about fiction: as a critic and as a creative person, and my general rule is to think as a critic only about the work of other people, never about my own work, otherwise I will in fact start writing a novel with the idea of writing “an important allegorical representation of Nigeria’s military culture.” But knowing that so little is known about Nigeria and, by extension, Africa, makes me a little wary of writing truthfully about what interests me.
My best friend, Uju, complains—and she’s been complaining the past few months, because I have been immersed in writing, in trying to finish a new novel—that she never sees me, and I never return calls, and we don’t spend as much time together as we should. And this is true, because when my writing is going well, I become very inward. I lock myself up for weeks, and sometimes I don’t shower—not that you need to have that too-much-infor-
mation bit—and it makes me think about the sacrifices that come with writing: the calls that are not returned, the time that you haven’t spent with the people you love, because for me love means time spent. And this often leaves me with a clutch of small regrets in my soul. But it’s a sacrifice I make willingly; it’s a choice I make for my writing. And so my best friend, in her complaining, said to me, “Well, just kill the character already so we can hang out!” And I said, “What are you talking about?” And she said, “Well, in your writing somebody always has to die.” And I wasn’t quite sure how to take that—I was quite taken aback, actually—and then I thought about it for a while, and I realized, you know, she is right. People don’t always die in my work, but in a larger sense, as a writer and also as a reader, I’m drawn to what is dark; I am drawn to mel-
ancholy; a kind of beautiful sadness is what I find most moving in writing and reading fiction.

My brother has a son who’s very bright but who doesn’t like to read, and so my brother said to me, “Why don’t you consider writing for children? Maybe this will make Chinadun read.” I thought about it for a while and then I thought, “You know, I really love children; I don’t want to be responsible for their being traumatized.” So I thought, “No, I won’t write children’s books, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” And so I write about love and the possibility of connection and all of that, but in the end my artistic vision is largely a dark one. And I sometimes wonder whether
being African means that I must always indulge in these fragile negotiations in order to explore my artistic vision fully. When I write about war, for example, I find myself thinking, “Does this only perpetuate the stereotype of Africa as a place of war?” So far I have kept from making artistic choices based on this, but I do think about it, and it brings a certain discomfort.

I will never forget how moved I was to read some years ago Nelson Mandela’s description of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. He called it “the book in whose presence the prison walls came down.” And I have a much smaller, but similar personal story. Last year, I was reading a piece in the *New York Times* about an American woman called Lori Berenson who had been convicted in Peru for aiding a leftist group, and she had been sentenced to twenty years in prison. She’d been granted parole, and her mother gave an interview in which she talked about how her daughter had coped during her years in captivity. Reading, not surprisingly, was central to her coping. And then I read a line where her mother said that one of the books that was a favorite was a book called *Half of a Yellow Sun*. At first I read past; I thought, “No, it can’t be my book”—it just seemed so improbable—and then the book was described as a book set in Nigeria, and I thought, “Wait, it is my book!” Now here was a woman I did not know of, who was not Nigerian, who was not in any way connected to Biafra, and yet this book had been meaningful to her at a very difficult time in her life. And reading that, I felt so moved, and I remember thinking, “Fiction does matter.”

When I first came to the US, American fiction was very important to me. Even though I had consumed a lot of American media, as most of the world does; even though, growing up in Nsukka, I had watched *Sesame Street* and I was very familiar with Big Bird and Elmo, I felt a sense of dislocation when I arrived. I thought
that every black family would be like *The Cosby Show*. You can imagine my surprise when I discovered that this was not so. And so I started to read American fiction. I read Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Philip Roth, John Steinbeck, Willa Cather, John Updike, and Mary Gaitskill. I read everything I could find. And in a way, America started to make sense to me.

So now, to end the story about number 305 Marguerite Cartright Avenue: four years ago, my parents moved out of the house. They’re now retired from the university, and the house has been assigned to another family. I was in the US when they moved out of the house, and so the week that they moved out, I talked to them on the phone and I asked them ridiculous questions: “Did you find that doll that I lost in primary school?” “Did you keep my secondary-school textbooks?” And throughout the conversation I fought tears. My parents talked about the cartons they had bought and the lorries they had hired. They sounded practical and calm. “How could they not see how momentous this was?” I thought. “We’re leaving behind twenty-five years of our lives.” But of course they did; they simply are not much given to melodrama, as I am. I hung up that day after talking to my parents, and I thought about the last time that I was in the house. There was a power failure at night, and in the pitch-blackness I walked from my room, down the stairs, and into the dining room to find the candle in the cabinet. And I did not stumble once.