The Blood Latitudes Short Guide

The Blood Latitudes by William Harrison (clergyman)

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Characters

The central figure of this novel is Will Hobbs, in his late fifties, a retired American journalist living alone in London in the quiet comfort of his big house in Queen's Gate, his wife Rennie having died two years earlier. Harrison develops him as intelligent, capable, competent in his profession as a journalist, sociable, sensitive, caring.

He is also a chef, a culinary expert who can and does prepare feasts throughout the novel, sometimes in the most unlikely situations. Harrison's characterization of Hobbs in this particular reveals him to be a nurturing, caring man. By cooking he gives and sustains life; by refusing to kill his captors when he has a reasonable opportunity to do so, he enacts a belief in the sanctity of life, a rare quality amidst the insanity of the intertribal warfare in Rwanda. This warfare serves as both background and foreground of Will's search for his son, Buck, who is also a journalist, and tests and toughens him.

Will's culinary skills set him apart from his journalistic colleagues and his family, even including his late wife, Rennie, his cultured British wife who had carried on an affair with an old friend for years, and Buck, their son who is married to Key and the father of a three-year-old son, Willie.

Buck has been assigned to Will's former job, the Nairobi desk, and outwardly Will is glad, but he knows that Buck is still immature, impetuous, and extremely competitive because he wants to convince his father that he is, finally, a man equal to his father.

Will is also smitten with a lust for Key, his daughter-in-law. Civilized and responsible man that he is, he keeps the "wild jealousy and resentment [of Buck that] he had no right to feel" at bay. Harrison introduces the father-son conflict early in the novel, establishing it as one caused in part by Will's extensive absences on assignment while Buck was growing up. It is not something that Will can fix at this point either by cooking or by giving advice to Buck. As he tries to tell his son shortly before Buck takes up his new post in Nairobi, the one that had been Will's, "Africa's lost, that's the first thing to see," but Buck will have none of it, determined as an idealist and as his own man to carve out his own reputation as a journalist, whatever it takes.

Key, Buck's wife and the mother of Willie, is developed as a beautiful, seductive, intelligent, and courageous young woman without education but very much able to use all of her considerable skills to create security for herself and her son. She is perhaps more attracted to Will than to Buck, and at one point she indicates that she fell in love with Will from listening to the stories that Buck told about him. Her character is, indeed, in many ways a key to understanding Will Hobbs for it is in resisting her seductiveness that he proves himself a man of high principles.

The other most important character is Papa Ngiza, Father Darkness, a selfproclaimed theologian educated in the West and the leader of a Hutu militia band, "five men dressed for a circus of mayhem," who are scouring their district and attempting to exterminate all Tutsis. Ngiza explains to Hobbs the nature and history of the conflict

between Hutus and Tutsis, his explanations revealing the fundamental insanity and horror of the civil war as well as something of their history. He is a mystic with anger in his heart and thus the symbol of all religious fanatics who kill in the name of their beliefs, and he loves riddles. Clever and ruthless, he nevertheless functions as a kind of moral mirror to Hobbs who comes to understand his relationship to both his son and his daughter-in-law more clearly as a result of his involuntary association with Ngiza.

Social Concerns

T he Blood Latitudes explores the nature and consequence of power—of "power in the blood" as they say—the power of ethnic and tribal relationships and history, and the power of European and American colonial exploitation of Africa for slaves at first, then for rubber, diamonds, oil, and other natural resources, and for strategic bases. It explores the nature of "the other" and the ferocious and terrible consequences of "othering" whether of one tribe to another or of son for father. It asserts, finally, that All the world is Africa, barbaric and primeval, and what's in the blood is more savage than we can know or possibly understand, and it comes for us like a marauder, it comes through the streets for us, it finds its way into our veins and moves toward our hearts. We refine and insulate ourselves, but our cultivations rupture, our yearnings betray us, and we want cobras in our gardens.

It is serious work, indeed, and appropriate work for Harrison's artistically crafted fictions to embody these disconcerting and at times terrifying themes and social issues.

They are the work of a thirty-plus year career as a serious writer as well as teacher of the craft. The Blood Latitudes is the culmination of that career to this point.

The questions Harrison invites us to ask of Blood Latitudes as well as of each of his four other "African" novels (Africana [1977], Savannah Blue [1981], Burton and Speke [1982], and Three Hunters [1989]) include What is the nature of power?, Who has it?, What are the consequences of its presence or absence?, Who or what is the marauder that comes for us?, and Why do we want cobras in our gardens? The Blood Latitudes explores the power of our social institutions such as marriage, the press, religion, education, and the fundamentals of sex, ethnicity, and racial hatred. Finally, in this novel as in all of his fictions there is enacted that essential conflict between barbarism and civilization, between the natural man and the civilized man, between Adam before and Adam after the Fall, around which the arguments and the actions of Harrison's fictional defining moments gather.

For instance, in Africana (1977), the first of his five African novels, one finds a passage suggesting that these fundamental conflicts and incongruities are part of the land itself, that its contrasts and mysteries mark every aspect of life: The bush, the forest, the savannah, the veldt, the highlands. Nothing was ever explained out there, nothing was ever understood; dreams were inexplicable like the patterns of leaves; beauty was accidental like the orchid set in rot; death smothered everything, yet that was irrational and bloody wondrous, for life always came back, green, moving the last seasons of decay aside . . . both the slavers and the missionaries failed. Every exploit, every philosophy, each cause or movement became as fragile and as transient as the jungle's smallest fern.

True as they are, these are also the thoughts of the dominant madman in Africana, the soldier-philosopher Leo. His counterpart in The Blood Latitudes is Papa Ngiza, the well-spoken, well-read, well-educated leader of a band of Hutu militia. Ngiza means

"darkness," the name given Lake Turkana by the native tribes who wandered its shores for thousands of years. Hence Papa Ngiza may be read as signifying the father of darkness. His band of militia has as its mission murdering and mutilating Tutsi men, women, and children—using pruning nippers to amputate the limbs of their victims, "cutting them down to size," Papa Ngiza, one of the "short" Hutus, explains.

Harrison examines the complex causes of this bloody tribal warfare in his African fictions, especially The Blood Latitudes, Africana, and Savannah Blue. Christian mythology portrays Satan, synonymous with evil, as darkness, the absence of light resulting from an absolute distance from the Godhead.

Here, in The Blood Latitudes, Harrison gives the powers of darkness the body and purposes of a modern, civilized Hutu tribesman, well educated in the West, articulate, charismatic, and totally ruthless. Two somewhat similar characters appear in earlier novels and represent different ethnic and political forces from those ostensibly enacted by Papa Ngiza. Leo is a bloodthirsty Welsh mercenary in Africana (1977), and establishes his reputation fighting in the internal wars of Kenya and later Biafra in the 1960s; Quenrin Clare is a brilliant, driven, and arguably psychotic mixed-blood assassin in Savannah Blue (1981), who strikes out at Western, especially American, exploiters of the post-colonial period in Africa. Each of the three is in his own right a fanatic, fantastic figure, an appalling and frightening human being who emerges from the nightmarish confusion of postmodern Africa, symbolic of all that is wrong with twentieth-century politics, philosophy, and technology. Each dies violently but only after committing bloody rampages across his particular section of Africa. Each is a brilliant creation that demonstrates just how serious (and effective) William Harrison is in dealing seriously with a fundamental issue of humanity, the problem of evil itself and its effects on each of us. As he writes suggestively (and pessimistically) at the end of The Blood Latitudes, "all the world is Africa, barbaric and primeval."

The Blood Latitudes and Africana give the problem of evil an all-too-human face of catastrophic tribal wars that provide the context and background for these novels.

Enabled, encouraged, and abetted by European and American arms manufacturers and dealers, the rebellion by Biafra in Nigeria and the genocide in Rwanda are only two in the long train of conflicts nurtured by mercenaries and colonialists and exploiters of every sort. These slaughters are, Harrison argues, the continuing consequence of European and American exploitation of Africa and Africans.

Harrison structures The Blood Latitudes with a series of powerful thematic contrasts. The novel opens with Will Hobbs, a U.S. journalist, recently retired and now living in the civilized comfort of London, where modern homes, civility, decadence, and old money contrast with the desperate fear, poverty, brutality, and blood savagery of Eastern Africa in the last third of the twentieth century. Harrison contrasts Hobbs' memories of the old days of Kenya as a huge sportsman's preserve, of leisurely afternoons for privileged whites at the Long Bar, and of other parts of East Africa as they never quite were with the brutal reality of today, a nightmarish and flickering landscape of warfare, deprivation, and death.

Into this landscape comes Will's son, Buck, whose youth, inexperience, rashness, and ignorance contrast with the age, wisdom, experience, discipline, and wisdom of Will.

East Africa has changed fundamentally from the old days of Hemingway. Will tries unsuccessfully to educate Buck about the complexities of the new Africa, an Africa that has been lost because of overpopulation, the spread of AIDS and other diseases, mindless European and American exploitation, the legacy of such nineteenth-century colonialists as King Leopold of Belgium, and other causes too mind-numbing to enumerate. Yet today, the West consistently ignores Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, and incessant tribal warfare exacerbated by four centuries of colonial exploitation is now waged with heavy artillery and automatic weapons (supplied by the West) rather than spears and pangas. The outbreak of ferocious ethnic warfare between the ruling Tutsi minority and the Hutu in Rwanda triggers the novel's action and continues Harrison's fictional analysis of a variety of social issues including the international arms trade and its role in stimulating and supporting the war.

Yet another and complementary social theme is the nature of civilization as portrayed by Will's life in London, his big, comfortable house (provided by his late wife's fortune), the comfortable life of late dinners and fine wines, of books and conversation. This civilization, however, is illustrated not only by Will's life in retirement; it is also defined by contrast with the wild, the jungle. More tellingly, perhaps, it is revealed as hollow and decadent as seen in contrast with the savagery of modern man whether tribal or colonial, African or European.

Harrison characterizes Will consistently as a man not without temptations and failings, but a man whose actions are guided by principle and a moral code. He is a "rare civilized sort." Consequently, when back in Africa searching for his son, he refuses to kill his captors when, in several instances, he could have done so, saves both himself and perhaps others, and escapes. Still, he feels like an impostor, as someone who has taken on his English wife's money, friends, family, and culture as his own but who has been found out. He is forced to reflect on the nature of culture and who may possess it by a series of significant challenges to his moral center that test his conduct in the face of several profound provocations: the loss of his son, his sexual attraction to his daughter-in-law, and the dangers he faces while a captive of the Hutu militia.

Harrison's book argues then that a serious and complex relationship exists between personal sexual morality and cultural and national morality, that if "everybody's screwing everybody" then "everybody's killing everybody," although he does not put it quite that specifically. But Will's refusal to surrender to the powerful attraction between him and his daughter-in-law and his determination to do everything he can to find his son testify to his fundamental and powerful moral center, and it contrasts sharply and tellingly with the apocalyptic and brutal mass maiming and murder he witnesses as he descends into "the heart of darkness" in his search.

Will's failure as a father is represented in his having never been around at home for the little events of Buck's childhood, of his being father (and husband) in absentia, on assignment in Nairobi, and thus modeling, as all fathers model in one way or another,

the role of father for his son. Buck, it is clear, even as an adult resents his father's absence from his childhood. With the birth of Willie, Buck and Key's son, "Buck had Will's fierce affection," but even that is not enough to overcome Buck's resentment or his sense that he is engaged in a fierce competition with his father and therefore must take risks and ignore his father's advice and help. Buck's pride and anger demand his fatal disobedience.

Techniques

Harrison's techniques are sound and traditional ones put cleverly into play. Drop a "good guy" (and Will is a good guy) plausibly into one of the more common testing grounds of one's moral center—sexual temptation, on the one hand, and into some sort of extreme situation created by the human race on the other—and see how he behaves.

How does the hero act in such extreme situations? What will his being thrust into these twin crucibles reveal about Will's character? What will his experiences teach us?

Harrison names his central figure Will Hobbs by which we are perhaps to understand the philosophic conflicts between free will and materialistic determinism. In his first name we find an allusion to "will" as in "free will" or "agency," the power to recognize and make moral choices. Perhaps in his surname we find an allusion to the ideas of Sir Thomas Hobbes, the English materialistic philosopher of the seventeenth century (although Harrison claims no recollection of having ever read him) who wrote, "Nosce teipsum, Read thyself: [an instruction] which was . . . meant . . . to teach us ... the similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man, to the thoughts and passions of another." This powerful and effective moral advice would appear to lie at the heart of Will Hobbs' journey and search. The Blood Latitudes, set in Africa in the last third of the twentieth century, certainly functions as a moral exemplum, a fiction that teaches important lessons. As Sir Thomas Hobbes outlines his treatise in his book Leviathan, he articulates his topics— man, government, and evil—and distinguishes between a Christian commonwealth and the Kingdom of Darkness. Hobbes says that man is both the created and the creator of government and he works to clarify how government is made, the rights and power or just power of a sovereign, and what preserves or dissolves it. Harrison's powerful novel offers his own contrast between the two kingdoms in his figuring of the decadent Christian commonwealth of contemporary England and the Kingdom of Darkness figured in central Africa. Harrison explicitly connects the political and the sexual contexts, the public and the private worlds of moral choice and civilized action in the first chapter of The Blood Latitudes when his daughter-in-law Key exposes her "dark pubic triangle" to Will in his hot tub on the first night after Buck, Willie, and Key arrive in London. Furthermore, Thomas Hobbes also assures us that wisdom comes not "by reading of books, but of men," which is exactly the skill that Will Hobbs has and by which he has made his living as a journalist and by which he will save his own life later on. But he is not certain how to read his daughter-in-law, nor is he certain at the beginning of the novel of the accuracy of his self-knowledge. But he knows how necessary it is that one knows one's self. He has made his living as a journalist by reading men and their actions and by examining his own life with some care.

Harrison structures The Blood Latitudes as a heroic quest novel, presented in a specific and realistic historical and geographical context, the genocidal conflict between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda of the early 1990s.

The basic plot line follows the archetypal quest of the hero, a useful analysis of which is Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949). As a man of mature middle age, Will Hobbs must seek to find his lost son and his own obscured moral center.

For these purposes he sets off on a traditional mythic journey, a journey into "the heart of darkness" to come to knowledge of himself, to find himself if not his son. He separates himself from his comfortable home in Queens Gate, London, a home that Rennie had bought with her money, crosses numerous borders, discovers a source of power within himself by descending into the belly of the whale (the lorry being used by Papa Ngiza and his militia), and has a series of defining and informing adventures. He is opposed by the forces of darkness in the person of Papa Ngiza, whose name means "the father of darkness," the leader of a band of Hutu militia with whom Hobbs travels unwillingly after they capture him.

They allow him to live because Hobbs hides his identity as a veteran journalist (Ngiza does not like journalists and has killed several, perhaps even Buck Hobbs) and assumes the nurturing identity of a chef. In that character he cooks for his captors. Ngiza and his band patrol their sector, killing, looting, and maiming Tutsis. Hobbs and Ngiza have numerous philosophical discussions, Hobbs agreeing with Ngiza that the crimes against humanity occurring in East Africa have ample historical precedent, and his insight here helps Will to see the correct moral choices he must make in the matter of his daughter-in-law. He is also witness to several atrocities, is unable to escape, and confesses his attraction for Key to his captor. Ngiza celebrates Will's passion then invites him to compare what the Hutus are doing to the great historical catalog of Western atrocities. Will agrees with him and concludes that the world "at best was in a barbaric twilight." The land through which they travel is blighted, the land cursed, the people "just warring factions, each trying to be more brutal than the other." In the process they come across a coffee plantation and are greeted by a blind old man who gives them honey wine, and they are stalked by the mysterious Ragman, a magical figure who kills the members of Ngiza's band one by one. Ngiza and Will discuss the great question, "What is Man?" Is he only the sum of what he does? Or does he have a true essence? At last, they come to a red-brick church, built by the Belgians years ago. Inside are a band of Tutsi children and a dying Swedish literacy worker. Hobbs gets into the church with the children, and they formulate a plan to overcome Ngiza and what is left of his band. Will cooks for the children and for the dying literacy worker, suggesting Christ's assertion that inasmuch as one serves his fellow man, he serves Christ. "I was hungered and ye fed me." Hobbs, attempting to protect the Swede, kills Cutter, the one who has cut off the feet of children with his tree lopper. He and the children then capture Ngiza, the children killing him by inches with shots to the leg and panga cuts in retribution for the pain he has inflicted on them and other Tutsis. After the battle Hobbs and the children get into the lorry and, after other difficulties, finally make it back across the border into Kenya, returning in accordance with the archetypal heroic journey, to the village, to civilization. Will bears the boon of self-knowledge as well as a conviction that his son is dead and that he himself, a representative of the West, is no longer one of the innocent. Will Hobbs re-enters the world, knowing on an emotional as well as

intellectual level how evil man can be, seeing a spreading "ring of darkness" to the northwest as he flies back into Nairobi.

Harrison's characterization of Hobbs, his conversations, the response of other characters to him, and most specifically his actions are all classic techniques. The depth of his characterization is such that Hobbs emerges in the novel as a convincing and compelling figure, fully realized and credible.

Themes

A number of important themes resonate throughout the novel, many of which are connected with the social issues present in the novel and discussed above. But a number have a kind of universality that Harrison acknowledges, especially the idea that cultural misunderstanding is a "human universal." Some scholars of post-colonialism argue that while cultural difference is real enough, there are also traits all human beings have in common, and thus appear to echo the position taken by Sir Thomas Hobbes who believed that people share many of the same thoughts and passions.

Africa is a land of extraordinary beauty and extraordinary sorrow. The great herds of wild animals, the powerful and compelling landscape of plain, mountain, and jungles as well as the farms and villages carved out by native peoples and colonial invaders which testify to a fundamental human drive for survival. The tribal warfare between Tutsi and Hutu testify to the intractability of human nature. The miscommunication and misunderstanding between father and son testify to a fundamental theme of the son's desire to supplant the father. In The Blood Latitudes the Oedipal conflict is ironically reversed as Buck, the son, meets his death apparently and mysteriously at a "crossroads" in Rwanda, and leaves his wife and his father to wrestle with the temptations and dangers of a possible sexual liaison. Another theme of this complex novel examines the nature of love in a marriage. It is the best thing that ever happened. It is a "deep thing of the heart." It is not immune to temptation or absence or destruction. But it is powerful, and for Will Hobbs, his love for Rennie has given him a center, a focus that helps to guide him even in her absence.

But finally, the basic theme in this novel is the old, old question of identity: "What is man? Who are we? Who am I?" While Harrison's examination of these questions centers on the experiences of Will Hobbs as he searches for his son in the terrifying chaos of fratricidal war in Rwanda (and elsewhere in Africa), the novel clearly expands the question to cover all of humankind. This theme intersects with the social issues of violence, overpopulation, tribal prejudice, and internecine strife; of the consequences of centuries of exploitation of native populations by colonial powers; and of the destabilization of post-colonial governments. Harrison explores the complex theme of social responsibility at various levels of the human community, from the relationship of the senior Alpha male and the females of his family to the assault on children in the mindless wars of the late twentieth century, especially tribal wars which seem to enact the biological imperative of lower animals to kill and mutilate the offspring of the competition.

But the theme is given an interesting twist through Will's attraction to his daughterin-law, an attraction that makes him feel, he muses, "like a leftover Victorian gentleman in heat," a complex allusion since the present-day problems of Africa stem in large measure from nineteenth-century imperialism, a connection Harrison makes in a number of ways. What is the responsibility of the individual for his own morality, for his family, for his tribe, for his community, indeed, for civilization itself? Responsibility for Will Hobbs has in the past been mainly a matter of telling the story, of covering his

African news desk accurately and competently, of writing well. Now that his son has been assigned to his old desk and heads for Nairobi when the Tutsi-Hutu War breaks out, Hobbs attempts to give his son useful advice, but Buck is in a total competitive mode with his father and refuses to hear his father's advice. Thus Will Hobbs later makes it his quest to find his lost son and avoid a sexual entanglement with his son's wife. And at the end of the story after his adventures and after his failure to save his son, he is left with the feeling that "words were like dry leaves . . . whirling across the bare floors of vacant houses."

This image contrasts with Will's prayer, said silently as he gazes out into the lights blinking in London darkness: "Don't let the dark see or touch us ... don't let it gather us in. Let us be gifted with language and speak the words that wake us up and set us free," a prayer that will be answered in Will's struggles against Papa Ngiza.

Harrison's argument is that the gift of language offered by writers as something that can assuage the pain and move back the dark is finally impotent and unable to stop the madness that is Africa and, by extension, all the world. Words cannot, finally, save the victims of genocide, nor can they heal rifts in a family, or save the son, or heal the pain.

Key Questions

The discussion between Papa Ngiza and Will Hobbs about the nature of tribal warfare and the relationship of the present bloodshed to a number of historical antecedents should stimulate thinking about the individual's responsibility in the face of social and cultural atrocities. The relationship between one's personal morality and the larger social and political contexts in which individuals operate is always a useful area for discussion.

1. The relationship between Will Hobbs and his son Buck is difficult and problematic. Does it make a difference that Will Hobbs is sexually attracted to his arguing ironically that only actions make daughter-in-law, Key? Is she really in a difference, that words and the work love with Will or is she merely oppor-of writers, including journalists as well tunistic and seeking security for herself as poets, make no difference? Consider and Willie? What is the relationship among other aspects of the novel the between sexual fidelity and the other arenas of moral choice represented in discussions between Will and Papa the novel? Ngiza and the actions that Will takes.

2. Why does Will not take action to over-7. Considering all the evidence, for examcome his captors and escape earlier ple, the personal and familial relationthan he does? Is the delay merely a ships examined in the novel, argue function of Harrison's plotting or is it a whether The Blood Latitudes presents a function of his characterization of Hobbs?

Is it simple fear that motivates Will's pessimistic or an optimistic view of life.

failure to act or is it something else? 8. Compare and contrast the Rwandan 3. Will is a great cook. Considering the conflicts that form the historical backoccasions of his preparing food, the ground of this novel and cost perhaps nature of the food, the implications of 800,000 lives with those of other this performance and considering mythic, "intratribal" wars such as WWI, WWII, theological, and political implications, and the American Civil War. Can one what does Harrison want his readers to make a convincing argument that Hobbs do with this aspect of Will's behavior?

How does it fit (or not) with the other is right, that "all the world is Africa, aspects of his character as revealed in barbaric and primeval, and what's in his actions? the blood is more savage than we can know or possibly understand"? What 4. What is the relation between the chardo you think he means? What other acterization of Will Hobbs and the writers have you read who express athemes of the novel?

similar idea? What are we to do with 5. Considering the representations of Africa that knowledge? and Africans, Europeans and Americans, what does the novel argue about 9. Compare Harrison's treatment of the what Africa means for the rest of the warrior in his other African stories. world? What is the meaning of Will's What do you think

Harrison is saying thoughts at the end of the novel, that about the condition of the post-WWII "all the world is Africa, barbaric and primeval. . . and we want cobras in our world? Is colonialism really dead or gardens." has it merely assumed other forms?

Literary Precedents

Harrison alludes to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, the quintessential Western examination of the horrors engendered by European discovery and exploitation of Africa. Conrad was once Harrison's favorite author, and he also admires Karen Blixen's Out of Africa as a nearly perfect prose meditation. But for a writer and a teacher of writing in a university context, it seems clear that many writers, all writers, have influenced him. The Blood Latitudes alludes to many writers and texts from Ernest Hemingway to George Adamson. It is clear that Harrison knows the history and the brutal realities of European colonialism, of the WWI realignment of colonial properties, and the post-WWII independence movements that revealed how much the indigenous peoples had learned from their colonial masters. However, he says that "Africa itself has always been the greater intoxicant.

I think I need to go back again."

Related Titles

Africana, Savannah Blue, Burton and Speke, and The Three Hunters are all novels by William Harrison that have Africa as their setting and theme. Each is a different kind of fiction. The Three Hunters he conceived as a comedy about a dysfunctional family and the youngest son's search for love in all the wrong places. It parodies the hunting stories of Hemingway and others. Savannah Blue, Harrison's best-selling novel, is a mystery set partly in Africa, partly in Washington, D.C., fascinating for its characterization of Quentin Clare as a clever and dedicated killer and its deft handling of a large cast of characters and a complicated plot. Burton and Speke is a fictionalized treatment of the relationship of John Harming Speke and Richard Francis Burton, their attempts to discover the headwaters of the Nile, and the consequences of those efforts, deeply researched and convincingly presented.

Africana is a story about the role of mercenaries in the civil wars of Biafra, Katanga, and Kenya. The Blood Latitudes is the last and most satisfying of the five African novels and shows Harrison at the top of his form.

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