

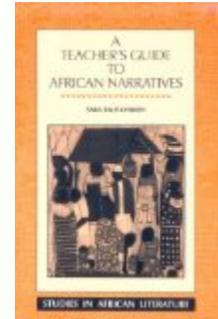
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sara Talis O'Brien. *A Teacher's Guide to African Narratives*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. 122 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-325-00039-8.

Reviewed by Patricia S. Kuntz (University of Wisconsin - Extension Madison Area Technical College, Madison Metropolitan School District)

Published on H-AfrTeach (June, 2000)



A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Sara O'Brien's *A Teacher's Guide to African Narratives* is a book to assist high school teachers to explore African literature. The book summarizes some of the anthropological and historical information which underlies specific pieces of African literature. In the past, O'Brien has been active in outreach activities at the secondary school level. Presently, she teaches literature –including African literature – at the undergraduate level. She writes this guide to ameliorate problems that North American English and social studies teachers might have in identifying African literature and in interpreting this literature in today's context.

O'Brien selected works by six sub-Saharan writers which are easily available in North America. They include Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Okot p'Bitek (Uganda), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya), Bessie Head (Botswana), and Alex La Guma (South Africa). Two writers are women (one deceased and one living in England). The four men (two deceased, one in exile) have lived most of their lives in the country of their designated work. Two of the writers describe pre-independence Igboland. However, O'Brien does not mention works by winners of the Nobel Award for Literature (Wole Soyinka, Nigeria; Nadine Gordimer, South Africa; and Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt) in this guide nor does she refer to North African literature.

The book provides a basis for discussion of several themes: clash of cultures (indigenous and colonial), revolution, and resistance. One text by each writer illus-

trates the themes and portrays aspect of culture from the Igbo of Nigeria, the Gikuyu of Kenya, the Acholi of Uganda, the Tswana of Botswana, and various ethnicities of South Africa. O'Brien selected six texts readable for pre- collegiate North American students. Corresponding in format to an earlier book of a similar title *A Handbook for Teaching African Literature* (Gunner, 1994), O'Brien presents the narratives *Things Fall Apart*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and *Time of the Butcherbird* in chronological order. Each chapter follows a format consisting of a discussion of major themes and literary techniques of text, *points to ponder*, a summary of the historical context, a description of author and work, and an annotated bibliography consisting primarily of literary criticisms.

This author takes the approach of literary depth rather than breadth in presenting her themes and narratives. According to the introduction, she seeks to *provide a sound background for teaching texts that require knowledge of Africa*. Perhaps this explanation is the reason that she includes texts by a male and a female Igbo writer to portray pre-independent Igbo society. As one theme, this juxtaposition of two gender points of view is not repeated with other authors and texts. However, a teacher might expand O'Brien gender focus with a comparison of the two authors born in South Africa – Bessie Head (exiled to Botswana) and Alex La Guma.

By analyzing each narrative in isolation, she fails to

place this book in the context of potential pre-collegiate courses such as world literature, the novel, literary activism, or world history. This reader had expected to obtain strategies for instructing these texts to advanced-placement, mainstreamed, or special education students. In the current form, the book might be appropriate for students in advanced placement international English (College Board). Unlike her predecessor who demonstrated how teachers might use ten novels and poetry in the context of common British secondary school syllabi and national exams, O'Brien does not give examples of how the study of her six narratives might fulfill state and national standards for English (language arts) or history (social studies). Without the application to specific standards-narrative correlation, I doubt many high school teachers will include African narratives, since teaching certification and licensure rarely requires African literary or social science knowledge.

Likewise, this teacher's guide does not provide supporting instructional resources. Few teachers have the time and knowledge to design complementary activities to reinforce the text themes. For instance, the reader does not find names of organizations involved in Africa, timelines of historical events, lists of films (Michigan State University and California Newsreel publish a com-

pendia of film reviews), or webpage addresses (University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, or Stanford University) for supporting students who are at different cognitive levels. In addition, for most teachers to obtain the annotated resources listed for each narrative, they would need to utilize interlibrary loan services of federally-funded African Studies Center library collections. Most of the works would not be available in public libraries. Although the maps are helpful for a general perspective, a map which focus on the location of the narrative would provide needed geographical or political information concerning the text or author. Moreover, some Africanists might argue with O'Brien's regional divisions of the continent as shown by the maps of Africa. In addition, the three drawings of female characters do not contribute additional information about the narrative, the author, or the country. Furthermore, the other three narratives were not illustrated. Although the concept of this book is important for pre-collegiate teachers and their students, as it stands, it requires changes to meet their needs.

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Citation: Patricia S. Kuntz. Review of O'Brien, Sara Talis, *A Teacher's Guide to African Narratives*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

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