

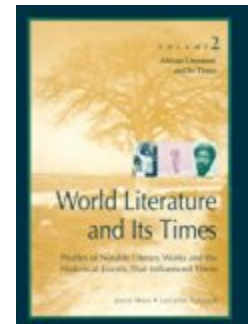
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Joyce Moss, Lorraine Valestuk. *African Literature and its Times: Profiles of Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them*. Detroit: Gale Group, 2000. xlv + 544 pp. High school and college. \$145.25 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7876-3727-9.

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African Literature with a View towards History

African Literature with a View towards History

This is the second volume in this well-received series edited by Joyce Moss and Lorraine Valestuk. The first volume (on Latin American literature) won the American Library Association's RUSA (Reference and User Services Association) award as one of the outstanding reference works of 1999. There is no doubt this volume will be as highly acclaimed.

The basic premise of the editors of this series is that they feel fiction is an excellent tool that may be used to help students understand both the differences and similarities between the various peoples and cultures of the world. They feel that a literary work can inculcate in a student a feeling for a time period or issue that would normally be lacking in a textbook. Conversely, the editors also feel that full understanding of a literary work requires knowledge of the social, cultural and historical milieu in which it was written. Therefore, each title analyzed in one of these volumes includes information about the historical circumstances in which it was conceived and written and how it helps us understand some aspect of history.

The volume under review analyses fifty African literary works that were selected by university professors with an eye to representing as great a number of the literary-historical connections mentioned above as possible. Each work chosen to be in this volume is felt, therefore, to illustrate some particular point in the historical development of the peoples of Africa. In addition, con-

sideration in selecting the works to be included was also given to how often a literary work is studied. The editors consciously have tried to select authors who were representative of all races and a variety of ethnic groupings, and care was taken so that both men and women authors were represented. Works are included from and about all geographical regions, including North Africa and Egypt. While most of the selected works were originally published in English, some were first published in Arabic, Afrikaans, French, Portuguese or indigenous African languages.

There was also an attempt to represent a variety of literary genres, including, for example, diaries, speeches, folklore and market literature. While there were a few offerings of pre-colonial literature, the vast majority of titles discussed were taken from the colonial and post-colonial periods.

The works are arranged alphabetically by title, and each is subsequently arranged as follows. There is a general introduction that places the work in context and provides a basic synopsis. Next there is an attempt to juxtapose the work with historical events that took place elsewhere at the time the story takes place. The third section summarizes in greater detail the plot, discusses how the work is particularly illustrative of some historical theme, looks at sources that may have inspired it, and finally takes a look at its overall literary context. A fourth section places the literary work more fully in the context of historical events happening when it was writ-

ten, and a fifth section presents a list of bibliographical references (both works cited and suggestions for additional reading). In addition, wherever possible, primary sources are given through the use of quotations in the text and sidebars. The sidebars also provide additional details and amplify issues raised in the text. The authors have done a good job in trying to define terms that are specifically African. A short, but useful introduction and a Chronology of Relevant Events that compares historical events in Africa with related literary works precede the entries.

Some of the titles discussed are certainly the classics of African literature. We find *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton; *The Rivonia Trial Speech* by Nelson Mandela; *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa, *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Ba; *God's Bits of Wood* by Ousmane Sembene; *The Wretched of the Earth* by Franz Fanon; Equiano's Travels; and Ibn

Battuta in Black Africa_. From those titles alone one can see four of the major themes being covered are apartheid, women's place in society, resistance to colonial rule, and travels in the pre-colonial era. While not all of the other titles are as well known, all do their jobs well in illustrating the varieties of the African experience through literature. The scope of ideas, cultures, politics and history presented in this selection of literary works is excellent.

While this series is evidently aimed at a secondary school audience, and certainly belongs in any high school library, it would also be a welcome addition to public library and college collections as well. It should also be of immense value to teachers who are looking to supplement reading lists for social studies or history classes and who have little or no background in African history or literature.

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