

BLACK AND WHITE AND READ ALL OVER

For more than a generation, Canadian writers of all backgrounds have been exploring Africa. The transatlantic traffic in ideas and books has never been richer.

When writer Ken Wiwa stares outside his office window in search of inspiration, he sees an empty white space like a blank sheet of paper—the snow-covered quadrangle of Massey College at the University of Toronto. “It’s hard to imagine Africa,” he says.

Yet that is what Wiwa, an accomplished non-fiction writer and columnist for *The Globe and Mail*, is currently trying to do: develop his first novel, an exploration of tribal memory and dislocation set amid the

brilliant tropical sunshine, the honking and shouting cacophony, the pollution, exuberance and heat of his family’s native Nigeria. “I’m consistently finding that reports of Africa in the Canadian news media are all about issues, about trouble,” says Wiwa. “It makes you wary of Africa.” And yet, he points out, a recent British poll found that Nigerians rated themselves as the world’s happiest people. “The troubles are real enough, but from the outside, it’s hard to get Africa’s complexity right.”

Nevertheless, a surprising number of Canadian writers have attempted to do just that—some of them with considerable success.

Two of the most recent are Toronto-based M.G. Vassanji, two-time winner of The Giller Prize (most recently for his 2003 novel about Kenya, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*), and Gil Courtemanche, the Quebec author of *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*. The latter, a best-seller in both French and English Canada, has been translated into 15 languages—the latest being Danish and Croatian, says Carole Boutin, who handles rights for publisher Les Éditions du Boréal.

Canada plays a minor role in these books. Vassanji’s narrators recount their stories from the security of Toronto, but the action takes place in Kenya. His *The Book of Secrets* is partly set in East Africa’s colonial past of railway building and land-clearing.



photo: Ch. (Derek Oliver)



Ken Wiwa: “It’s hard to imagine Africa.”

Vikram Lall takes place mostly during Kenya’s bloody struggle for independence, when the Mau Mau waged war on white colonists, while Indian Kenyans—like the Vassanji family, descendants of indentured workers brought over by the British—waited anxiously in between.

Courtemanche also sets his action in Africa, in Rwanda’s capital city in the period of the Hutu-Tutsi genocide. At the centre is a Québécois journalist and aid worker who is in love with a Hutu woman and dismayed at the failure of a Canadian major-general working for the UN to stop the coming genocide. The cast of characters includes some bumbling Canadian diplomats. So cynical is Courtemanche’s portrait of his compatriots, some might ask why the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) has underwritten some of the novelist’s promotional touring.

Then there was Margaret Laurence, who wrote of her years with her husband in Somalia and Ghana in *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* and in short fiction. Audrey Thomas explored the politics of aid in Ghana in *Coming Down From Wa*. Isabel Huggan set several stories in Nairobi in her collection *You Never Know*. Barbara Gowdy imagined life as a she-elephant in *The White Bone*. Among French-language books, there is Hubert Aquin’s *Blackout* and Jean-Jacques Ferron’s *Saint Elias*.

These are white writers, preoccupied with the guilt-laden relationships between First- and Third-World people trying to solve Africa’s development and justice conundrums. Another group of Canadians, writers of African background, are more concerned about exorcising the traumas of the past, addressing issues of emigration and building a post-colonial identity—people such as Ugandan-born playwright George Seremba; poet and playwright David Odhiambo; and Calgary writer Esi Edugyan, whose debut novel *The Second Life of Samuel Tyme* is being published this year by Knopf Canada.

Whatever their perspective, when writers sit down to create, the vivid tones of Africa tend to transcend the subdued colours of Canada. And yet there’s much in these books that parallels Canada’s own stories: tales of survival in vast and inhospitable landscapes; dramas of indigenous peoples’ contact with Europeans; accounts of the opening of the land

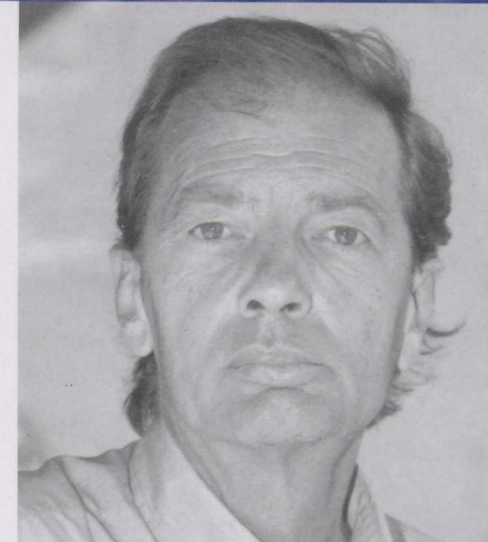
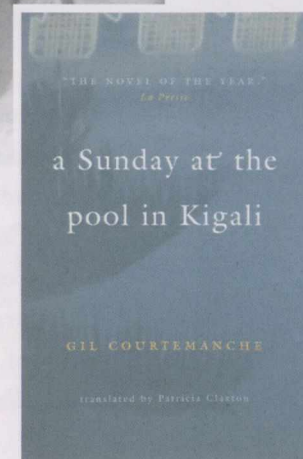


photo: Pierre Longtin

Gil Courtemanche



by railways and capitalists; and, of course, the modern saga of learning to live in multicultural, multilingual communities. Such themes run like subterranean veins through the bedrock of Canadian literature; no surprise that writers working in Canada can detect similar literary gold in other lands.

From his office overlooking a snowy landscape, Ken Wiwa notes, “The only way I can access Africa from Toronto is through memories and music. Perhaps, though, writing from here has its advantages. Once you’re there, it’s hard to stay distanced.”

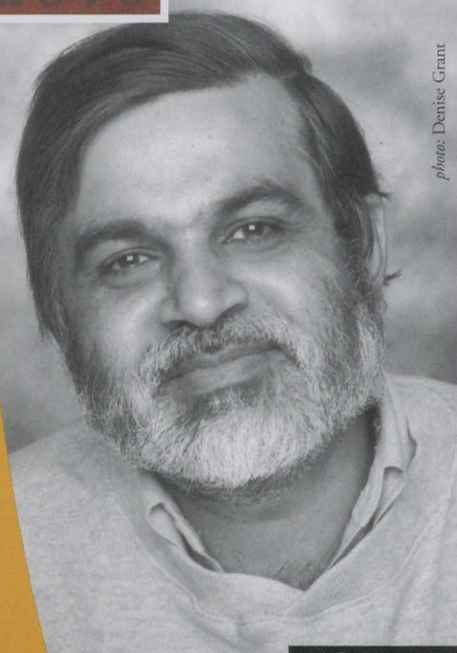
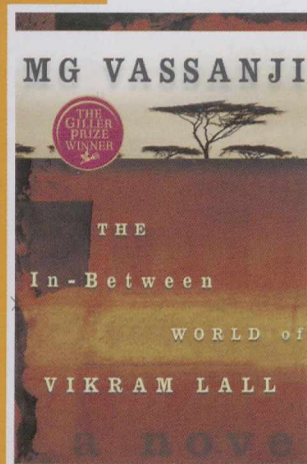


photo: Denise Grant

M.G. Vassanji