

There are three truly remarkable things about this slender but incisive study of contemporary American literature with African settings. First, it is amazing that so few scholars have noted the remarkable thematic elements that tie so many important post-World War II American writers to Africa. From Saul Bellow to John Updike to Thomas Pynchon to Alice Walker and, of course, to Alex Haley, some of the nation's most significant authors have discovered Africa as both source and substance of significant fiction.

Secondly, Dave Kuhne's study reveals that Africa, as both place and idea, has informed much of western literature since the beginning when Africa was regarded as little more than a "blank space" on the map, a dense and foreboding continent as full of abstract mystery as it was fraught with concrete peril. Kuhne avers that, until recently, accurate descriptions of African landscape, people, or even climate have been rare. He notes that even prestigious authors such as Saul Bellow initially drew what they thought they knew about the "Dark Continent" from such sources as Hemingway's short stories and Johnny Weissmuller's Tarzan films.

But perhaps the most remarkable revelation made by Kuhne's study is how the gradual and sometimes painful emergence of Africa into the conscious mind of the modern western world has had a profound influence on the development of thought and philosophy regarding time, civilization, and, of course, nature. Along with that awareness has come a new and quite different fascination with Africa, an intense devotion to its varied and ancient cultures and vast unsettled wilderness. For the first time in western history, Kuhne points out, the world has begun to understand that Africa is a highly varied and complex continent, not a single place with a single identity, either cultural or geographic, and that, like the other continents, it is far greater than the sum of its parts. Kuhne writes with a clarity rarely found in contemporary literary criticism, fraught as it is with postmodern claptrap and trendy jargon. Breaking down his approach into a series of themes, he begins by examining the ancient attitudes toward Africa as expressed through classical literature. From this foundation, he moves rapidly to such writers as Daniel Defoe and Samuel Johnson, detailing their use of a continent they knew little about but which captivated them by its remoteness and almost mythical strangeness. Working quickly through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kuhne examines the evolving use of Africa as setting by numerous British and American writers, most especially Joseph Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* Kuhne convincingly avers, redefined Africa and established an enduring geographic image. Then, turning to the "safari motifs" of such American writers as Ernest Hemingway and Robert Ruark and the steamy prose of Paul Bowles, Kuhne's examination breaks down into individual chapters, each dealing with a large, central element that is then subdivided into studies of single authors and their methods of dealing with Africa in their fiction.

Beginning with contemporary authors who have used fictional African settings for their novels, Kuhne closely studies works by Ross Thomas, John Updike, Philip Caputo, and others who have set their works in fabricated African nations. Kuhne's thesis here is that these writers wished to create microcosmic societies that would allegorically represent the entire continent and would exploit-or debunk-traditional African stereotypes. His next chapter, "Black on Black: African American Novels with African Settings," reverses the ordinary trend of examining American fiction from the standpoint of discovering African themes and ideas, and instead looks at the work of such writers as Alice Walker, Frank

Yerby , and Charles Johnson, among others, from the standpoint of African Americans who have used African settings to educate, illuminate, and even to explain the deeper contexts of racial origins and connections to a distant and sometimes unknowable past. In the next two chapters Kuhne looks at genre fiction (historical, thrillers, and science fiction), particularly the work of William Harrison, and he examines the fantastic approaches of postmodern writers such as Thomas Pynchon and their take on Africa as both place and rich source of theme and characterization. Ultimately, he concludes the volume with the prediction that because Africa has in the past half century become more accessible and better known to the rest of the world, it will grow as an attractive setting and idea for the next generation of novelists. He asserts that the rich diversity of the second-largest continent provides a virtually limitless source of inspiration based on knowable and measurable fact rather than on animated speculation.

Throughout the volume, Kuhne keeps several common questions in mind. He seeks to find generic threads in the ways these authors use African settings as a didactic device to destroy or possibly to reinforce stereotypes. He also examines the ways in which the geography of Africa is depicted and tries to relate these elements to similar depictions in more traditional American settings. Additionally, he relates the use American writers make of Africa in their employment of universal and traditional themes such as courage, death, love, and war, then draws conclusions about the relationship of these ideas, as portrayed in African-set novels ,to similar themes as they appear in American-set fiction. Kuhne's accessible and well-organized study offers an excellent basis for a course in contemporary American fiction with African settings. He deals frankly and specifically with traditional ideas commonly associated with Africa and relates them directly to fundamental American values; more to the point, he links Africa and its properties to the larger sense of frontier and adventure that so often becomes the backdrop for fictional examinations of human relationships and human folly in the best of American fiction.

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