

Edited by
Suzanne S. Choo

CROSS-WORLDS
short stories
on global themes

Marshall Cavendish
Editions



CROSS-WORLDS

short stories on global themes

More than any other period in human history, the twenty-first century is marked by the intensification of global interaction, interconnectedness and interchange. As the world becomes increasingly closer and flatter, it is also pulled apart by rising instances of global terrorism, xenophobia, inequality among rich and poor nations, and modern-day slavery.

This anthology features ten short stories by internationally acclaimed authors originating from Australia, Canada, China, India, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. Each story provides powerful insights into the lives of individuals as they grapple with urgent global issues such as the plight of asylum seekers, immigrant experiences, climate change, terrorism, the effects of capitalism, among others. It is hoped that these stories will prompt deeper, more empathetic and layered connections with multiple others in our world.

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*short stories
on global themes*


- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
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- Margaret Atwood • Peter Carey
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- Nadine Gordimer • Ha Jin
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- Ken Liu • Bharati Mukherjee
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- Wena Poon • Helen Simpson
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- Madhuri Vijay
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For Review Only

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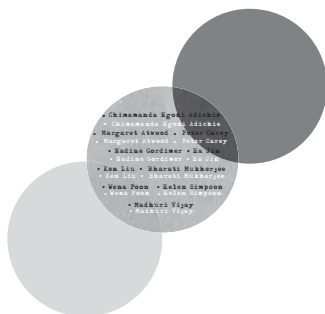
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INTRODUCTION: THE VALUE OF LITERATURE IN A GLOBAL AGE

By Suzanne S. Choo

*When you have encountered a human being,
you cannot drop him.*

Most often we do, saying 'I have done all I could!'

We haven't done anything!

(Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 1999)

In the early fifteenth century, the Chinese Admiral Zheng He commanded over three hundred and seventeen ships setting sail from China to Southeast Asia towards major trading sites along India's southwest coast. Years later, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus would discover the new world in the Americas, and Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama would make the first voyage from Lisbon through Africa to India establishing a sea route from Europe to the East. These men, among others, were catalysts in facilitating a global exchange of knowledge, goods and culture along with colonization and slavery of people. Today, the sense of international interaction, interconnectedness and interchange, encapsulated in the term "globalization", has intensified more than

any other century in human history. Indeed, the word “global” has become a cliché in our twenty-first century landscape in which companies increasingly apply global marketing strategies, financial institutions compete to provide global banking services for their mobile clienteles, and education systems are compared globally on international test surveys while universities continue developing enticing global exchange programmes and partnerships with overseas institutions. These changes are fuelled by a race among cities all over the world from Dubai to Shanghai and Singapore to market themselves as global cities that are highly networked and that are encouraged to maintain a cosmopolitan openness to immigrants and foreign investors.

As the world becomes increasingly closer and flatter, it is also pulled apart by rising instances of global terrorism, xenophobia, inequality among rich and poor nations, and modern-day slavery. It is here that literature provides powerful insights into the lives of individuals as they grapple with globalization and its effects arising from cross-border movements, cross-cultural clashes and mixings, and political cross-fires among nations. *Cross-Worlds: Short Stories on Global Themes* features works by well-known and new award winning authors originating from various parts of the world including Australia, Canada, China, India, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, United Kingdom and the United States. Most of these authors have themselves travelled from their place of birth and experienced the challenges of assimilating to a different culture. Each story has been carefully selected to elucidate one or more of the following global themes: asylum seekers and refugees, capitalism, climate change, cultural displacement, immigrant experience, modern-day slavery, terrorism and xenophobia.

The investment, particularly by economically advanced nations, in the development of human capital and in applied subjects, raises the question concerning the value of literature in our global age. Surely, one of literature's key contributions must be in the way it fosters dispositions of hospitality towards who are foreign, marginalized and othered. How precisely does it do so? I want to suggest five ways.

1. Literature personalizes globalization.

Globalization is an abstract term commonly referenced by policymakers, business leaders and scholars. Through literature, however, we get a glimpse of how individual lives are affected by everyday globalization. In "The American Embassy" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, we learn of how the struggle for freedom has torn families apart in Nigeria leading a mother in search of asylum. All she needs to do is to answer a few questions at the embassy but can asylum restore loss and hope? How much is one willing to give up in the pursuit of a better home?

The question about the possibility of hope in the midst of social devastation is also raised in Nadine Gordimer's "The Ultimate Safari". The story is told from the perspective of an eleven-year-old girl who describes the treacherous journey her family takes as civil war breaks out in Mozambique. They leave their home and venture through a national park before finally reaching a refugee camp in South Africa. Subtle distinctions are made between tourists with their insulated sense of security enjoying their African experience in the park as opposed to displaced refugees whose sense of a permanent home has been destroyed.

2. Literature reveals the complex effects of globalization.

At the same time, great works of literature do not simplify or gloss over personal loss. In reality, there are often no quick-fixes, no tidy resolutions, no convenient ways to manage pain as a result of global religious politics as presented in “The Management of Grief” by Bharati Mukherjee. Set in the context of the Air India Flight 182 terrorist bombing, we journey with Mrs. Bhave who struggles to move on with life having lost her husband and sons in the attack. She is later enlisted by a Canadian government representative to help manage the grief of affected immigrant communities. Yet, the story highlights the limits of empathy not only in her hesitance in approaching a Sikh couple as a Hindu woman but also in the manner in which the government representative fails to understand the Sikh couple’s reluctance to accept the state’s generous offer of financial support for the loss of their sons in the tragedy. As the representative stands to leave and thanks the couple for tea, Mrs. Bhave remarks to them, “She thinks you are being very hospitable but she doesn’t have the slightest idea what it means.” This revelatory comment highlights the conditional nature of hospitality limited by systems and procedures, and ultimately blind to the deeper needs of the other.

3. Literature provides layered glimpses of characters struggling with displacement and discrimination.

Hospitality towards the foreign other is also a significant theme in Margaret Atwood’s “Dancing Girls”. How should we respond when the foreigner dwells, not in a faraway country or distant segregated community, but in one’s own home? Atwood depicts the fragility of welcome in which one’s initial impulse to exoticize quickly descends

into suspicion as a result of an inability to completely categorize and define the other. Atwood reveals how discrimination becomes naturalized when we think the worst of the other whom we cannot understand. Towards the end of the story, even the narrator, herself new to the country, presumes that the dancing girls engaged by the foreigner are prostitutes and in her apparently commonsensical judgement has overlooked the rich tradition of dancing in Middle Eastern cultures.

The importance of moving beyond judgement to appreciating the cultural specificity of the other is reiterated in Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie". One of globalization's characteristic traits is the mobility of people as well as the fluidity of citizenship and belonging. Yet, the effects of such fast-paced, transnational circulation can lead to the commoditization of individuals as occurs when a teenage Chinese girl is purchased as a wife to an American via a catalogue. The struggle to assimilate, the sense of alienation and the silencing of the past emphasize how important it is to appreciate the particular history of the displaced other before he or she is judged.

4. Literature vividly depicts the effects of economic globalization thus calling us to be engaged and accountable.

The political and cultural aspects of globalization are commonly driven by economic globalization. The spread of neoliberal capitalist practices has led to widespread exchange of goods and services. "After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town" by Ha Jin describes the setting up of an American fast-food restaurant in a small city in China. The event is considered "a significant breakthrough in the city's campaign to attract foreign investors". However, tensions emerge as locals acclimatize to new kinds of food such as jell-O and pecan

pie as well as new practices such as the buffet. Capitalist business strategies clash with socialist practices and miscommunication occurs as a result of language barriers. The tragicomic ending causes us to ponder—to what extent are transnational exchanges another form of imperialism? To what extent should local traditions and communities be protected?

In a similar vein, how should local governments and communities protect the rights of foreign workers? In Wena Poon's "Development", we recognize the grim paradox that accounts of foreign domestic worker abuse often occur in economically advanced countries with their highly literate and educated populace. Perhaps, in the pursuit of progress, the implosive energy of the city finds an outlet in the infliction of violence on the other.

The progress of cities marked by the quest to develop taller skyscrapers, larger mega malls and more enticing gadgetries mask invisible and uneven networks of power as economically advanced nations become more dependent on developing economies for cheap labour. To date, the United Nations estimates that over twenty-one million men, women and children are trapped in slavery all over the world. Madhuri Vijay's "Lorry Raja" provides a vivid insight into the lives of Indian children labouring, for a few rupees each day, to mine ore for the construction of an Olympic Stadium in China. Throughout, the aspiration to escape to a different reality is replaced by resigned acceptance of an unending cycle of poverty.

5. Literature expands our imaginative capacity to perceive the future.

What consequences result from globalization's limitless quest for expansion, colonization and accumulation? Literature's essential power is in the projection of vision and in extending our imaginative

capacity to perceive “what if” scenarios. In Helen Simpson’s “Diary of an Interesting Year”, we are given an intimate account of lives affected by the devastating effects of global warming leading to the blurring of boundaries between people and places. The paradox of climate change is that it is universally experienced and thus provokes a pervasive sense of planetary consciousness; at the same time, it intensifies that sense of individualism as human beings revert to their natural survival instincts.

The gradual destruction of earth is also the focus of Peter Carey’s “Do You Love Me?”. The practice of cartography aptly frames the story since it has catalyzed global expansion from the time of Ancient Greece and China to the age of exploration and the Enlightenment. Yet, map making is itself an imperialistic act of naming, classifying and managing territorial space. As globalization over-reaches itself, the management of space extends to material objects and people. Taken to the extreme, the compulsion to control becomes an all-consuming obsession so that the meaning of things and relationships with others no longer matter.

It is indeed a fact that in our global age, certain things have begun to dematerialize and “disappear” such as forests and various animal species. There is a danger too that in our zealous pursuit for economic progress, literature, along with its disciplinary practice of critical appreciation and analysis, may dematerialize when we no longer perceive its value. Yet, the stories in this collection testify to literature’s powerful capacity to nurture global citizens who are critically sensitive to the complexities underlying urgent contemporary issues of our time and who embody an imagination hospitable to multiple others and realities in our world.



THE AMERICAN EMBASSY

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

She stood in line outside the American embassy in Lagos, staring straight ahead, barely moving, a blue plastic file of documents tucked under her arm. She was the forty-eighth person in the line of about two hundred that trailed from the closed gates of the American embassy all the way past the smaller, vine-encrusted gates of the Czech embassy. She did not notice the newspaper vendors who blew whistles and pushed *The Guardian*, *Thenews*, and *The Vanguard* in her face. Or the beggars who walked up and down holding out enamel plates. Or the ice-cream bicycles that honked. She did not fan herself with a magazine or swipe at the tiny fly hovering near her ear. When the man standing behind her tapped her on the back and asked, “Do you have change, *abeg*¹, two tens for twenty naira²?” she stared at him for a while, to focus, to remember where she was, before she shook her head and said, “No.”

The air hung heavy with moist heat. It weighed on her head, made it even more difficult to keep her mind blank, which Dr. Balogun had said yesterday was what she would have to do. He had refused to give her any more tranquilizers because she needed

to be alert for the visa interview. It was easy enough for him to say that, as though she knew how to go about keeping her mind blank, as though it was in her power, as though she invited those images of her son Ugonna's small, plump body crumpling before her, the splash on his chest so red she wanted to scold him about playing with the palm oil in the kitchen. Not that he could even reach up to the shelf where she kept oils and spices, not that he could unscrew the cap on the plastic bottle of palm oil. He was only four years old.

The man behind her tapped her again. She jerked around and nearly screamed from the sharp pain that ran down her back. Twisted muscle, Dr. Balogun had said, his expression awed that she had sustained nothing more serious after jumping down from the balcony.

"See what that useless soldier is doing there," the man behind her said.

She turned to look across the street, moving her neck slowly. A small crowd had gathered. A soldier was flogging a bespectacled man with a long whip that curled in the air before it landed on the man's face, or his neck, she wasn't sure because the man's hands were raised as if to ward off the whip. She saw the man's glasses slip off and fall. She saw the heel of the soldier's boot squash the black frames, the tinted lenses.

"See how the people are pleading with the soldier," the man behind her said. "Our people have become too used to pleading with soldiers."

She said nothing. He was persistent with his friendliness, unlike the woman in front of her who had said earlier, "I have been talking to you and you just look at me like a moo-moo!" and now ignored her. Perhaps he was wondering why she did not share in the familiarity that had developed among the others in the line.

Because they had all woken up early—those who had slept at all—to get to the American embassy before dawn; because they had all struggled for the visa line, dodging the soldiers’ swinging whips as they were herded back and forth before the line was finally formed; because they were all afraid that the American embassy might decide not to open its gates today, and they would have to do it all over again the day after tomorrow since the embassy did not open on Wednesdays, they had formed friendships. Buttoned-up men and women exchanged newspapers and denunciations of General Abacha’s government, while young people in jeans, bristling with *savoir faire*, shared tips on ways to answer questions for the American student visa.

“Look at his face, all that bleeding. The whip cut his face,” the man behind her said.

She did not look, because she knew the blood would be red, like fresh palm oil. Instead she looked up Eleke Crescent, a winding street of embassies with vast lawns, and at the crowds of people on the sides of the street. A breathing sidewalk. A market that sprung up during the American embassy hours and disappeared when the embassy closed. There was the chair-rental outfit where the stacks of white plastic chairs that cost one hundred naira per hour decreased fast. There were the wooden boards propped on cement blocks, colorfully displaying sweets and mangoes and oranges. There were the young people who cushioned cigarette-filled trays on their heads with rolls of cloth. There were the blind beggars led by children, singing blessings in English, Yoruba, pidgin, Igbo, Hausa when somebody put money in their plates. And there was, of course, the makeshift photo studio. A tall man standing beside a tripod, holding up a chalk-written sign that read EXCELLENT ONE-HOUR PHOTOS, CORRECT AMERICAN VISA

SPECIFICATIONS. She had had her passport photo taken there, sitting on a rickety stool, and she was not surprised that it came out grainy, with her face much lighter-skinned. But then, she had no choice, she couldn't have taken the photo earlier.

Two days ago she had buried her child in a grave near a vegetable patch in their ancestral hometown of Umunnachi, surrounded by well-wishers she did not remember now. The day before, she had driven her husband in the boot of their Toyota to the home of a friend, who smuggled him out of the country. And the day before that, she hadn't needed to take a passport photo; her life was normal and she had taken Ugonna to school, had bought him a sausage roll at Mr. Biggs, had sung along with Majek Fashek on her car radio. If a fortune-teller had told her that she, in the space of a few days, would no longer recognize her life, she would have laughed. Perhaps even given the fortune-teller ten naira extra for having a wild imagination.

"Sometimes I wonder if the American embassy people look out of their window and enjoy watching the soldiers flogging people," the man behind her was saying. She wished he would shut up. It was his talking that made it harder to keep her mind blank, free of Ugonna. She looked across the street again; the soldier was walking away now, and even from this distance she could see the glower on his face. The glower of a grown man who could flog another grown man if he wanted to, when he wanted to. His swagger was as flamboyant as that of the men who four nights ago broke her back door open and barged in.

Where is your husband? Where is he? They had torn open the wardrobes in the two rooms, even the drawers. She could have told them that her husband was over six feet tall, that he could not possibly hide in a drawer. Three men in black trousers. They had

smelled of alcohol and pepper soup, and much later, as she held Ugonna's still body, she knew that she would never eat pepper soup again.

Where has your husband gone? Where? They pressed a gun to her head, and she said, "I don't know, he just left yesterday," standing still even though the warm urine trickled down her legs.

One of them, the one wearing a black hooded shirt who smelled the most like alcohol, had eyes that were startlingly bloodshot, so red they looked painful. He shouted the most, kicked at the TV set. *You know about the story your husband wrote in the newspaper? You know he is a liar? You know people like him should be in jail because they cause trouble, because they don't want Nigeria to move forward?*

He sat down on the sofa, where her husband always sat to watch the nightly news on NTA, and yanked at her so that she landed awkwardly on his lap. His gun poked her waist. *Fine woman, why you marry a troublemaker?* She felt his sickening hardness, smelled the fermentation on his breath.

Leave her alone, the other one said. The one with the bald head that gleamed, as though coated in Vaseline. *Let's go.*

She pried herself free and got up from the sofa, and the man in the hooded shirt, still seated, slapped her behind. It was then that Ugonna started to cry, to run to her. The man in the hooded shirt was laughing, saying how soft her body was, waving his gun. Ugonna was screaming now; he never screamed when he cried, he was not that kind of child. Then the gun went off and the palm oil splash appeared on Ugonna's chest.

"See oranges here," the man in line behind her said, offering her a plastic bag of six peeled oranges. She had not noticed him buy them.

She shook her head. "Thank you."

“Take one. I noticed that you have not eaten anything since morning.”

She looked at him properly then, for the first time. A nondescript face with a dark complexion unusually smooth for a man. There was something aspirational about his crisp-ironed shirt and blue tie, about the careful way he spoke English as though he feared he would make a mistake. Perhaps he worked for one of the new-generation banks and was making a much better living than he had ever imagined possible.

“No, thank you,” she said. The woman in front turned to glance at her and then went back to talking to some people about a special church service called the American Visa Miracle Ministry.

“You should eat, oh,” the man behind her said, although he no longer held out the bag of oranges.

She shook her head again; the pain was still there, somewhere between her eyes. It was as if jumping from the balcony had dislodged some bits and pieces inside her head so that they now clattered painfully. Jumping had not been her only choice, she could have climbed onto the mango tree whose branch reached across the balcony, she could have dashed down the stairs. The men had been arguing, so loudly that they blocked out reality, and she believed for a moment that maybe that popping sound had not been a gun, maybe it was the kind of sneaky thunder that came at the beginning of harmattan³, maybe the red splash really was palm oil, and Ugonna had gotten to the bottle somehow and was now playing a fainting game even though it was not a game he had ever played. Then their words pulled her back. *You think she will tell people it was an accident? Is this what Oga asked us to do? A small child! We have to hit the mother. No, that is double trouble. Yes. No, let's go, my friend!*

She had dashed out to the balcony then, climbed over the railing, jumped down without thinking of the two storeys, and crawled into the dustbin by the gate. After she heard the roar of their car driving away, she went back to her flat, smelling of the rotten plantain peels in the dustbin. She held Ugonna's body, placed her cheek to his quiet chest, and realized that she had never felt so ashamed. She had failed him.

"You are anxious about the visa interview, *abi*?" the man behind her asked.

She shrugged, gently, so as not to hurt her back, and forced a vacant smile.

"Just make sure that you look the interviewer straight in the eye as you answer the questions. Even if you make a mistake, don't correct yourself, because they will assume you are lying. I have many friends they have refused, for small-small reasons. Me, I am applying for a visitor's visa. My brother lives in Texas and I want to go for a holiday."

He sounded like the voices that had been around her, people who had helped with her husband's escape and with Ugonna's funeral, who had brought her to the embassy. Don't falter as you answer the questions, the voices had said. Tell them all about Ugonna, what he was like, but don't overdo it, because every day people lie to them to get asylum visas, about dead relatives that were never even born. Make Ugonna real. Cry, but don't cry too much.

"They don't give our people immigrant visas anymore, unless the person is rich by American standards. But I hear people from European countries have no problems getting visas. Are you applying for an immigrant visa or a visitor's?" the man asked.

"Asylum." She did not look at his face; rather, she felt his surprise.

"Asylum? That will be very difficult to prove."

She wondered if he read *The New Nigeria*, if he knew about her husband. He probably did. Everyone supportive of the pro-democracy press knew about her husband, especially because he was the first journalist to publicly call the coup plot a sham, to write a story accusing General Abacha of inventing a coup so that he could kill and jail his opponents. Soldiers had come to the newspaper office and carted away large numbers of that edition in a black truck; still, photocopies got out and circulated throughout Lagos—a neighbor had seen a copy pasted on the wall of a bridge next to posters announcing church crusades and new films. The soldiers had detained her husband for two weeks and broken the skin on his forehead, leaving a scar the shape of an L. Friends had gingerly touched the scar when they gathered at their flat to celebrate his release, bringing bottles of whiskey. She remembered somebody saying to him, *Nigeria will be well because of you*, and she remembered her husband's expression, that look of the excited messiah, as he talked about the soldier who had given him a cigarette after beating him, all the while stammering in the way he did when he was in high spirits. She had found that stammer endearing years ago; she no longer did.

"Many people apply for asylum visa and don't get it," the man behind her said. Loudly. Perhaps he had been talking all the while.

"Do you read *The New Nigeria*?" she asked. She did not turn to face the man, instead she watched a couple ahead in the line buy packets of biscuits; the packets crackled as they opened them.

"Yes. Do you want it? The vendors may still have some copies."

"No. I was just asking."

"Very good paper. Those two editors, they are the kind of people Nigeria needs. They risk their lives to tell us the truth. Truly brave men. If only we had more people with that kind of courage."

It was not courage, it was simply an exaggerated selfishness. A month ago, when her husband forgot about his cousin's wedding even though they had agreed to be wedding sponsors, telling her he could not cancel his trip to Kaduna because his interview with the arrested journalist there was too important, she had looked at him, the distant, driven man she had married, and said, "You are not the only one who hates the government." She went to the wedding alone and he went to Kaduna, and when he came back, they said little to each other; much of their conversation had become about Ugonna, anyway. You will not believe what this boy did today, she would say when he came home from work, and then go on to recount in detail how Ugonna had told her that there was pepper in his Quaker Oats and so he would no longer eat it, or how he had helped her draw the curtains.

"So you think what those editors do is bravery?" She turned to face the man behind her.

"Yes, of course. Not all of us can do it. That is the real problem with us in this country, we don't have enough brave people." He gave her a long look, righteous and suspicious, as though he was wondering if she was a government apologist, one of those people who criticized the pro-democracy movements, who maintained that only a military government would work in Nigeria. In different circumstances, she might have told him of her own journalism, starting from university in Zaria, when she had organized a rally to protest General Buhari's government's decision to cut student subsidies. She might have told him how she wrote for the *Evening News* here in Lagos, how she did the story on the attempted murder of the publisher of *The Guardian*, how she had resigned when she finally got pregnant, because she and her husband had tried for four years and she had a womb full of fibroids.

She turned away from the man and watched the beggars make their rounds along the visa line. Rangy men in grimy long tunics who fingered prayer beads and quoted the Koran; women with jaundiced eyes who had sickly babies tied to their backs with threadbare cloth; a blind couple led by their daughter, blue medals of the Blessed Virgin Mary hanging around their necks below tattered collars. A newspaper vendor walked over, blowing his whistle. She could not see *The New Nigeria* among the papers balanced on his arm. Perhaps it had sold out. Her husband's latest story, "The Abacha Years So Far: 1993 to 1997," had not worried her at first, because he had written nothing new, only compiled killings and failed contracts and missing money. It was not as if Nigerians did not already know these things. She had not expected much trouble, or much attention, but only a day after the paper came out, BBC radio carried the story on the news and interviewed an exiled Nigerian professor of politics who said her husband deserved a Human Rights Award. *He fights repression with the pen, he gives a voice to the voiceless, he makes the world know.*

Her husband had tried to hide his nervousness from her. Then, after someone called him anonymously—he got anonymous calls all the time, he was that kind of journalist, the kind who cultivated friendships along the way—to say that the head of state was personally furious, he no longer hid his fear; he let her see his shaking hands. Soldiers were on their way to arrest him, the caller said. The word was, it would be his last arrest, he would never come back. He climbed into the boot of the car minutes after the call, so that if the soldiers asked, the gateman could honestly claim not to know when her husband had left. She took Ugonna down to a neighbor's flat and then quickly sprinkled water in the boot, even though her husband told her to hurry, because she felt somehow

that a wet boot would be cooler, that he would breathe better. She drove him to his coeditor's house. The next day, he called her from Benin Republic; the coeditor had contacts who had sneaked him over the border. His visa to America, the one he got when he went for a training course in Atlanta, was still valid, and he would apply for asylum when he arrived in New York. She told him not to worry, she and Ugonna would be fine, she would apply for a visa at the end of the school term and they would join him in America. That night, Ugonna was restless and she let him stay up and play with his toy car while she read a book. When she saw the three men burst in through the kitchen door, she hated herself for not insisting that Ugonna go to bed. If only—

“Ah, this sun is not gentle at all. These American Embassy people should at least build a shade for us. They can use some of the money they collect for visa fee,” the man behind her said.

Somebody behind him said the Americans were collecting the money for their own use. Another person said it was intentional to keep applicants waiting in the sun. Yet another laughed. She motioned to the blind begging couple and fumbled in her bag for a twenty-naira note. When she put it in the bowl, they chanted, “God bless you, you will have money, you will have good husband, you will have good job,” in Pidgin English and then in Igbo and Yoruba. She watched them walk away. They had not told her, “You will have many good children.” She had heard them tell that to the woman in front of her.

The embassy gates swung open and a man in a brown uniform shouted, “First fifty on the line, come in and fill out the forms. All the rest, come back another day. The embassy can attend to only fifty today.”

“We are lucky, *abi?*” the man behind her said.

She watched the visa interviewer behind the glass screen, the way her limp auburn hair grazed the folded neck, the way green eyes peered at her papers above silver frames as though the glasses were unnecessary.

“Can you go through your story again, ma’am? You haven’t given me any details,” the visa interviewer said with an encouraging smile. This, she knew, was her opportunity to talk about Ugonna.

She looked at the next window for a moment, at a man in a dark suit who was leaning close to the screen, reverently, as though praying to the visa interviewer behind. And she realized that she would die gladly at the hands of the man in the black hooded shirt or the one with the shiny bald head before she said a word about Ugonna to this interviewer, or to anybody at the American embassy. Before she hawked Ugonna for a visa to safety.

Her son had been killed, that was all she would say. Killed. Nothing about how his laughter started somehow above his head, high and tinkly. How he called sweets and biscuits “breadie-breadie.” How he grasped her neck tight when she held him. How her husband said that he would be an artist because he didn’t try to build with his LEGO blocks but instead he arranged them, side by side, alternating colors. They did not deserve to know.

“Ma’am? You say it was the government?” the visa interviewer asked.

“Government” was such a big label, it was freeing, it gave people room to maneuver and excuse and re-blame. Three men. Three men like her husband or her brother or the man behind her on the visa line. Three men.

“Yes. They were government agents,” she said.

“Can you prove it? Do you have any evidence to show that?”

“Yes. But I buried it yesterday. My son’s body.”

“Ma’am, I am sorry about your son,” the visa interviewer said. “But I need some evidence that you know it was the government. There is fighting going on between ethnic groups, there are private assassinations. I need some evidence of the government’s involvement and I need some evidence that you will be in danger if you stay on in Nigeria.”

She looked at the faded pink lips, moving to show tiny teeth. Faded pink lips in a freckled, insulated face. She had the urge to ask the visa interviewer if the stories in *The New Nigeria* were worth the life of a child. But she didn’t. She doubted that the visa interviewer knew about pro-democracy newspapers or about the long, tired lines outside the embassy gates in cordoned-off areas with no shade where the furious sun caused friendships and headaches and despair.

“Ma’am? The United States offers a new life to victims of political persecution but there needs to be proof...”

A new life. It was Ugonna who had given her a new life, surprised her by how quickly she took to the new identity he gave her, the new person he made her. “I’m Ugonna’s mother,” she would say at his nursery school, to teachers, to parents of other children. At his funeral in Umannachi, because her friends and family had been wearing dresses in the same Ankara print, somebody had asked, “Which one is the mother?” and she had looked up, alert for a moment, and said, “I’m Ugonna’s mother.” She wanted to go back to their ancestral hometown and plant ixora flowers, the kind whose needle-thin stalks she had sucked as a child. One plant would do, his plot was so small. When it bloomed, and the flowers welcomed bees, she wanted to pluck and suck at them while squatting in the

dirt. And afterwards, she wanted to arrange the sucked flowers side by side, like Ugonna had done with his LEGO blocks. That, she realized, was the new life she wanted.

At the next window, the American visa interviewer was speaking too loudly into his microphone, “I’m not going to accept your lies, sir!”

The Nigerian visa applicant in the dark suit began to shout and to gesture, waving his see-through plastic file that bulged with documents. “This is wrong! How can you treat people like this? I will take this to Washington!” until a security guard came and led him away.

“Ma’am? Ma’am?”

Was she imagining it, or was the sympathy draining from the visa interviewer’s face? She saw the swift way the woman pushed her reddish-gold hair back even though it did not disturb her, it stayed quiet on her neck, framing a pale face. Her future rested on that face. The face of a person who did not understand her, who probably did not cook with palm oil, or know that palm oil when fresh was a bright, bright red and when not fresh, congealed to a lumpy orange.

She turned slowly and headed for the exit.

“Ma’am?” she heard the interviewer’s voice behind her.

She didn’t turn. She walked out of the American embassy, past the beggars who still made their rounds with enamel bowls held outstretched, and got into her car.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND THE EDITOR

THE AUTHORS

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born and grew up in Nigeria. She is the author of three novels: *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*. Her work has been translated into thirty languages and has received numerous awards and distinctions including the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for Fiction, Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Her book *Americanah* was listed among the ten best books of 2013 by *New York Times* Book Review and BBC. She was listed among the "Leading Women of 2014" by CNN. Her story "The American Embassy" won the O. Henry Prize in 2003 and is part of her short-story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada. To date, she has written fourteen novels, nine short-story collections, sixteen books of poetry and ten volumes of non-fiction. Her work has been published in more than forty languages and has been recognized

internationally with numerous awards and honorary degrees such as The Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction, City of Toronto Book Award, Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Canadian and Caribbean Region, Chicago Tribune Literary Prize and Harvard Arts Medal. She has been described as one of Canada's major contemporary authors. Her book *The Blind Assassin* won the prestigious Booker Prize in 2000. Her story "Dancing Girls" is part of her short story collection *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* which won the Periodical Distributors of Canada Short Fiction Award and the St. Lawrence Award for Fiction.

Peter Carey was born in Australia and is currently Director of the Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing at Hunter College in New York. He is one of the few authors to have been awarded the prestigious Booker Prize twice for his novels *Oscar and Lucinda* and *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Additionally, he has been honoured with numerous awards for his work including the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Miles Franklin Award. To date, he has written eleven novels and more than two collections of short stories. In 2012, he was appointed Officer of the Order of Australia for distinguished services to literature. His story "Do You Love Me?" was originally published in his short story collection *War Crimes* which won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award.

Nadine Gordimer was born in South Africa and lived most of her life in Johannesburg. In 1991, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and was the first South African to win as well as first woman to win in twenty-five years. Her work has also been recognized with numerous awards such as the Booker Prize and

the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, and she has been awarded fifteen honorary degrees from universities in USA, Belgium and South Africa, and from York, Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the UK. Her books and short stories have been published in forty languages, and up until her death in 2014 she continued to write about the effects of apartheid and about life in post-apartheid South Africa. Her story "The Ultimate Safari" is taken from her short story collection *Jump and Other Stories*.

Ha Jin was born and grew up in a rural province in Northern China. He majored in English and earned a Masters in American Literature at Shandong University and later a PhD in English at Brandeis University in the USA. To date, he has published seven novels, six collections of short stories, five collections of poetry and a book of essays. His novel *Waiting* was awarded the National Book Award and the PEN/ Faulkner award. His novel *War Trash* was also given the PEN/Faulkner Award. He received other awards for his work including the Flannery O'Connor Award for short fiction, the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Asian American Literary Award. He has also been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize twice, and his work has appeared in numerous anthologies including *Best American Short Story* anthologies, the *O. Henry Prize* anthologies and *Pushcart Prize* anthologies. His story "After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town" is taken from his short story collection *The Bridegroom: Stories*.

Ken Liu is an American author and translator of speculative fiction, as well as a lawyer and programmer. Several of his other stories have been nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, Locus and Sidewise Awards. His fiction has been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*,

Clarkesworld, *Lightspeed* and *Strange Horizons*, among other places. His stories have also been translated into over a dozen languages and won major awards in Japan, Russia, Spain and China. His short story “The Paper Menagerie” was the first work to win the Hugo, Nebula and World Fantasy awards.

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta, India. She completed a Bachelor degree and Master in English and Ancient Indian Culture in India. A few years later, she completed a Master of Fine Arts and PhD in English and comparative literature from the University of Iowa. After more than a decade living in Montreal and Toronto in Canada, she and her husband left for the United States where she is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of California-Berkeley. She has written more than ten novels and collections of short stories. Her story “The Management of Grief” is taken from her short-story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* which won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Wena Poon was born and grew up in Singapore before completing a degree in English Literature from Harvard University where she graduated magna cum laude. She later obtained a degree from Harvard Law School and currently works as a lawyer in the USA. She is the author of nine books of literary fiction. Her stories have been broadcast by BBC Radio 4 as a ten-episode Book at Bedtime series, performed in a Roman arena in France, staged at Westminster Abbey in London, and used as a GCE ‘O’ Level text in Singapore schools. Winner of the UK’s Willesden Herald Prize for best short fiction, she has been nominated for Ireland’s Frank O’Connor Award, France’s Prix Hemingway, the Singapore Literature Prize and the UK’s Bridport Prize for Poetry. Her story

“Development” is taken from her second short story collection *The Proper Care of Foxes*.

Helen Simpson was born in Bristol and grew up in London where she currently resides. She has written five collections of short stories that have won numerous awards such as the E. M. Forster Award, Hawthornden Prize, Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award and Somerset Maugham Award. She was chosen as one of Granta magazine’s twenty “Best of Young British Novelists 2” in 1993. Her story “Diary of an Interesting Year” is taken from her latest short story collection, *In-flight Entertainment*.

Madhuri Vijay was born in Bangalore, India, and holds a Master of Fine Arts in fiction from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. “Lorry Raja” was originally published in *Narrative Magazine* and won First Place in the 2011 Narrative 30 Below Story Contest. The story was also included in *The Best American Non-Required Reading* and the *Pushcart Prize* anthologies.

THE EDITOR

Suzanne Choo is Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She completed her PhD in English Education at Columbia University, USA. Her primary interest is in the area of literature education particularly in relation to globalization and cosmopolitanism. She continues to work actively with schools and organizations to explore ways in which literature provides a powerful entry point to discussions of ethics, social justice, and contemporary global issues. Her research has been published in various international peer-reviewed journals. In 2011, she was awarded the International Award for Excellence by the *International Journal of the Humanities* for the best published article in the journal. That same year, she was awarded the Walter M. Sindlinger Writing Award by Teachers College, Columbia University for exceptional research paper. Her book *Reading the world, the globe, and the cosmos: Approaches to teaching literature for the twenty-first century* was awarded the 2014 Critics Choice Book Award by the American Educational Studies Association.