The AKO Caine Prize: What's in for us in 2021?

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When you enter the world of Rémy Ngamije's 'Giver of Nicknames', you're probably not thinking of how teenagers perceive injustice. To reduce the story set in a Catholic school in urban Namibia to this one theme is to do injustice to the writing. The shortlisted stories in the 2021 AKO Caine Prize For African Writing pose different questions to the readers. In 'This Little Light of Mine', Troy Onyango asks: how do millennials living with disabilities navigate dating and sex in a fast-paced social media world where it's relatively easy to be taken advantage of?

While conversations around inequality and injustice along gender, racial and disability lines are not new, context is usually stripped away when using stats and data to show reality. Storytelling, fiction, in particular has the power to humanise and provide the texture we need to understand the world better.

Frequent conversations around racism took place on and offline in the past year. Last year was extraordinary; the pandemic hit in the first quarter of the year and changed the way we live, interact and work. Across the world, there was a reckoning triggered by the Black Lives Matter movement. Several industries were forced to rethink the long-upheld forms of systemic and structural racism.

In publishing and creative industries, conversations around diversity sprung up among stakeholders — writers, editors, agents, publishers and marketers. Amongst several shocking revelations, a few facts hit hard: books and stories written by African writers are edited and marketed by their white publishers to target a western audience. It also exists as a barrier to entry, so writers conform to stereotypical storytelling patterns that fixate on hard issues like rape, immigration, race, poverty and politics, to be published or win certain prizes.

Two decades before, the Caine Prize for African writing — now known as The Ako Caine Prize for African writing — was created to 'encourage and highlight the richness and diversity of African writing by bringing it to a wider audience internationally.' Since the year 2000, the prize has been awarded to an African writer for a short story published in English.

In July 2020, with continued conversations around reforming the publishing and creative industry, Irenosen Okojie was announced the winner of the Caine Prize for her experimental fiction, 'Grace Jones', from Nudibranch, published by Dialogue Books (2019). It tells the story of a 13-year-old girl, Sidra, who loses her family in a fire and, years later, impersonates the famous Jamaican musician Grace Jones. The story has been described as radical, defying logic and convention. This much is true. Critics have highlighted this lack of defiance and conformity to tropes in previous stories in the Caine Prize as far back as the start of the last decade. In 2011, African writer Ikhide R. Ikheloa criticized the award, suggesting it 'may have created the unintended effect of breeding writers willing to stereotype Africa for glory.' This is similar to criticism Black writers have of Western publishers and prizes.

Arguably, some past stories have skewed the norm. In 2016, Lesley Arimah's story, 'What it Means When A Man Falls From The Sky', was shortlisted for the prize. The science fiction short story is set in the late 20th century and was first published in *Catapault*. Here, Lesley Arimah plays with a futuristic world, ravaged by climate and political conflict, one in which mathematicians can fly or heal others of their negative emotions.

Before this, in 2015, Namwali Serpell's 'The Sack' — published in 2014 as part of *Africa39*, a list of 39 promising Sub-Saharan African writers aged under 40 — won the Caine Prize. The story begins with the image of a sack, and has been applauded for the ways in which Serpell defies form, time and space and challenges readers to widen their imaginations.

After winning the prize, Irenosen Okojie said stories like hers show diverse and varied African writing. The 2021 Caine Prize for African Writing shortlist tows this line and might indicate the emergence of stories that do not apologise. They discuss complex topics, but in delicate, narrative-driven techniques, exploring the literary devices abundantly available in language and showing overall human beings' complexity. They show us that form and language can be deftly manipulated by African writers; and boxing writers does no one, least of all the readers, any good.

At the core of the five stories shortlisted for this year's prize: 'A Separation' by Iryn Tushabe, 'Lucky' by Doreen Baingana, 'The Street Sweet' by Meron Hadero, 'This Little Light of Mine' by Troy Onyango, and 'The Giver of NIcknames' by Rémy Ngamije are subjects like class, power, injustice. The stories interrogate how ordinary characters navigate these issues and are laced with more minor everyday concerns.

In this shortlist, a story about sex and desire is more, in the same way the story of a girl leaving home is not just an immigration story. The details and nuance give life to the stories, placing us in shoes we may never have dreamed of or presenting us with a bird's-eye view of the world of these daring protagonists.

'The Street Sweet' by Meron Hadero presents a classic example through the protagonist Getu, a street sweep who dreams about getting a job through his friend, Mr. Jeff and of eventually saving his home. Despite his mother's warnings, her skepticism that this encounter with Mr. Jeff would amount to nothing, Getu doesn't stop dreaming. Meron Habera weaves anxiety and desperation into language — 'the sweat stains on his shirt', 'the struggles to perfect a Windsor tie' — and dialogue. In the end, we see how these details transform the character into a less disillusioned and more confident personality.

But Getu isn't the only character in this shortlist that dares to dream. A small dream, maybe even closer to home, is the dream of being accepted and dealing with rejection. After Evans loses his mobility in an accident, he stops socialising, preferring to stay indoors. To find companionship, he must rely on the internet, even if it means being swindled. Onyango explores the difficulties of living in a disabled body and at the same time ventures into the forays of mental health. His exploration of the mind as a prison is subtle but works in tandem with physical boundaries.

What about the boundaries enacted during wars and conflict? In the year 2020, most of the world was indoors — 'lockdown' — due to the fast-spreading virus, Covid-19. This took a toll on people's mental and physical wellbeing, the economy and relationships. It encouraged us to be more deliberate about the ways in which we work and survive. Doreen Baigana takes us on a different but familiar journey in 'Lucky'. The story is set in a school occupied by students and a math teacher who cannot go home during the war that has broken out. Their lives become a monotonous routine of cleaning their dorm and going to classes to learn. Even in their bubble, the students do not have the freedom of deciding how they spend their time. War can be complicated; Doreen Baigana, through funny and ambiguous characters, expertly breaks down how war can be a leveller of power.

Conflict is a factor when Africans decide to leave home. More young Africans are leaving in pursuit of a better quality of life. It's never an easy choice, and several stories like NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, an extension of the 2011 Caine Prize-winning story, 'Hitting Budapest', have captured this dilemma — leaving or the desire to. Immigration plays an underground role in 'A Separation'. Here, themes of death, love and loss are at the fore. Iryn Tushabe constructs a world where the dead live through our grief, in our memory, in what we don't know and the stories they leave behind. In this story. Tushabe invites readers to be storytellers, fill in the gaps in the stories, and answer questions we may have of the narratives that she doesn't explore.

If the other stories in this year's shortlist have been melancholic, then Rémy Ngamije's 'Giver of Nicknames' stands out for the sharp and biting wit the narrator uses to address injustice. The story is told from the viewpoint of a character nicknamed 'Onion Marks'. Onion Marks, in turn, focuses on three of his classmates, who are ironically all called Donovan. And although Onion Marks gives them nicknames, the story doesn't shy away or attempt to mask injustice as society tends to do.

The judges and reviewers have used several adjectives to describe the shortlist for this year. The most consistent is their resonance with the reader. The stories in the shortlist cannot be used as a reflection of the state of African writing in 2021. You will find these in the literary magazines that have sprung up in the last decade. But they show an emergence of craft and form. These stories are true in their approach to the themes they cover.

The judges have said that for the shortlist, they were looking for literary excellence and great stories. A question worth asking is: what are yardsticks to determine the ultimate literary excellence — the winner for this year's prize? If this resonance, the reliability of the fiction, is forefront, then Troy Onyango's 'This Little Light Of Mine' that explores the anxiety of being a millennial and of using social media, is bound to win. If they're tilting towards a story that speaks to the global situation — the idea of being locked away from the world — Lucky will take the crown, thanks to the thematic and psychological parallels that can be drawn. Perhaps, literary excellence is breaking the rules, challenging the reader, experimenting with form, then of course, we can give it to The Giver of Nicknames. These stories hold several merits and whatever it comes to, the stories in this cohort deserve recognition.

'Birds outside his window sing, not privy to the sadness he feels.'

- 'This Little Light of Mine' by Troy Onyango

'Eventually, as always, the birds start their chirping and singing again.'

- 'Lucky' by Doreen Baigana

Although birds feature in Onyango's 'This Little Light of Mine', and even more in Doreen Baigana's Lucky, they play different roles. They function within both worlds as a means to show the emotional undercurrent, how the world interacts with itself and how outsiders observe the characters in their element.

Drawing a parallel from this, it's clear that the stories in this year's shortlist want us, readers, to examine how we interact with the world.

Ope Adedeji is a writer and editor from Lagos. She is a former editor-at-large at *Zikoko Magazine* and was the managing editor at Ouida Books. Her work has appeared in *Catapult*, *Lolwe*, and *McSweeney's Quarterly*. In 2018, she was shortlisted for the Koffi Addo Prize for Creative Nonfiction by Writivism and was an Artist Managers and Literary Activists Fellow in the same year. She is an alumnus of the Purple Hibiscus Trust Creative Writing Workshop (2018) and the winner of the 2019 Brittle Paper Award for African Fiction. She is currently a Booker Prize Foundation Scholar at the University of East Anglia.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this piece mistakenly noted that Lesley Arimah's 'What it Means When A Man Falls From The Sky' was published in the *The New Yorker.* It was first published in *Catapault*.

OLONGO AFRICA