

An Odyssey into 21st century Nigeria

AN ORCHESTRA OF MINORITIES

Chigozie Obioma
(Little, Brown, £14.99)

Review by Lucy Scholes

Nigerian author Chigozie Obioma's audacious debut, *The Fishermen*, captured everyone's attention when it made the Man Booker shortlist back in 2015. In it, Obioma elevated the ordinary sibling rivalry between four brothers living in a small town in western Nigeria to the dizzying heights of Greek tragedy. A similar act of transformation can be found in his impressive, epic second novel, the narrative of which follows the (mis)adventures of one Chinonso Solomon Olisa, a humble 26-year-old poultry farmer in the Nigerian city of Umuahia.

One day, while driving home from the market where he has purchased some new birds for his flock, Chinonso comes across a woman about to throw herself to her death from a highway bridge. In agitation, he grabs two of the fowl and tosses them over the bridge to demonstrate the gruesomeness of the death that awaits her. The young woman, a trainee pharmacist whose name is Ndali,

is so struck by this intervention that she changes her mind. Chinonso drives home, "uncertain about what he had done, only knowing that he had done something out of the ordinary".

Ndali and Chinonso soon fall in love. They want to get married, but her family – who are much wealthier than Chinonso, and are perturbed by his lack of formal education – do everything in their power to foil the lovers' plans.

Thus, when an old school friend of Chinonso's reappears in his life, claiming he'll help his pal to enrol in a university on Cyprus – he can prove himself worthy of Ndali by earning his degree – Chinonso, "a man of instinct and passion", rashly decides to sell all his possessions, including his house and farm, to fund the plan.

In *The Fishermen*, Obioma knitted together Aristotelian tragedy with the oral storytelling traditions of his characters' cultural heritage, and he takes a similar patchwork approach here.

The narrative of *An Orchestra of Minorities* owes much to Homer's *Odyssey*. Chinonso's experiences in Cyprus are just as challenging as the struggles faced by his classical predecessor during his years of wandering. But Obioma blends these elements of the narrative with Igbo folklore and myth. The



Updating a classic Obioma blends the Homeric with Igbo myth JASON KEITH

novel, for example, is narrated by Chinonso's chi, the guardian spirit who watches over man in Igbo cosmology. It's a voice reminiscent of a Greek chorus: ever-watchful, knowledgeable, but unfortunately unable to intervene.

Obioma's interest in examining the tension between fate and self-determination also runs through both his novels. Poor, unfortunate Chinonso finds himself "wronged by man and history" – first he falls foul of a migration scam, and then finds himself falsely accused of attempted rape and murder (a not wholly convincing episode) – as a consequence of which, "a great darkness" enters him, "a crawling, multilegged darkness, shaped like a rapidly procreating millipede that burrowed into his life".

Where brother turning on brother in *The Fishermen* could be read as an allegory of post-independence Nigeria, the parable here speaks to broader concerns about the cruelties of the contemporary world; about what the powerful do to the weak, and how a man can be expected to endure only so much before he begins to want to inflict the same torments on those who have hurt him.

Timely, portentous and powerful, Obioma's second novel confirms his remarkable talent.

ALSO RELEASED



THE ORDER OF THE DAY
Eric Vuillard
(Picador, £12.99)

So often, history is about the consequences of mistakes by the weak and fallible. If the performance of our Brexit negotiators appears dubious, that is small beer compared with the craven dealings during the key meetings – all still within living memory – which could have prevented the Second World War. In this slim, disturbing volume the French writer and film director Éric Vuillard recreates some of them with striking imaginative flair.

As he underlines repeatedly, the Nazis were bluffing almost all the way up to the outbreak of hostilities. Tragically, their adversaries rarely challenged them, let alone pushed back.

First, Vuillard scrutinises the German business community. On a cold February day in 1933, two dozen industrialists and bankers gathered in the palace of the President of the Reichstag next to the River Spree. A smiling

Hitler greeted these men of commerce and spoke about the necessity to resist communism. Then they all contributed huge amounts of money towards his imminent election campaign. The Nazis duly seized power. As Vuillard points out, many of these companies continue to prosper; some of them having profited from slave labour during the war.

For the remainder of the book, Vuillard looks at the German annexation of Austria. He describes the visit of the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, to Germany in 1937. Halifax went hunting with Göring and afterwards, when he met Hitler, he intimated that the Führer's designs on Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia did not seem unwarranted. This was like handing an arsonist petrol and matches.

Later on, in 1940, Halifax decided he didn't want to be Prime Minister; to lead the fight against the Axis forces – largely because he wanted to spend time with his mistress. Thankfully, Churchill got the job instead.

Vuillard's centrepiece is Hitler's manipulation of the

Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg in 1938. Vuillard takes us right inside the mind of Von Schuschnigg, a distinctly pusillanimous individual.

They met at the Berghof, Hitler's mansion high in the Bavarian Alps. Over the course of the day, Hitler threw a masterclass in intimidation. To place Von Schuschnigg off balance, the Führer alternated between threats and friendly overtures, while keeping him waiting on and off for hours. Eventually, von Schuschnigg caved in and signed an agreement which paved the way for the Nazi takeover of Austria.

Vuillard explores the thoughts and feelings of his protagonists with nimble facility in this *tour de force* of enhanced realism. It is no surprise that it is a prize-winning best-seller in France – though whether the industrialists and politicians of the present ever learn much from their predecessors' mistakes is moot. As Vuillard says: "We never fall twice into the same abyss. But we always fall in the same way, in a mixture of ridicule and dread."

Peter Carty



FRANCIS: A LIFE IN SONGS
Ann Wroe
(Jonathan Cape, £16.99)

When Ann Wroe wanted to write a biography of St Francis of Assisi, she decided it was a life best expressed in poetry. And so comes about the structure of this extraordinary book. She starts each chapter with an extract from a biography of St Francis and perhaps a passage from Francis himself. Then she follows it with a poem about the episode, and follows that with a further poem about a loosely linked contemporary subject.

The best parts of the book are, of course, the extracts from the life of Francis himself, which are remarkable in their lyrical simplicity. But the poems Wroe writes are haunting, too.

Writing about the hut that Francis used for his followers, she says: "The tumbled struts were once/ a livestock place. Sour grassy-warm their breath in here, the trampled floor/ pungent and deep. The little group/ you've driven in, King Arthur's knights,/ Bernard and Philip, Giles, the rest,/ Huddle as cattle do..."

Next to this there are verses about a shepherd's abandoned shack in Romney Marsh.

A wonderful patchwork of prose and poetry. EVENING STANDARD

Melanie McDonagh



SHE WAS THE QUIET ONE
Michele Campbell
(HarperCollins, £7.99)

The murder of a twin points the finger at her sister, aka the quiet one. Centring on orphaned twins and their boarding school master and mistress, this is a tale of unrequited love and rule-breaking. The narrative flips between the main story and transcripts of police interviews with people involved in events in the run-up to the murder. Fans of *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng will love the untangling of these seemingly perfect lives.

Jenny Stallard



SCRUBLANDS
Chris Hammer
(Wildfire, £16.99)

The Outback has become a go-to setting for crime thrillers. In a drought-scoured country town, a charismatic local priest guns down five men. A year on, a troubled journalist turns up to write a piece on the anniversary of the murders, and discovers that a seemingly open-and-shut case is anything but. *Scrublands* is well-plotted and atmospheric, but there's almost too much going on as it explodes into life.

Derek Watson

Top 5 Books

1. **Becoming** Michelle Obama (Viking)
2. **The Story of Brexit: Ladybirds for Grown-Ups** Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris (Michael Joseph)
3. **Normal People** Sally Rooney (Faber & Faber)
4. **The Ice Monster** David Walliams (HarperCollins Children's)
5. **The Tattooist of Auschwitz** Heather Morris (Zaffre Publishing)