

# CLIFFORD GARSTANG

JUNE 18, 2008 BY CLIFF

## >The New Yorker: "The Headstrong Historian" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



>It is rare for a short story to cover the entire span of a person's life, but this one does that and more. It tells the story of the life of Nwamgba, a woman born in Nigeria in the late Nineteenth Century, who marries a boy even though his family may be cursed by miscarriages. But it is a family with status and so she is allowed to marry into it. There are several miscarriages, but finally she does give birth to a boy. After her husband dies, she is harassed by his cousins into relinquishing his wealth, and in order to protect the interests of her son she enrolls him in the Catholic

missionary school. Unfortunately, he takes to that life too well and turns his back on the traditional ways. That hurts Nwamgba, but her son's wife bears two children, including a girl who, Nwamgba believes, carries the spirit of her dead husband. The girl, known as Grace, comes to her grandmother's deathbed, and we, the readers, get a glimpse into her future life—she is the headstrong historian of the title (although, in a sense, so is Nwamgba).

The issues touched upon by this story are huge, probably too big for just a short story. We hear about how the Europeans “pacified” Nigerian tribes. We hear about the missionaries turning the people away from their traditions. We hear about Nigerians who adopt Western ways and become insufferable. We hear about strong women asserting themselves, being beating down, and asserting themselves again. (It's unfortunate, I think, that Nwamgba believes her granddaughter's spirit is her husband's since that slightly undercuts what seems to me to be a feminist theme, but not by much.) There's also slavery, female inheritance, and other traditional issues in addition to the theme of oppression arising from colonialism. There is a lot here.

So let me focus on just one small aspect of the story. Nwamgba makes pottery, but she's also a story-teller. Her granddaughter thinks of the stories as poetry, but her teachers insist that it is primitive "call and response" and not true poetry. But the entire last section of the story, the flash forward into Grace's future, is in what might be a form of this primitive style: "It was Grace who . . ." at least twelve times. The effect is stunning and hardly primitive.

This is certainly an early contender for New Yorker Story-of-the-Year honors.

June 23, 2008: "The Headstrong Historian" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



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#### NEW YORKER 2008

### 4 Replies to ">The New Yorker: "The Headstrong Historian" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie"



**Anonymous**

**JUNE 20, 2008 AT 3:05 PM**

>I enjoy your reviews of the NYker stories. I'm curious to know which ones you'd rank the highest so far since we're nearing the 6 mo mark.

I've tried to keep up the reading, too, but think I've missed some.  
Pam P



**Cezarija Abartis**

**JUNE 28, 2008 AT 11:31 PM**

>I think Adichie can include so much in the story because its surface is like that of a fairy tale—general with occasional specifics. Or maybe I think this because I was reading "Cinderella" the other day.

There is no dialogue except in the middle, in the baptism scene: "Michael, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." That's a very interesting

technique.



**Anonymous**

**DECEMBER 1, 2008 AT 3:03 AM**

>I loved this story.

Sue Haigh



**Jacob Russell**

**MAY 1, 2009 AT 5:24 PM**

>The story carries these generations forward from the time of Achebe's Things Fall Apart, touching on common themes, common names, till you are more and more certain of the connection. At the end, we get the clincher when the grand-daughter, who as read the white administrator's The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria, her writes a book titled, "Pacifying with Bullets: a reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria.