
Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol12/iss2/17

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Abstract
The following contribution is based on two interviews, one with James Currey and Keith Sambrook, and one with Alan Hill, both recorded in August 1990 in London.
On 17 June 1958 Heinemann published *Things Fall Apart*, written by an unknown Nigerian. They played safe and printed only 2,000 copies. The book went on to sell upwards of 3,000,000 copies in the U.K. edition alone, not counting the American editions, the reprints throughout Africa, and the translations into forty-five different languages; but apart from achieving such international acclaim it also gave the impetus to a new publishing venture which came to be the springboard for the astonishing new wave of writing from independent Africa. Alan Hill tells the story of its way to publication.

Alan Hill: I was the educational books director of Heinemann when Achebe’s manuscript came into the office. I don’t think he had any idea of the importance of what he had done. It did not occur to him that he was the first great African writer in the English language. He had just sat down and written a novel – in manuscript as he didn’t have a typewriter; and there were no carbon copies, neither was there a photocopier in those days. He just parcelled up the one copy of the manuscript in brown paper and sent it by ordinary mail to London, in response to an advertisement in *The Spectator*: ‘Authors’ manuscripts typed.’ He got an acknowledgement and a request for a £32 fee, which he sent by British postal order, and he heard nothing more for a year. He sent follow-ups but nothing happened and he was getting very depressed. So one of his colleagues in the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, who was on a visit to London, went to this typing agency and found the manuscript lying in a corner gathering dust. They eventually typed it and sent the manuscript back to him with one typed copy. Years later, I asked Chinua what he would have done if the manuscript had in fact been lost. ‘I would have been so discouraged,’ he replied, ‘that..."
I would probably have given up writing altogether... and if I had re-written it, it would have been a different book.'

Shortly afterwards he came to London on a course at the BBC. He showed it to his course officer who sent it round to Heinemann's. Heinemann's normal fiction reader read it and did a long report, but the firm was still hesitating whether to accept it. Would anyone possibly buy a novel by an African? There were no precedents. So the rather doubting bunch at the top of Heinemann's thought of the educational department, who after all sold books to Africa and were supposed to know about Africans. So they showed it to one of our educational advisers, Professor Donald MacRae, who was just back from West Africa. He read it in the office and ended the debate with an eleven-word report: 'This is the best first novel I have read since the war.' We took the book and printed 2,000 copies.

Kirsten Holst Petersen: How about editing the book. Was there any editing?

AH: No, we didn't touch a word of it. We brought it out and it was very well reviewed in The Times Literary Supplement, and C.P. Snow reviewed it and all round it had very good and respectful reviews.

This led Alan Hill to look further into publishing possibilities in Africa.

AH: Achebe could not be unique. I felt there must be other potential authors among the new university-educated generation in Nigeria. So the following year, 1959, I went to West Africa and I took the book around with me. Everywhere I was greeted with total scepticism that a recent student from the University of Ibadan should have written a novel that was of any significance at all. I then went on to travel round the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, and when I got back it was clear I needed specialised help if we were to find and publish new African authors - a feat which none of the famous British publishers who were long-established in Africa had ever attempted.

Fortune favoured me. In 1960 Nelson's talented West African specialist Van Milne had a flaming row with his boss and resigned. I at once invited him to join me. Though he was only to stay two years, his contribution was crucial. We decided to make a really cheap paperback of Things Fall Apart - 25p in fact - and look for some other books to go with it so that we could put out a package. Achebe by now had written a second book, and Van picked up Kenneth Kaunda who was just out of prison and was writing a book about the independence struggle in Zambia. Van finally approached Cyprian Ekwensi who had made something of a name for himself by writing for Hutchinson, and
he dug out a manuscript from his bottom drawer called *Burning Grass*. This made a group of four books, and by 1962 we were able to launch them as the first of 'The African Writers Series'.

Both Alan Hill and Keith Sambrook emphasise the pioneering work done by Van Milne.

**Keith Sambrook:** The African Writers Series was started by Van Milne who had joined Heinemann to develop their African publishing; he persuaded Alan Hill to back the idea in 1961, and was able to do this because Heinemann already had the copyright of the two earlier Achebe novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer At Ease*, and he got Cyprian Ekwensi to write a simple novel about Northern Nigeria, *Burning Grass*, and worked with Kenneth Kaunda on *Zambia Shall Be Free*. Those were the first four titles launched in 1962. Van had left Heinemann, when I joined in January 1963, and left behind him four manuscripts, one of which was Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*. That had come to Van through Achebe at a writers' conference in Makerere in 1962.

However, Achebe's role soon became crucial.

**AH:** Van's early departure back to Nelson's - his old boss having retired - left us in only a mild quandary. We just didn't realise the scale and importance of what we had embarked upon, as was exemplified in Van's reasons for leaving us: 'So far as Africa is concerned, Heinemann is cottage industry. I want to get back to the big time!' Suitably humbled, I invited Keith Sambrook to join us in 1963 as Van's replacement, and he worked with me until I retired.

But before he arrived I felt the need for a General Editor 'on the ground' to develop the series. So in November 1962 I sent out my number two, Tony Beal, to Nigeria to meet Chinua to invite him to be general editor. The two met in Lagos, in the Bristol Hotel, and Chinua at once said 'yes'. For the next ten years, Chinua edited the series - we published 100 titles in ten years, an average of ten per year. He read them all, commented on them, said whether he thought they were worth publishing or not, and in addition to the hundred there were many more that we didn't accept. In many cases he did major editorial work, recommending to authors important improvements to their work.

**KS:** Achebe had told Van Milne that Ngugi was a very promising young writer. What I think you must remember is that Van Milne and I were academic and school book publishers. This was our entire training and background, and we thought in terms of books for use by stu-
dents. Van also had strong political interests in Africa, and that explained the Zambia/Kaunda book. Achebe clearly didn’t think first and foremost in terms of educational books and when he directed Van towards Ngugi, the slant of the series changed somewhat. It was no longer viewed simply as an extension of educational publishing, but as a series that launched new writing.

AH: By this time you may be wondering why a major creative writing series was being handled by an educational publisher. I must emphasise that, from the very start, we knew we were not now in the business of publishing school textbooks. Van and I had long discussions as to what our publishing role should properly be. Looking back on a list of 300 titles, it is easily answered in retrospect. But in 1961 we had just two novels by Achebe, and beyond that we faced the unknown... complete darkness. We decided in the end to be guided by literary quality - to publish anything of real merit which came our way, irrespective of its ‘category’. In point of fact, the great majority of the first titles were new fiction, interspersed with poetry and drama. The fact that some of the titles were set for school and university examinations was an incidental, though very welcome, bonus.

Then why Heinemann Educational Books? The reason is simple. We were the only firm with the faith - the passion almost - and the will to do the job; and we had Chinua Achebe’s first two novels to give us a flying start. Also - and this was quite essential - we had the necessary business set-up to sell books within Africa itself. The big fiction houses were useless; they just didn’t reach black Africa, for the book trade in that continent was almost entirely educational. William Heinemann, our fiction and general company, had never sold books in Africa outside the European communities. Only the educational company had the know-how and the marketing organisation to bring the African Writers Series to the ordinary African.

For the first ten years Achebe was editor of the series and he did all this work for nothing. He did it for the good of African literature. And, you know, this is what the younger generation of critics just don’t realize, that he made an enormous contribution to the African Writers Series. His name was the magnet that brought everything in, and his critical judgement was the decisive factor in what we published. And in addition to that, the fantastic sales of his own books selling by the million provided the economic basis for the rest of the series. I did a calculation in 1984, by which time we had published getting on for three hundred titles, and one third of the sales revenue from the entire list came from Achebe’s four novels. And so his freely offered literary
judgement plus his own tremendous sales were the backbone of the African Writers series.

In those early days I used to go out to see Achebe in Nigeria, in Lagos. He was the very image of a modern Nigerian 'yuppie' in those days. He had a very handsome British colonial-type house, he used to wear a sharp suit, dark glasses, and he had a Jaguar car. At first sight he was a perfect Nigerian 'yuppie'. But of course, once one started to talk to him, one realized that there was something very different below the surface. We had a very agreeable relationship, he was a very understanding and accommodating author.

KHP: What was the pattern of this working relationship? What role did Achebe play?

James Currey: Here again, I think that Achebe is very important. He of course read most of the manuscripts, and he was a very very strong encourager of the other potential writers. Another important thing was that he was very well regarded by Alan Hill, the founding chairman of Heinemann Educational, so if Chinua said a book ought to be published, Alan tended to agree and side with us against the rest of our colleagues.

KS: I think that from very early on, when the new manuscripts came in, particularly from Nigeria, we automatically consulted Achebe, and once Aig Higo became manager of Heinemann's office in Nigeria in 1965, we more or less put everything through him if it was Nigerian or West African, indeed increasingly from anywhere in Africa, because he has such a very good literary judgment and insight. So between them, Achebe and Higo were filters for everything we published and in this way we found a lot of new writing by new authors.

AH: Keith has already mentioned a very good example of how Chinua attracted a new author. It happened like this: I was at a board meeting at our offices in Kingswood in Surrey and I had a telephone call from Van Milne in Makerere. There was a symposium going on in Makerere, organized by the Council for Cultural Freedom, a CIA-funded outfit which was a mixture of the British Council and the Pentagon. They were running this thing, and Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe were both there. Anyhow, Van Milne phoned me up and said a young student at Makerere had shown to Achebe an almost finished manuscript of a novel he'd written. Achebe was very impressed with it and he'd shown it at once to Van Milne. Van Milne read it and told me over the
telephone: 'I think it’s terrific, and I want your agreement to take on this book sight unseen.' And I said, 'You’ve got it,' and went back to the meeting. The book was Ngugi’s *Weep Not, Child*. Now that would never have come to us in that way if the author hadn’t taken it and shown it to Achebe. And that is how the African Writers Series was built up.

By 1967 it was clear we were onto something big, and we could no longer run the African Writers Series as an ‘add-on’ to our educational publishing. So I invited James Currey of the Oxford University Press to join us and run the African Writers Series as his specialism.

**KHP:** Did Achebe’s involvement with the crisis in the East affect your working relationship?

**JC:** Yes, definitely communication became more difficult during the Biafran War. During the war, Chinua Achebe came to London from time to time, but less frequently as the war progressed because he was visiting the United States as unofficial Biafran fund-raising ambassador. I do remember him occasionally coming through, and this was exciting because he had this tremendous enthusiasm and vision of the new Biafran state. This meant that he found it more and more difficult to have a regular dialogue with us on the African Writers Series, but nevertheless he was tremendously supportive and we, who were becoming more and more confident, would say, ‘We’ve got this and this which looks interesting, and these are the reports.’ And Chinua had more and more an overview and less and less reading of the individual manuscripts of that time. We would talk things through with him, and as a sympathetic ear he was very very good. Then the Biafran war ended, and that was obviously an extremely difficult period for Chinua Achebe because he was in the East, and the recently re-opened university at Nsukka was struggling. In 1971 I remember visiting him in his house on the university campus which, like all the other houses on the campus, had blackened walls – there was no electric light, the whole university was a shell and had been through various military occupations. It was then that Chinua said, ‘Look, during this period I’ve been unable to give you as much advice as I would have liked to have done. I think it should be handed over to another writer, and I would suggest that Ngugi should be the advisor.’

**KHP:** You published his collection of short stories, *Beware, Soul Brother*, which were about the Nigerian Civil War. Did this not cause some difficulties as Britain supported the other side?
AH: Oh, no. There were no problems there. During the Civil War he used to come over to London. He used to get into a clapped-out Super Constellation aircraft at the Uli-Ihiala airstrip and he’d fly to Lisbon; then he’d transfer to an ordinary commercial aircraft and come to London. And he’d come strolling into the office as cool and as humorous as if he’d just come from Chelsea or Kensington. We used to hold parties and receptions for him. When Chinua finished ten years as general editor, the event coincided with the publication of the one hundredth book – which was his own book, Girls at War. So we celebrated with a party at the Athenaeum Club, attended by many literary celebrities. Chinua now (1972) resigned his position as general editor, and decisions were taken in London, James Currey being editorially in charge of the series.

KHP: You were originally educational publishers. Did this change represent a ‘drift’ into fiction, or was it a definite policy?

KS: Well, very little had been published at that time, so to continue the series Chinua encouraged us to look for new writers and writing. This was to some extent resisted at Heinemann Educational Books, and in order to obtain any kind of general trade marketing for books outside Africa we had to enlist William Heinemann, our general publishing colleagues, and persuade them, often against their will, to publish hardbacks of these early novels. In this way, the new books stood a chance of being noticed in the trade.

KHP: Why did you want hardbacks?

KS: Well, that was the only way you get them into the trade. Otherwise they were simply going to be seen as school textbooks.

JC: Paperbacks hardly existed in Britain at that time, except for Penguin. Also they did not get reviewed.

KS: The authors, of course, wanted that kind of exposure. And there was a growing interest in African literature at the time.

KHP: You must have faced some opposition.

KS: Well, scepticism and certainly cynicism from some of our colleagues. But to be fair, Alan Hill had great enthusiasm for the African Writers Series. Alan was outgoing, and he wanted to establish Heinemann in Africa because he believed in Africa and in African progress.
But I think that he was the only one amongst our colleagues who had anything but profound scepticism. They tended to regard it as an obligation and a waste of time. Later on, they changed their minds, because the second Ngugi novel, *The River Between*, began to sell, and in 1964 it was reviewed by people whom they regarded highly. Also Achebe’s *Arrow of God* was widely acclaimed in 1964 and did very well.

**JC:** Another thing against us was that whilst our colleagues at Heinemann were happy about creative writing as long as the author was dead (D.H. Lawrence) they found it very hard to come to terms with an educational series by living writers. The other important factor that happened during the period of decolonisation – and this is the period we’re talking about – was the establishment of examination boards in both East and West Africa. These boards were all part of the enthusiastic decolonisation process, and they insisted quite rightly that everything needed to be more African oriented. When it came to literature, initially they were pretty conservative – Shakespeare, etc. But there was a great interest in and enthusiasm for things that were African, and fairly rapidly they realized that there were interesting works being produced by young Africans and examination questions could be asked about these works.

But as publishers we came up against a general problem: what was appropriate for an educational publisher to publish? Fiction was for a general publisher. William Heinemann had the proud record of being one of the most enterprising London-based fiction publishers. But even they needed their arms twisted a bit to publish these books. Meanwhile there was a demand building up in Africa for ‘set’ books. As publishers who were interested in literature, as both Keith and I were, we managed to override our colleagues’ initial scepticism and get away with it because of the sales success of the series as a whole. However, one of the great pleasures of the African Writers Series was all the different books which one published in hope, and publishing in hope is always a risky business. It turned out, however, within the context of the ’60s that Heinemann with its growing educational market, with mailings to schools, contact with inspectors and universities, etc. was actually able to get these books into the educational network in Africa.

**KS:** However, it is still true that initially the African Writers Series attracted more interest outside Africa than it did inside Africa. That was not the intention. Our original intention was to provide books at a price which readers in Africa could afford. But they hadn’t heard of Achebe in Nigeria, so it took a little while to establish him in his own country. The interesting thing is that it happened in a surprisingly short
Publishing policy was obviously important.

KHP: Would Heinemann’s reasons for doing the series and Achebe’s coincide? Obviously Heinemann was in it for the market and the money.

AH: Well, Heinemann was me.

KHP: All right, you, then. As a British publisher you would be thinking in terms of a market and money...

AH: That’s right.

KHP: ...and Achebe would be thinking of furthering Nigerian writing.

AH: Yes, but you have to remember that we were not dominated by a money-grabbing ideology in those days. Publishing has changed a lot since then, and I don’t really care for the accountancy-ridden profit-making of present-day publishing firms which are now in the grip of big corporations who are only interested in the profits which the products make.

As I said, in the earlier days, like Achebe whose ten years’ editorship was entirely unpaid, we were very idealistic. Africa was an immensely exciting country. Independence was coming, we published Things Fall Apart when Nigeria was still an English colony moving towards independence, and there seemed to be a tremendous dawn, ‘the wind of change’, as everyone said, and this was something we wanted to be in on, and if splendid writing was being written in these countries we were going to publish it. Whether it was profitable or not wasn’t really our major consideration. The fact that the overall series was profitable, of course, meant that nobody interfered with us. We later on published a whole lot of books that weren’t profitable. But these were carried by the profits generated by some ‘big-selling’ authors: Achebe, Ngugi, etc.

KHP: Many of the later titles can’t have sold many copies. There was a whole spate of intermediate books.

AH: Yes, quite. We have been criticized by people who have said, ‘You should not have published these books.’ But when you’re pioneering
in an unknown field, I felt that we should cast the net as wide as possible, rather than try to be over-meticulous and over-selective. So we cast the net wide, and we had some real surprises.

KS: Quite consciously we decided that if we were going to publish new writers we had to take on people who were not in the Achebe and Ngugi class. This built up the Series and encouraged good writers like Kofi Awoonor to come and give us his novel and Lenrie Peters his poetry. In the meantime Clive Wake and John Reed encouraged us to look at writing from Francophone Africa, either works already in translation or works which could be translated.

JC: Thirty titles in the Series sold over 100,000 copies each. I think that Chinua Achebe was very important in encouraging us in treating the African Writers Series not just as an educational series, but as a series which could sustain sufficient sales on the open market, and that school teachers would just have to be careful about what they selected. An important factor in this transition was the question of s-e-x. One of the early titles which Chinua strongly supported in the African Writers Series was the translation of Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*. The translation was published in 1964 and it was set in East Africa for the old East African Examination Council in the early '70s. They ordered the book - *Mission to Kala* sounded quite a safe bet in a mission school - but they were absolutely horrified by it when it actually arrived. It was a fully adult novel written by Mongo Beti in the '50s for the French fiction market.

S-e-x was a very important thing, but the other thing was s-h-i-t. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is very scatological. In fact, it would have been too way out for an English school at the time. But by the time I started working for the series in 1967, it was so successful that there need be no holds barred, the best fiction or poetry there was could be published, and we would find a market for it. After all, even though the African market was an educational market, there were people like Sam Cofie running the University bookshop in Legon, and he provided a cultural centre for school teachers, peace-corps volunteers, African students, etc. They wanted to buy paperbacks, and you must remember that Penguin paperbacks were orange in England, and we used the colour unashamedly, so the series became known as 'the orange series'. One could say that the Allan Lane, Penguin revolution begat the African Writers Series, in a way. Paperbacks were still comparatively rare in 1960-61.
KHP: Would you say that Achebe's opinions have altered the direction of the series?

AH: No. It didn't alter the direction. I think, principally, having him was the magnet which drew all the writers to the series. That was really the thing.

KHP: How did the rest of the publishing world in London look at this new venture?

AH: Well, they were astonished. They were glad that someone had done it. Some of them wished they had done it. There wasn't a vast field of writing from which you could pick and choose to fit some ideological preconception. Whatever it was, if it was good, we would take it.

KHP: This 'goodness', was this a literary criterion?

AH: Yes, basically it would be a literary criterion. The intention was to publish African literature wherever it sprang up and wherever we could find it. It was simply a trade matter. The books were sold through the educational book system because there wasn't any other in West Africa.

JC: Although Heinemann Educational was an educational publisher it published a general fiction and poetry series. I think Chinua Achebe gave us enormous support in publishing fiction. This is so much the matter of the publisher's self image, which is related to the thrust of the publisher's marketing, and by then we could sell a general series in Africa. With Chinua's help and encouragement the series was a general series rather than an educational one, because of the cultural, educational and social context in which we were operating. Meanwhile, the strength of Heinemann's own marketing and distribution in Africa was always growing. But the most important thing was that people in Africa had an intrinsic part in choosing and recommending titles, and Chinua Achebe, more than anyone else, re-shaped the literary map of Africa.