

**Chinua Achebe and C. L. Innes, eds. *African Short Stories*. (Exeter, NH: Heinemann, 1985) 159 pp., \$5.00 paper.**

From time to time, collections of modern African short stories like the collection here noted should be published in order to keep an increasingly aware readership abreast of articulate literary production. When such collections are prepared, their editors would do well to be led by the general principles expressed by Chinua Achebe in a short, but very cogent, introduction:

The indebtedness of modern African writing to its wealth of oral traditions is taken for granted by the editors and they see no necessity to demonstrate the link further by including traditional tales in this collection.

The point is well taken: publications during the past quarter of a century have made these tales available and well known. An expanding and developing production of short stories even now makes the matter of choosing which to include and which to omit a critical matter. In the collection at hand the editors have recognized this and have tried to show their solution as one of a number of valid ones:

The rich contrasts of Africa are well displayed in this book — stories of the north, spare as Islamic calligraphy beside the more densely and luxuriantly realized species from further south . . . .

Although breadth and variety are shown, there is also a “spirit of unity which is more than a political cliché” which the reader is aware of. The collection is of African short stories, but African does not mean monolithic. The varieties of style include magic tales, exempla, and dramatic narratives. Although the editors were mindful of the advantages of representing writers of different regions, sexes and generations in this anthology, their criterion was ultimately literary merit. Of course, the decision of what constitutes literary merit is an editorial one which may be argued. And even though one may find it impossible to be in total accord with the judgments of another critic, the fact that the editor tries to adhere to literary — not political, historical, or moral — values is an important critical decision and a proper one.

The editors write, “In putting it together we had in mind to appeal to the general reader.” This orientation is both significant and pragmatic. If the world is to become intelligently aware of the modern African literary scene, it must have means of showing some of that scene in the schools of various countries of the world. If that scene is a varied one, as has been asserted, such a showing can be made only through a number of writings. To be sure novels like the “pioneer” novel, *Things Fall Apart*, are of high value; practically, however, the elementary, secondary—and even tertiary—school student is more easily led to a number of short stories than to more than one or two novels.

Chinua Achebe and C. L. Innes, the editors of this volume, have divided Africa into four large areas: West Africa (five writers), East Africa (five writers), Northern Africa (three writers), and Southern

Africa (seven writers). About half of the writers chosen are already well known: Sembene Ousmane, Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Ezekiel Mphahlele, for example. The stories chosen from their works, however, are not the ones most commonly known.

It is obvious that the intention here is to "add to" the public's African library rather than to provide a basic text for new readers. Even so, the result is a book which will serve both the initiated reader and the classroom student. Heinemann's *African Writers Series* No. 270 is definitely recommended reading.

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**Margaret B. Blackman. *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida Woman.* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982) xvii, 172 pp., \$19.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper.**

This book is a recorded autobiography, but it is also much more. In the preface Blackman traces her connections with the Haida people of the Northwest Coast since 1970 and explains her special relationship with Florence Edenshaw Davidson whom she promised in 1973 that she would someday publish the record of her life. Davidson had accepted Margaret Blackman as a grandchild and the special kinship relationship enabled the two of them in 1977 to record the life story of the eighty-one year old Haida woman. Nani, the Haida equivalent for "grandmother," traces through six chapters the significant events of her life, remembering the stories told about the times before her birth and elaborating on the changes she has experienced within her own lifetime. In her recollections she fulfills the mandate of the name Story Maid which her father had given her at birth.

Blackman frames the narrative of Davidson's life with anthropological information on the culture of the Haida, includes an orthography of the Haida language, and provides a bibliography for further study. Photographs bring to life the people discussed in the account. Blackman's description of her methodology gives the reader insight into how life histories are collected and provides the context for her work. She presents theoretical information on the purposes and values of life histories and gives a personal account of the circumstances surrounding her relationship with Florence Davidson.