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World Novel Today

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Panel: World Novel Today. The author discusses the state of the novel internationally.

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WORLD NOVEL TODAY

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By Mamle Kabu (Ghana)

A **novel** is a long narrative, normally in *prose*, which describes *fictional* characters and events, usually in the form of a sequential story. While *Ian Watt* in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) suggests that the novel came into being in the early 18th century, the *genre* has also been described as "a continuous and comprehensive history of about two thousand years",^[1] with historical roots in *Classical Greece* and *Rome*, *medieval*, *early modern romance*, and in the tradition of the *novella*.¹

Whichever way you slice it, the novel appears to have come about within a European context. And through the dominance of that culture and the effects of colonization, it has become so universally recognized as the defining output of a fiction writer that in today's world of renowned literature and prestigious awards, a fiction writer is in danger of disappearing off the radar screen altogether if he/she does not embrace the genre and produce accordingly. Writing novels is just what fiction writers do! The aspiring novelist can even look up standard novel word lengths among a myriad of other suggested parameters. Short stories have their place, yes, but if you want to make it onto the 'A' list as a fiction writer, you have to crank out that novel.

I love a good novel as much as the next reader but as a writer, I can't help wondering who exactly it was who decided that any fictional story worth its salt had to be at least 50,000 words long and why, more to the point, we continue to accept this as a given. Ghana, my country and a former British colony, inherited the English language, education system and everything that went with them including cultural and artistic perceptions and definitions. I am not aware of any pre-colonial forms of creative linguistic expression that ran into the kind of word length associated with novels today. One might argue that this was due to the absence of transcription. But interestingly, many of the early African novels that I've read – and by this I mean Sub-Saharan Africa – are shorter than the novels being produced by African writers today.

Contemporary African novels in length and in other regards are more similar to western models, in particular those written by younger generations of writers that have gained international recognition. Let's take for example, *Ghana Must Go* by Taiye Selasi, published last year. I enjoyed this book and admired the author's craft with words, but many people I know in Ghana tried to read it and gave up, alienated precisely by this highly stylized literary technique. In more traditional Ghanaian and perhaps, African fiction, the emphasis tends to be more on plot than on style. Indeed, I myself have had tiresome wrangles with editors and publishers in Ghana precisely for their failure to recognize the concept of style in creative writing.

There is no denying that the novels of the most famous contemporary African writers have a wider readership in Europe and America than in Africa. This is one of the reasons why African writers may be perceived to be writing for the West. In fact, I have great difficulty identifying any homegrown readership in Ghana sizeable enough to influence contemporary writing styles. With illiteracy rates still high and people who read quality literature for leisure representing a miniscule, middle-class elite, it is hardly surprising that a publishing industry for such writing barely exists in-country. An industry cannot survive without a market and the hard truth is, African writers like myself do not have an economically viable market in our own countries because we lack a robust, local readership.

This skewed literary landscape has spurred various trends in African writing. Not only may modern African fiction be stylistically alienating for many Africans, but it frequently also favors storylines that highlight what has been dubbed 'poverty porn.' This refers to the misery, brutality, bloodletting and similar stereotypes that reduce Africa to a country rather than the vast and diverse continent that it is. I know writers who have actually been told by publishers in the West that their writing was not African enough because it lacked or was too light on the poverty porn-type subject matter.

¹ Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novel>, accessed September 2014.

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It is easy to accuse African writers of playing to the gallery. But if they are, to what extent can they be blamed for it? And if the readership in their own countries is so limited, what motivation is there to write in an 'African' style? How does one even define or develop such a style in the absence of any significant readership? For Anglophone Africa, not surprisingly, the countries with the healthiest readerships and publishing industries dominate the literary landscape. In particular, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa have a comparatively high publishing output and tend to win the most awards. Notably, these are also countries that have established their own, homegrown literary awards.

Thus, the 'African novel' is a complex and still-evolving phenomenon, as is the concept of the African novelist. As a candidate for this title, I feel that what I need to do in order to attain any significant degree of publishing success, is to write about Africa in a non-African style. If I choose to write stories that are not overtly about political issues, I run the risk of not being taken seriously as an African writer. If I choose to write stories that are not about Africa, my identity as an African writer immediately becomes compromised and I automatically disqualify myself from a host of literary prizes. These are some of the complexities of the literary landscape in which I find myself as an African novelist.