



Bearing Witness

Wendy Griswold

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Greed, frustrated love, traffic jams, infertility, politics, polygamy. These--together with depictions of traditional village life and the impact of colonialism made familiar to Western readers through Chinua Achebe's writing--are the stuff of Nigerian fiction. *Bearing Witness* examines this varied content and the determined people who, against all odds, write, publish, sell, and read novels in Africa's most populous nation.

Drawing on interviews with Nigeria's writers, publishers, booksellers, and readers, surveys, and a careful reading of close to 500 Nigerian novels--from lightweight romances to literary masterpieces--Wendy Griswold explores how global cultural flows and local conflicts meet in the production and reception of fiction. She argues that Nigerian readers and writers form a reading class that unabashedly believes in progress, rationality, and the slow-but-inevitable rise of a reading culture. But they do so within a society that does not support their assumptions and does not trust literature, making them modernists in a country that is simultaneously premodern and postmodern.

Without privacy, reliable electricity, political freedom, or even social toleration of bookworms, these Nigerians write and read political satires, formula romances, war stories, complex gender fiction, blood-and-sex crime capers, nostalgic portraits of village life, and profound explorations of how decent people get by amid urban chaos. *Bearing Witness* is an inventive and moving work of cultural sociology that may be the most comprehensive sociological analysis of a literary system ever written.

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