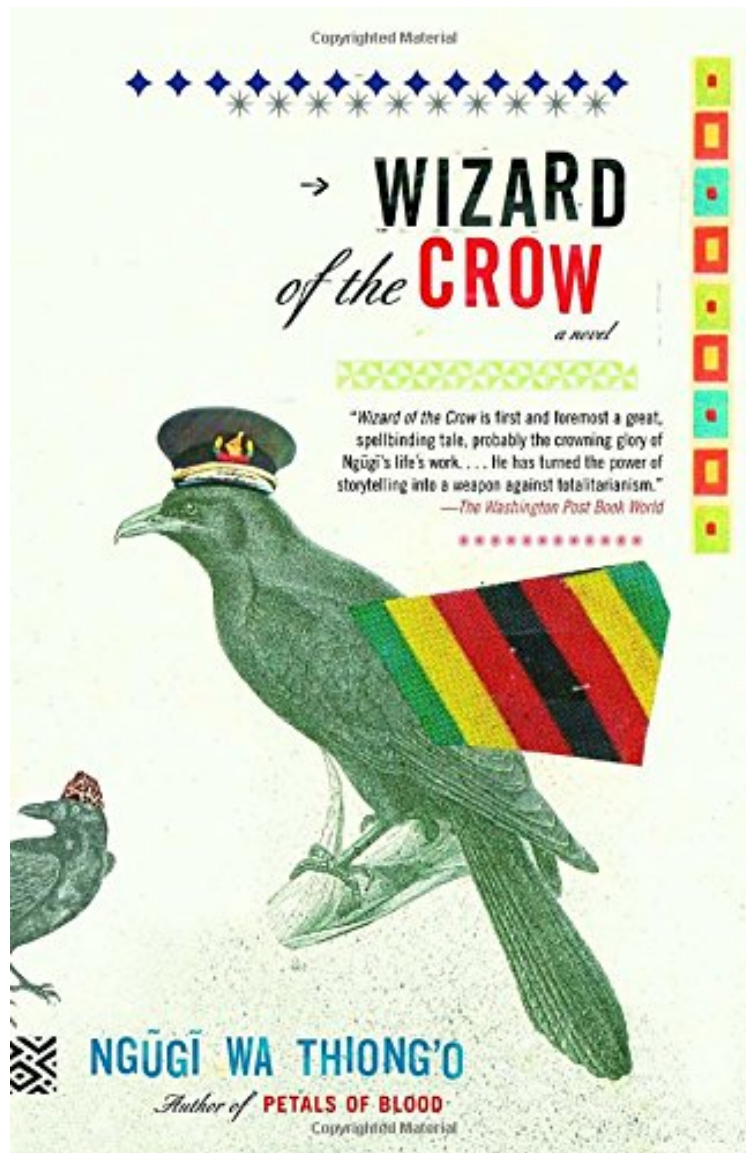


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Wizard of the Crow

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o : Wizard of the Crow before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Wizard of the Crow:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Satirical Dissection of Post-Colonial Africa By blueotter This sprawling satirical story is set in the fictitious African country Aburiria, which I understand resembles author Ngugi wa Thiong'o's home country Kenya when it was under a dictatorship. The "Ruler" is an awful, totally self-centered man who is convinced the people love him even when they show how much he is detested. There are obvious

similarities to self-obsessed dictators like Mobutu and Idi Amin. All his yes-men are busy trying to outmaneuver the others for his affection, and each secretly dreams of becoming the ruler himself. When the Ruler endorses an absurd project to build a tower to Heaven to show he's better than biblical predecessors, his sycophants can hardly contain themselves in their efforts to support it, and to secretly benefit from the inflow of money. Lengthy queues begin to form at appropriate government offices, filled with those planning to give a bribe in exchange for future rewards from the project. A huge funding loan is sought from a western bank, which then wants to scrutinize government operations. Aligned against the Ruler and his parasites is job-seeking Kamiti, who can physically smell corruption (which often torments him in this endlessly corrupt country), and lovely Nyawira, a rebel group's leader who smells like flowers to Kamiti. Kamiti has herbal healing skills, and through various humorous twists becomes recognized as the miracle-working "Wizard of the Crow", whose assistance is sought by sycophants and rebels alike. His clever, intuitive solutions, with the assistance of a mirror, to the problems brought to him, comprise many of the highlights of the book. The satirical dissection of post-colonial Africa is merciless. One sycophant, for example, is suffering so from "white-ache", the desire to be a British white man, that he can no longer say anything more than "If". His cure from the Wizard of the Crow may lie in finding out what it's like to be a member of a former power outstripped by history. Can Kamiti and Nyawira lead the rebels to toppling the absurd, corrupt regime of the Ruler, even while darting into the heart of it, and colliding with that regime in various dangerous roles? Can Kamiti turn his perceived wizarding skills to the rebellion's advantage? Can Kamiti and Nyawira find a sustainable life together in this crazy country? I've mentioned before that the book made me think of a diverse group of works - Tom Jones, as a rambling adventure story without the bawdiness, Catch-22 in its satire of war and government, Dr. Strangelove for the same. It apparently was first serialized, so it has that episodic story quality of various Dickens novels, too. The New York Times reviewer said "it recalls a long yarn told by firelight." It was written in a Kenyan language that derives from an oral tradition, and then translated by the author. This all makes for a different kind of read than I previously have encountered, one that made me laugh and cheer on the exploits of Kamiti and Nyawira. At the same time, the novel casts a fierce satirical eye on a horribly corrupt government. I understand that this despotic rule, while taken to absurd lengths, unfortunately has strong roots in reality.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The author shifts easily from modern By Greg Ngugi's sprawling tale of a fictional African dictator, a homeless MBA turned healer and a grassroots revolutionary is both poignant and hilarious, biting and hopeful. The author shifts easily from modern, post-colonial, post-Cold War African politics to interpersonal vices such as greed, racism and sexism. The characters are smart and well-developed, and display the best and worst of African religion, mysticism, politics, history, ambition and pride. Though the story peters out a bit at the end (think the finale of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings), Ngugi deserves a curtain call to tie up any loose strands and offer hope for the future of the characters and their nation. Wizard of the Crow stands as one of the most complete fictional works on the state of contemporary Africa, and a must-read for anyone interested in modern African and/or global politics.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Stairways to heaven By H. Schneider What caused the ruler's illness? Anger? A curse by a goat? The process of aging? His disgraced first wife's rebelliously unshed tears? The withdrawal of demonic support? The author of this satirical phantasy about the great African nation of Aburiria was a candidate for the 2014 literature Nobel. He sure looks like a plausible bet. The book is large, 750 pages, organized in six 'books', each title using the word 'daemon'. The ruler is not the main character. That is the title hero: the Wizard of the Crow, who starts the story as a beggar with the unusual ability to let his spirit leave the body and soar the sky like a bird. It turns out, that the beggar holds an MBA and is looking for a job. He meets a woman with secrets. Maybe she is an underground rebel. Together they embark on miraculous and hyperbolic adventures. Some romance too, but no overdose. A slightly too starry eyed attack of optimism in the closing chapter... The central theme of the plot is the ruler's grand project: a new attempt at the Tower of Babylon, the building that scrapes the sky... (Though the author seems to be slightly mis-interpreting the biblical tower story). The project generates many sub-plots: of corruption, sycophancy, power struggles, state terror, and superstition, mostly satirical views of third world lamentability. The satirical tone makes the book amusing, but it keeps us from being gripped by the story. It is a smart construction, but we don't quite get pulled in for more than a few chapters. Fact is: this project is too big. Not just the tower, but the novel itself. Half the size would have done better. Less would be more. But it is still worth it and not boring. I can't see why NwT shouldn't win the Nobel next year. Though his subject here is not new, and his treatment of the subject is not unprecedented, not every Nobel writer can invent a new school of writing. I am slightly uneasy about one thing: NwT confirms all prejudices about African society and politics. He sounds like the modern colonialist's favorite African. But what if his mad world is the real world? That's a real conundrum. Conclusion: 4.5 stars

A landmark of postcolonial African literature, Wizard of the Crow is an ambitious, magisterial, comic novel from the acclaimed Kenyan novelist, playwright, poet, and critic. Set in the fictional Free Republic of Aburiria, Wizard of the Crow dramatizes with corrosive humor and keenness of observation a battle for the souls of the Aburirian people, between a megalomaniac dictator and an unemployed young man who embraces the mantle of a magician. Fashioning the stories of the powerful and the ordinary into a dazzling mosaic, in this magnificent work of magical realism, Ngugi

wa'Thiong'o—one of the most widely read African writers—reveals humanity in all its endlessly surprising complexity.

“Wizard of the Crow is first and foremost a great, spellbinding tale, probably the crowning glory of Ngugi’s life’s work. . . . He has turned the power of storytelling into a weapon against totalitarianism.” —The Washington Post Book World “In his crowded career and his eventful life, Ngugi has enacted, for all to see, the paradigmatic trials and quandaries of a contemporary African writer, caught in sometimes implacable political, social, racial, and linguistic currents.” —John Updike, *The New Yorker* “An allegory presented as a modern-day folk tale (complete with tricksters, magic, disguised lovers and daring escapes). . . . Ngugi writes simply and unaffectedly about his characters. . . . It recalls a long yarn told by firelight.” —The New York Times Book “Ngugi is one of Africa’s greatest writers, and certainly the foremost voice of Kenyan literature. . . . Possibly the best comparison to make of *Wizard of the Crow* is with Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.” —San Francisco Chronicle

About the Author Ng’g’ wa’Thiong’o has taught at Nairobi University, Northwestern University, Amherst College, Yale University, and New York University. He is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. His many books include *Wizard of the Crow*, *Dreams in a Time of War*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Decolonising the Mind*, and *Petals of Blood*, for which he was imprisoned by the Kenyan government in 1977.

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1 There were many theories about the strange illness of the second Ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria, but the most frequent on people’s lips were five. The illness, so claimed the first, was born of anger that once welled up inside him; and he was so conscious of the danger it posed to his well-being that he tried all he could to rid himself of it by belching after every meal, sometimes counting from one to ten, and other times chanting *ka ke ki ko ku* aloud. Why these particular syllables, nobody could tell. Still, they conceded that the Ruler had a point. Just as offensive gases of the constipated need to be expelled, thus easing the burden on the tummy, anger in a person also needs a way out to ease the burden on the heart. This Ruler’s anger, however, would not go away, and it continued simmering inside till it consumed his heart. This is believed to be the source of the Aburirian saying that ire is more corrosive than fire, for it once eroded the soul of a Ruler. But when did this anger take root? When snakes first appeared on the national scene? When water in the bowels of the earth turned bitter? Or when he visited America and failed to land an interview with Global Network News on its famous program *Meet the Global Mighty*? It is said that when he was told that he could not be granted even a minute on the air, he could hardly believe his ears or even understand what they were talking about, knowing that in his country he was always on TV; his every moment—eating, shitting, sneezing, or blowing his nose—captured on camera. Even his yawns were news because, whether triggered by boredom, fatigue, hunger, or thirst, they were often followed by some national drama: his enemies were lashed in the public square with a *sjambok*, whole villages were blown to bits or people were pierced to death by a bows-and-arrows squad, their carcasses left in the open as food for hyenas and vultures. It is said that he was especially skillful in creating and nursing conflicts among Aburirian families, for scenes of sorrow were what assuaged him and made him sleep soundly. But nothing, it seemed, would now temper his anger. Could anger, however deeply felt, cause a mystery illness that defied all logic and medical expertise?

2 The second theory was that the illness was a curse from the cry of a wronged he-goat. It is said that some elders, deeply troubled by the sight of blood flooding the land, decided to treat this evil as they had epidemics that threatened the survival of the community in the olden days: but instead of burying the evil inside the belly of a beast by inserting flies, standing for the epidemic, into its anus, they would insert the Ruler’s hair, standing for the evil, into the belly of a he-goat through its mouth. The evil-carrying goat, standing for the Ruler, would then become an outcast in the land, to be driven out of any region where its cry announced its evil presence. Led by a medicine man, they mixed the hair, obtained secretly from the Ruler’s barber, with grass, salt, and magic potions and gave it to the goat to swallow. Needle and thread in hand, the medicine man started sewing the seven orifices of the body beginning with the anus. The struggling he-goat gave out a bloodcurdling cry and, before the medicine man could seal its mouth, it escaped. It is said that it cried grief across the land, until the Ruler heard the cry and, learning about the curse, which he imagined to be a call for a coup, sent soldiers to hunt down the he-goat and all involved. Rumor has it that the goat, the barber, the medicine man, the elders, and even the soldiers were given over to the crocodiles of the Red River to ensure eternal silence about the curse. And it was to mark this day of his deliverance that the Ruler had the picture of the Red River added to Buri notes, the only picture besides his own to honor the Aburirian currency. Still, he worried about the fact that the goat had a beard, and he secretly consulted an oracle in a neighboring country, who assured him that only a bearded spirit could seriously threaten his rule. Though he read this as meaning that no human could overthrow him, for, since they had no bodily form, spirits could never grow beards, he became sensitive to beards and then decreed what came to be known as the Law of the Beard, that all goats and humans must have their beards shaved off. There are some who dispute the story of the bearded he-goat and even argue that the Law of the Beard applied only to soldiers, policemen, civil servants, and politicians, and that the herdsmen shaved their he-goats out of their own volition, shaving goats’ beards then being the fashion among Aburirian herdsmen. These skeptics wondered: what has the cry of a he-goat whose anus, ears, and nose being sealed, have to do with the strange illness that befell the Ruler?

3 Others now came up with a third theory, which said that

since nothing lasts forever, the illness had something to do with the aging of his rule: he had sat on the throne so long that even he could not remember when his reign began. His rule had no beginning and no end; and judging from the facts one may well believe the claim. Children had been born and had given birth to others and those others to others and so on, and his rule had survived all the generations. So that when some people heard that before him there had been a first Ruler, preceded by a succession of governors and sultans all the way from the eras of the Arabs, the Turks, the Italians, to that of the British, they would simply shake their heads in disbelief saying, no, no, those are just the tales of a daydreamer: Aburiria had never had and could never have another ruler, because had not this man's reign begun before the world began and would end only after the world has ended? Although even that surmise was shot through with doubts, for how can the world come to an end? 4 The fourth theory asserted that his illness had its origins in all the tears, unshed, that Rachael, his legal wife, had locked up inside her soul after her fall from his grace. The Ruler and his wife had fallen out one day when Rachael asked questions about the schoolgirls who, rumors claimed, were often invited to the State House to make his bed, where he, like the aging white man of the popular saying, fed on spring chicken. Of course, the Ruler would never admit to aging, but he had no problems with the "white man" comparison, and so he amended the proverb to say that a white man renews his youth with spring chicken. Imagine how he must have felt about Rachael's attempt to deny him his fountains of youth! How indiscreet and indecorous of her to ask the unaskable! Since when could a male, let alone a Ruler, be denied the right to feel his way around women's thighs, whether other men's wives or schoolgirls? What figure of a Ruler would he cut were he to renounce his right to husband all women in the land in the manner of the lords of Old Europe, whose *droits de seigneur* gave them the right to every bride-to-be? Rachael thought she was being reasonable. I know you take the title Father of the Nation seriously, she told him. You know that I have not complained about all those women who make beds for you, no matter how many children you sire with them. But why schoolgirls? Are they not as young as the children you have fathered? Are they not really our children? You father them today and tomorrow you turn them into wives? Have you no tears of concern for our tomorrow? They were dining in the State House, and to Rachael the evening was very special because it was the first time in a long while that they were alone together: the burdens of presiding over the nation hardly ever gave them time to share meals and engage in husband-and-wife talk. Rachael believed in the saying that clothes maketh a woman, and that night she had taken particular care with her appearance: a white cotton dress with a V-shaped collar, short sleeves pleated at the edges, a necklace highlighting her slender neck, rings on her fingers, and dangling from her elegant ears, diamonds sparkling all about her. We can very well imagine the scene. Guiding his fork unerringly toward his lips, the Ruler was about to place a morsel of chicken into his mouth, when suddenly, at Rachael's words, the fork froze in midair; slowly, he lowered the fork to the plate, the piece of chicken still on it, took the napkin and wiped his lips with deliberation. Before replacing the napkin on the table, he turned to his wife and asked: Rachael, did I really hear you say that I have been forcing myself on schoolchildren? That I don't cry over our tomorrow? Have you ever heard of a Ruler who cries, except maybe, well, never mind him, and where did those daily tears of a grown man lead him? He lost his throne. Do you want me to end up as he did? There is always a difference between a thought and its description: what the Ruler had been dwelling on when lowering the fork to the table and wiping his lips with a corner of the napkin was not the fate of a Ruler who wept and so lost his throne but rather what he would have to do to make Rachael understand that he, the Ruler, had power, real power over everything including . . . yes . . . Time. He shuddered at the thought. Even before the shuddering completed its course, he had made up his mind. Speaking with studied calm, a faint smile on his face, he told Rachael that the unfinished meal would be their last supper together, that he would go away to give her time to think about the implications of her allegations, and since she would need space to think, he would bring to pass what had been written in the scriptures: In My Father's House Are Many Mansions. Even for sinners. He built her a house on a seven-acre plot that he surrounded with a stone wall and an electric fence, and it was while contemplating the unbreachable walls that the idea of a building that reached . . . but we shall talk about that later, because the idea was given expression by one of his most faithful and adoring ministers. What was undisputedly the product of his own genius, in its conception and execution, was the construction of Rachael's mansion. All the clocks in the house were frozen at the second, the minute, and the hour that she had raised the question of schoolgirls; the calendars pointed to the day and the year. The clocks tick-tocked but their hands did not move. The mechanical calendar always flipped to the same date. The food provided was the same as at the last supper, the clothes the same as she had worn that night. The bedding and curtains were identical to those where she had once lived. The television and radio kept repeating programs that were on during the last supper. Everything in the new mansion reproduced the exact same moment. A record player was programmed to play only one hymn: Our Lord will come back one day He will take us to his home above I will then know how much he loves me Whenever he comes back And when he comes back You the wicked will be left behind Moaning your wicked deeds Whenever our Lord comes back The idea of the endless repetition of this hymn pleased him so much that he had amplifiers placed at the four corners of the seven-acre plantation so that passersby and even others would benefit from the tune and the words. Rachael would remain thus, awaiting his second coming, and on that day when he found that she had shed all the tears for all the tomorrows of all the children she had accused him of abusing, he would take her back to restart life exactly from where it had stopped, or rather Rachael would resume her life, which had

been marking time, like a cinematic frame on pause. I am your beginning and your end. What were you before I made you my wife? he asked, and answered himself, A primary school teacher. I am the past and the present you have been and I am your tomorrow take it or leave it, he added in English as he turned his back on her. There was only one entrance to the seven-acre prison. An armed guard was stationed at the stone gate to make sure that she neither left or received visitors except officials who replenished supplies and doubled as spies, or else her children. Her children? Apart from the numberless others he begot upon his bed-makers, the Ruler had four boys with Rachael. They were not the brightest in their class, and he had taken them out of school before they had obtained their high school diplomas. He enlisted them in the army--to learn on the job--where they quickly rose to the highest ranks. At the beginning of their mother's frozen present, the firstborn, Rueben Kucera, was a three-star general in the army; the second, Samwel Moya, a two-star general in the air force; the third, Dickens Soi, a one-star general in the navy; and the fourth, Richard Runyenje, an army captain. But apart from their military duties they were all on the board of directors of several parastatals closely linked to foreign companies, particularly those involved in the exploration of oil and the mining of precious metals. They were also on several licensing boards. Their main task was to sniff out any anti-government plots in the three branches of the armed forces, as well as to receive bribes. The only problem was that the four were so partial to alcohol and drugs that it was difficult for them to keep up with whatever was happening in the armed forces or on the boards over which they sat. The Ruler was rather disappointed, for he had hoped that at least one of his sons with Rachael might inherit the throne, establishing a mighty family dynasty, and so he often scolded them for their lack of ambition and appetite for power. Yet on the days when they brought him their collections, there was the celebratory atmosphere of a family reunion. From the Hardcover edition.