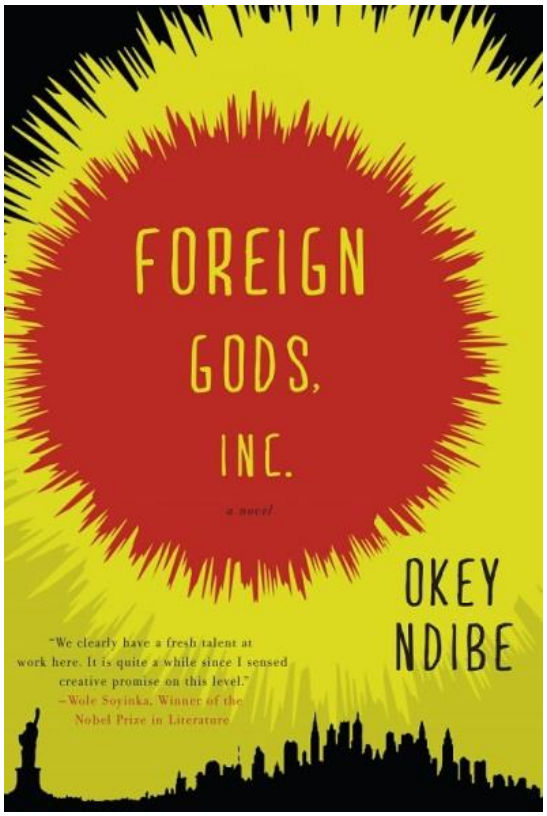
Foreign Gods, Inc. Reader's Guide with an interview with Okey Ndibe



In the interview below, Okey Ndibe has said his protagonist, Ike, is "engaged in a drama of self-reclamation." What can that mean for Ike, an immigrant whose "self" is being rejected by his adopted country—even down to his accent?

This battle between Christianity and the followers of Ngene drives an important storyline in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* How does Ike's disinterest in both Nigerian folk religion and the Christianity that's arrived there complicate his trip home?

Ike says that Ngene is no longer a war god, because "The warriors of Utonki had not fought a war in more than a hundred years." Do you think he's right? Can symbols, especially religious ones, lose an intrinsic potency if their devotees lose faith?

Mark Gruels says of Ngene: "a god must travel or die." What do you think he meant? Is he right?

In the Igbo language, "Ike" can mean two things: the correct pronunciation of Ike's name (*Ee*-keh) means "Power of God." An incorrect one (*Ee*-kay) means buttocks. What do you think might have been intended in giving Ike such a tricky name?

What are the various ways greed, wealth, and objectification come into play in *Foreign Gods, Inc.*? For example, are there different views of what it means to be rich in Nigeria and in the US?

Ike's African American wife is just as condescending about his Nigerian accent as the white characters he encounters. Do you think Ike has a unique vantage on race in the US?

Ike avoids his cell phone because he "[abhors the idea of other people being able to reach him at all hours, wherever he was."

Why do you think Ike's heart is pounding in the first chapter, when he commits to stealing and selling Ngene, a sacred deity from his hometown? Guilt? Excitement? Something else?

About a quarter of the way through the book, Ndibe relates the story of Reverend Walter Stanton as heard by a young Ike. Why do you think Ndibe chooses to tell the story in its entirety and as a dream?

Interview with Foreign Gods, Inc. author Okey Ndibe
by Paul Oliver

Paul Oliver: When we meet Ike Uzondu (the protagonist of Foreign Gods, Inc.) he has seemingly hit rock bottom. He's lost any semblance of control over his addiction to alcohol and gambling. He is mired in a dangerous combination of shame and indignation. It's enough to bring to mind the famous opening lines of Dostoevksy's Notes from Underground: "I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." What made you want to write such a morally reparable character?

Okey Ndibe: The United States is a truly extraordinary address, a place where – pardon the cliché – dreams are constantly inspired, born and nurtured. But it can also be an unforgiving place, a location where dreams die, where forces, physical as well as ineffable, sometimes appear to be arrayed against the striving, but luckless, guy. Despite the cosmopolitan accent of life in the US, many immigrants also know that the phrase "You have an accent" can suddenly, lastingly take on a certain defining gravity. In many American cities – and this is true, by the way, of the UK as well as much of Europe – you're bound to run into many immigrant graduates, even PhDs, who are cab drivers, and not always by choice. A sizeable number of these are from Africa, but there are others from Asia, Eastern Europe, South America, etc. In some ways, some of them inhabit the Underground; they have that lacerating sense of being cast, if not quite in a dungeon, then aside. The psychological freight of being caught in that predicament struck me with its rich, complex dramatic potential. My novel attempts to look unflinchingly at some of the monsters that can be birthed when one such "ground-down" man dares – through contemplation of an act of treachery – to become a master of his own fate. At the end of the day, my protagonist, Ike Uzondu, is engaged in a drama of self-reclamation.

PO: At Book Expo last summer you gave me a lesson on how to pronounce Ike's name—citing how tricky it can be. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it goes something like this: Ike (Eekeh) is short for Ikechukwu, which in Igbo means "The Power of God." Though if you were to make the mistake of referring to him as EE-kay you'd be saying an entirely different word, íkè, which is the Igbo word for buttocks. I probably have that wrong. But it is kind of fitting for this particular character to be stuck somewhat between those two things. Was that name choice intentional?

ON: You're exactly right. Unless you've spent time getting their pronunciation right, Igbo names as well as words can play tricks on you. For example: the letters a-k-w-a form at least four meanings, each meaning determined by a slight inflection in pronouncement. The same spelling, but the word can mean an egg, a bed, clothing, or tears. So, yes, part of Ike's sense of depersonalization comes from having his passengers frequently, insouciantly mangle his name. They either call him "Buttocks" or impose the Americanized Ike – as in Eisenhower. I wanted Ikechukwu – Ike, for short – to have that particular frustration and unease.

PO: There are a few strikingly different concepts of personal wealth in this book. Ike's character alone seems to straddle several views. On one hand he feels guilty for never having sent money back to his family in Nigeria and on the other he is willing to sacrifice his relationship with them for a western concept of wealth. Can you speak to the various ways greed and objectification play out in Foreign Gods, Inc.?

ON: This question strikes at the heart of Ike's psychological dilemma. It ought to be noted, first, that the tools of social media have homogenized – or, at any rate, rendered globally familiar – certain aspects and trends of contemporary experience. Twenty-five years ago, most Nigerians had little use for the game of basketball; today, many have become hooked, in part because of the sheer scandal – in their eyes – of paying millions of dollars to tall men just for throwing a ball through a basket. As it were, the logic of cash – as much as the dazzle of the dunk and the wizardry of the cross-over dribble – has made basketball compelling. As a Fulbright lecturer

at the University of Lagos, I noticed that my students, who had never even visited a neighboring African country, much less New York City, Nashville, or Atlanta, could do unheard of things with American slang. But Ike is not searching to be an over-"social mediated" man. In fact, even though the novel is set about 2005, he's far from taken with cell phones, which he sees, dimly and primarily, in terms of their intrusive capacity. Yet, like many an immigrant, he's compelled to simultaneously play by the rules of two cultural games. He's buffeted by personal crises, some of them of his own making, but he can't help responding to his mother's claims on his financial support. He's fond of his uncle, the chief priest of Ngene, his community's war deity. Even so, he somehow subordinates a great love for his uncle to an all-consuming craving for riches. Ultimately, it's this desire to rig himself into "American-made" material success that both propels and blinds him.

PO: Racism and the difficulties that immigrants face in the US are major themes in your novel. Race in Foreign Gods, Inc. is particularly multifaceted. Beyond black and white, questions of race also manifest amidst the peoples of the African diaspora that populate this story, whether African, African American, or Caribbean. Ike's African American wife is just as condescending about his Nigerian accent as the white characters he encounters. Do you think Ike has a unique vantage on race in the US?

ON: It can be awfully difficult to talk about race and racism in the US. The terms are often slippery, even though they are also America's inescapable, default subjects, rooted in the peculiar history of this republic. Yet there's so much that the words obscure, render oblique. The ubiquity of the two words paradoxically enforces certain taboos, closes off exploration of some of the unexpected ways in which racial conflict plays out. For example, there are situations where your "strange" or "foreign" accent can get you quick passage into bedrooms, whilst blocking your access to the boardroom. James Baldwin knew, as do John Edgar Wideman and many others, that race is often deftly manipulated, used to keep Africans and African Americans apart, separately garrisoned, trapped in a state of mutual distrust. Ike is enmeshed in all this. He's intellectually sophisticated enough to grasp the ironies of his plight, even to understand the nature of the foes he's up against, and yet he remains mostly powerless to do much about his dire condition. His experience runs the gamut; he's possessed of a wide-angled perspective, and that, I hope, deepens the emotional gravity of the choices he makes, the impact of what happens to him. Through him, the attentive reader will be able to glimpse the varied ways in which the currencies of race and racism are furnished, deployed, deflected, cashed in or cashed out. Foreign Gods, Inc. seeks to bring some of the sly "race" moments out into the open of the fictive canvas. It tries to speak some of the taboos of race and racism.

PO: "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" is Salman Rushdie's now famous essay (and pun) describing the entry of post-colonial writers into the Western Canon. There seems to be a trend lately among writers from post-colonial states to turn an eye inward to their own political cultures, writing less out of external critique. Is the "empire" still writing back? Or have the politics of the novel left the paternalism of the post-colonial orbit?

ON: Rushdie's essay is a provocative description. Achebe called it "four memorable words: The Empire Writes Back." Rushdie's formulation sought to ground that phenomenon – which has since accumulated a rather long history – of the presumably "mute" (or muted) postcolonial subjects insisting on having their say, talking back, bringing their voices into the equation of narratives. In his slim but richly rewarding book of essays, Home and Exile, Chinua Achebe used two fascinating metaphors to zero in on this Rushdian idea. One metaphor is adopted from fable of the natural world, and involves the Lion's guaranteed disadvantage in a world where the Hunter monopolizes the narrative of the hunt. As long as the Lion doesn't take a turn at telling the story, as long as the Lion's account is expunged, the Hunter will always emerge, inevitably and predictably, as the sole hero. Achebe's other metaphor is taken from the modern world, specifically the British post office. It is the location where accounts are mailed and received, what I'd call a veritable Narrative Exchange. A man of great wisdom and prudence, Achebe prescribed "the balance of stories among the world's peoples." We're far from achieving that

balance, but we must admit that each day brings its small harvest of progress. I see glimpses of hope – even instances of wonderful signs. Writers, storytellers from all over the world are writing, "speaking," in a wide variety of accents. Thanks to the Internet and literary festivals, they're communing in great fiestas to tell their stories, to listen to others' stories. I'm willing to hazard that readers, these days, are on the whole more adventurous, more curious about the imaginative harvests of other cultures, more keen to tune in to stories forged in areas that were once deemed "mute" or unintelligible. And that rising quotient of curiosity is a magnificent development.

PO: I think that in the United States we tend to think of religious conflict as exclusively the realm of the world's major religions, which is exactly why the conflict in Foreign Gods, Inc. is interesting. This battle between Christianity and the followers of Ngene drives an important storyline in your novel. How much do deities like Ngene play a role in modern Nigerian life? And are they in conflict with religions like Christianity and Islam?

ON: The grand narrative of the (often) bloody feud between Islam and Christianity often obscures the deeper embattlement of those who, despite all odds, still stick to traditional religious practices. In Nigeria, Christian pastors sometimes lead crusades to destroy or desecrate animist shrines. There was a former military governor, a self-professed born-again Christian, who came by the revelation that all the problems in the state he administered were caused by satanic forces. He declared war on places of traditional worship, led mini-crusades of fervent Christian warriors to lay waste to many a shrine. Traditional religious practices are not always so singularly besieged, but the antipathy toward them runs deep. Yet vestiges of traditional religion remain, stubborn and resilient. Their staying power lies, I suspect, in the fact that many a Christian or Muslim has a syncretist outlook, not beyond consulting a traditional diviner when life turns suddenly, mysteriously miserable.

PO: "A heist story like no other" is how Booklist described the core plot of Foreign Gods, Inc. This novel really does succeed in creating tension of the kind usually found in genre fiction. Weighty themes concerning race, identity, greed, and religion are apparent from the outset and clearly the reason you wrote the novel. But how much did you worry about writing a page-turner as well?

ON: Did I set out to write a page-turner? To keep the reader invested, captivated, viscerally moved by the turns and twists of the story – those goals shape my narrative choices. Inevitably, I hope, it all boils down to something like a page-turner. You can't interest someone in polemics if they have little care about what happens next.

PO: On January 9, 2011, Nigerian security agents arrested you on your arrival at the international airport in Lagos. You were subsequently detained, and had your Nigerian and US passports confiscated. Did you see the arrest coming? How did you react to what followed?

ON: Did I see the arrest coming? Yes and no. In late 2009, I had received two anonymous calls warning me not to show up in Nigeria. The callers disclosed that the Nigerian government, then under Umaru Yar'Adua, had put my name on a list of "enemies of the state" and ordered my arrest if I showed up at any Nigerian port of entry. It was all so bizarre, so sordidly Orwellian. My weekly column for a Nigerian newspaper had apparently riled the Yar'Adua regime. However, Mr. Yar'Adua died in May 2010, and Goodluck Jonathan took over Nigeria's presidency. On Mr. Jonathan's first official visit to the US, two of his aides rang to invite me to meet with him in Washington, DC. I declined the invitation, but raised the issue of my status as "an enemy of the state." The two officials assured me that Mr. Jonathan had ordered that the "enemy list" be erased. So, yes, I knew that I had been branded an enemy, but I was under the impression that the whole list had been tossed. So I was somewhat surprised when an immigration officer at Murtala Muhammed Airport told me he was going to hold on to my passport, and that I should grab my luggage and return to him because the Nigerian security agency at the

airport wanted me. I used the occasion of picking up luggage to call friends and colleagues in the US. Within a few minutes, news of my detention was on the Internet. Wole Soyinka (winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize for literature) issued a statement condemning my arrest. From there, it became a whirlwind. The news was widely reported by newspapers around the world. Writers, writers' groups, newspaper editorials, columnists, academics, and numerous Nigerian organizations voiced their outrage. Three days later, a top security official returned my passports, assured me that my name had been erased from any list of "enemies," and blamed it all on the deceased Yar'Adua. Later, Nigeria's top security official told the editor of the newspaper that carries my column to ask me to write a petition to him officially demanding the removal of my name from the list. I refused; since I had not, after all, asked anybody to put my name in the roster of enemies of the state, it was not my place to urge deletion. I have since been stopped and briefly detained five times, most recently in January 2012 when I was held overnight – for more than ten hours – at the same Lagos airport. My reaction is a cross between amazement and indignation. Some of Nigeria's worst criminal elements, including governors and ministers who looted millions of dollars of public funds, go in and out of Nigeria with no impediment whatsoever. My only crime is that, week after week, I call out the corrupt in my column, and expose the scam that passes itself off as governance in Nigeria – and occasionally elsewhere. I can't see much of a future for a country that makes a point of shielding, even glorifying, scoundrels, but hounding innocents.

PO: It seems to me that African literature is enjoying a bit of a renaissance at the moment. Writers like NoViolet Bulawayo, Teju Cole, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Mukoma Ngugi have all enjoyed success with their recent books. Not to mention the likes of Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o . . . Do you have any theories about why African literature is popular at the moment?

ON: I suspect that several factors built up, slowly, inexorably into this current renaissance in African writing. But I'd argue that the wide interest in works by African authors isn't altogether a new phenomenon. Achebe's Things Fall Apart has sold more than 10 million copies in English, and been translated into some 60 languages. We're all indebted to him in a significant way, because his commanding presence in the canon of world literature went a long way in making what we call African literature visible, familiar, and desirable. Then we must not forget Wole Soyinka's Nobel in 1986, with the traction and gravitas that come with the prize. Soyinka's Ake: The Years of Childhood was a New York Times bestseller. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose roundedness and eminence as a literary artist make him one of my favorite writers of all time, has apparently – deservedly – emerged as a serious candidate for the Nobel. Then there's the Caine Prize for African writing, which awards some $15,000 to a short story. The prize has its annual buzz index. It's created a certain ferment. So there's all of that. But there's also the factor of serendipity, the fact that a few US and British publishers gambled on works by younger African writers – and discovered that there was a huge, excited and attentive audience out there. Ben Okri's Booker for The Famished Road provided a huge tonic for African writers. Chimamanda Adichie's radiance and stupendous talent command attention. Teju Cole's Open City dazzles with the sheer luminousness of its style, its effortless intelligence. There are many others – Zakes Mda, Nuruddin Farah, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Chika Unigwe, Emmanuel Dongala, and Helon Habila among them – whose extraordinary writings continue to stamp our literature on the world's consciousness. One can't minimize, much less discount, the Internet's role: how it has unbound once-repressed voices, how it's catalyzing the bursting forth of some magnificent writing, a variety of styles and accents of storytelling. For all the wonderful things happening around African writing, I'm often deeply sad that the "metropolitan" publishers in New York, London, Brussels, and Paris are mostly responsible for husbanding much of African writing, introducing it to the world – and, in many cases, to Africa. I'd like to see a robust publishing industry take root throughout Africa to match the continent's energetic creative talent.

PO: The late Chinua Achebe played a significant role in your life and career. From giving you your first big interview for the Nigerian Sun to co-founding Africa Commentary with you, Achebe was a huge influence for

you. It almost didn't happen, though, thanks to a tape recorder malfunction, and you very easily could have got off to a bad start with the great writer. How did that go down?

ON: My first interview with Achebe, in 1983, was also my very first significant assignment as a rookie correspondent for the now long defunct African Concord, a weekly magazine. That first interview set a mood for my relationship with the author – he saved my career.

I met Achebe quite by accident. I was visiting a girl from Ogidi, Achebe's hometown. I raved on and on about Achebe and his best known work, Things Fall Apart. The girl listened for a while, a bemused smile creasing her cheeks. Then she said: "Achebe is my uncle. His house is a short walk away. He happens to be home this weekend. Do you want to visit him?"

Did I ever!

The Achebe I met in his country home personified grace. I still remember that he served us cookies and chilled Coke. He regarded me with penetrating eyes as I gushed about his novels, his short stories, his essays, even reciting favorite lines. I told him I had just got a job with the Concord magazine and would be honored to interview him. To my surprise, he gave me his telephone number at Nsukka, the university town where he lived and ran the Institute of African Studies.

A week later I flew to Lagos, reported for work, and told the magazine's editor that I had Achebe's telephone number—and a standing commitment that he would give me an interview. Elated, the editor dispatched me on the assignment. It was my first real task as a correspondent.

Achebe and I retreated to his book-lined office at the institute, its air flavored with the scent of books stretching and heaving. Five minutes into the interview I paused and rewound the tape. The recording sounded fine and our interview continued for another two hours. Afterwards Achebe told me it was one of the most exhaustive interviews he'd ever done. I took leave of him and, heady with excitement, took a cab to the local bus stop where I paid the fare for a bus headed for Enugu, the state capital, where I had booked a hotel.

That evening several of my friends gathered in my hotel room. They asked questions about Achebe, and then said they wanted to hear his voice. I fetched the tape recorder, happy to oblige them. Then I pressed the play button. My friends and I waited – not a word! I put in two other tapes, the same futility. How was I going to explain this mishap to my editor who had scheduled the interview as a forthcoming cover?

I phoned Achebe's home in panic. I begged that he let me return the next day for a short retake. "Thirty minutes—even twenty —would do," I pleaded. I half-expected him to scold me for lack of professional diligence and then hang up, leaving me to my distress. Instead he calmly explained that he had commitments the next day. If I could return the day after, he'd be delighted to grant me another interview. And he gave me permission to make the next session as elaborate as the first.

Two days later we were back in his office for my second chance. This time I paused every few minutes to check on the equipment. I stretched the interview to an hour and a half before guilt—mixed with gratitude—compelled me to stop. It was not as exhaustive as the first outing, nor did it have the spontaneity of our first interview. But it gave me—and the readers of the magazine—a prized harvest. My friends got a chance to savor Achebe's voice, with its mix of faint lisps and accentuated locutions.