MEJA MWANGI

Meja Mwangi belongs to *a* second generation of Kenyan creative writers in English. Mwangi began his prolific writing career in the 1970s, a decade after his more well-known compatriots such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Grace Ogot had been publishing their works. When he burst onto the scene with the award-winning Kill Me Quick in 1973, Mwangi was hailed in various quarters as a rising star in the East African literary constellation who was helping to disprove Taban lo Liyong's oft-cited claim that East Africa was a literary desert (Taban 1965, Nazareth 1976). Since then, Meja Mwangi has gone on to establish himself as one of the most prolific of Kenyan writers, publishing eleven novels in seventeen years in addition to short stories, children's books and working with a variety of projects in film. Mwangi's works have received awards in Kenya and abroad, they have been translated into six languages, and there are film versions of two of his novels.

If there is a single writer whose work is representative of the entire range of Kenyan narrative fiction today, it is Meja Mwangi. What is common to practically all of Kenyan--indeed, we might even say African—writing is its major thematic preoccupation with the dynamics of how tradition and modernity interact in African society. This thematic preoccupation has led in a number of directions, of course, with major concerns being

the disintegration of village life following the arrival of the Europeans in the colonial era, the disequilibrium caused by European formal education, the torment of the "been-to", the influence of the missionaries, and in the post-colonial setting the development of a new African political and economic elite and the dilemmas of life in the modern African city.

While Mwangi has touched on all of these concerns, we might divide his work into three major categories. The first comprises his Mau Mau novels. For many Kenyan writers, especially from the Kikuyu ethnic group to which Mwangi belongs, the armed resistance to British olonialism in Kenya, which came to be known as the Mau Mau revolt and reached its height in the 1950s, was a far-reaching experience. Mwangi, like other Kikuyu writers, has “exhumed his Mau Mau ghost" in his two novels Carcase for Hounds and Taste of Death (note). The thrillers that Mwangi began to write during the late 1970s and 1980s form a second category of texts, and have put him at the heart of a raging critical debate in the Kenyan literary establishment over the merits of serious versus popular literature. The third category of Mwangian writing, in fact written before Mwangi began his popular writings, is that of the urban novel. Mwangi's urban trilogv--Kill Me Quick. Going Down River Road, and The Cockroach Dance—is a compelling and innovative set of texts dealing with what is arguably the most pressing contemporary social

problem in Kenya: the rapid urbanization the country has experienced since independence in 1963 and its accompanying social problems. It is fair to say that critical acclaim for Mwangi as a writer has come predominantly from these tales of city life.

Meja Mwangi was born in Nanyuki, in Kenya's Central Province, on December 27, 1948. While by no means a major city, Nanyuki is an important center in a region which, during the pre-colonial era when Mwangi was born, was part of the so-called "white highlands," an area that had been set aside by the colonial administration exclusively for settlement by European farmers. The region features fertile farmland and an excellent climate. Following the colonization of Kenya, the resident Kikuyu and Maasai populations were either forced off this land onto "native reserves" or permitted to remain as squatters and laborers on the new white-owned ranches. The fact that land alienation was most blatant in this part of the colony, coupled with the importance of land in the Kikuyu tradition, made Central Province the center of armed resistance to the colonial authorities. The Land and Freedom army, also known by the enigmatic name of Mau Mau, effectively used its base in the forests if Central Province to become an important force in the lead-up to independence in 1963.

In some of same ways that the Vietnam War was a watershed in the North American consciousness, the Mau Mau

struggle was a defining and divisive experience for the colony and later the nation of Kenya. In the 1950s, as resistance fighters in increasing numbers took to the forests of Mount Kenya or the Aberdare mountain range—both areas near Mwangi's home in Nanyuki—the colonial administration declared a state of emergency, restricting movement in the area, resettling people into more easily controlled "villages," and using Kenyan homeguards to combat what they termed a terrorist movement. While there is no doubt that the Mau Mau fighters were instrumental in convincing the British government to grant political independence in Kenya, when the colonial administration negotiated the terms of independence it was with leaders who had not been personally involved in the armed struggle. The result has been an uneasy official position toward the Mau Mau participants during the entire postcolonial era that has followed. While giving lip service to the patriotism of the freedom fighters, many politicians who themselves took less confrontational and more collaborative stances during that era are happy to forget it (note: about Waruhiu Itote; Ngugi's position; more Mau Mau background). Given its historical and social significance, writers—and particularly Kikuyu writers—have felt compelled to deal with the Mau Mau experience in one way or another, and Meja Mwangi is no exception. He experienced the emergency as a child, living in the area of the main conflict, and

turned fifteen two weeks after Kenya achieved political independence. Both the promises of political independence and the troubled time leading up to that point were central to his consciousness.

The 1970s, when Mwangi was entering his 20s and beginning to publish his writings, was a time of disillusionment with the unfulfilled hopes of independence in East Africa in general, and a time of crisis for the city of Nairobi in particular. There resulted what might be termed an entire genre of "disillusionment literature," which vigorously criticized the new African political and economic elite that appeared to have betrayed the nation by using education and positions of privilege for personal rather than collective gain. The term neocolonialism was coined to describe a situation where a few of the faces in the power structure changed but where unjust colonial structures remained firmly in place. The disillusioned intellectual, once so optimistic about national development and the intellectual's role in nation-building, surfaced as an important character in Kenyan writing (note: Ngugi; Kibera).

It was at this time—around 1970—that Mwangi moved to Nairobi to continue his education. In addition to the climate of political disillusionment, the city's population was for a variety of reasons quickly outgrowing the capacity of its infrastructure. Although Nairobi has been characterized by rapid growth throughout

its history, in the decade following independence and with the dropping of restrictions on African immigration to the city, the growth reached unprecedented heights. By the early 1970s, housing, employment and transportation facilities were being strained more than ever. Slums, always a feature of Nairobi's geography, were growing at alarming rates. The government responded with a number of autocratic measures reminiscent of colonial era tactics, lending credence to charges that Kenya's was a neocolonial social system. Historically, Nairobi had been designed as a white man's city, and during the colonial era the South African model of racial segregation in housing and business was adopted almost wholesale. Pass laws were issued to restrict immigration, and vagrancy acts allowed unwanted immigrants to be returned to the countryside. In the late 1960s, when the post-independence relaxation of immigration restrictions allowed a huge growth in the city, the government reinstated some of the colonial-era vagrancy laws, and President Kenyatta urged Nairobi residents who had no jobs to "go back to the land." These measures had relatively limited impact, and Nairobi has continued its rapid growth since. Not surprisingly, this rapid urbanization, perhaps the most significant social phenomenon of postcolonial Kenya, was soon being treated by Kenyan writers, with Leonard Kibera's Voices in the Dark the first example of this trend.

Meja Mwangi is somewhat unusual among Kenyan writers in that he was not part of the university community, which has been the traditional fount of creative writers and artists in the postcolonial East African setting. After completing his "0" level exams at Nanyuki secondary school and his "A" level training at Kenyatta College near Nairobi, he applied for but failed to gain admission to the journalism and television broadcasting programs at the University of Nairobi. He instead embarked on a career of practical experience with the film industry. Mwangi worked as a soundman with a French television company ORTF, traveling throughout East Africa, and later joined the staff at the British Council in Nairobi as a film librarian. It was while at the British Council that he wrote his first novel (although the second to be published), Carcase for Hounds.

The importance of film to Mwangi's creative expression cannot be overemphasized. As a child in Nanyuki, he would regularly attend the open-air film offerings of the mobile movie theaters that came through town showing mostly Hollywood productions, and when Mwangi moved to Nairobi during the 1970s, he came to a town where recently released American and British films were regularly shown. Later, his connections with French television and with the British Council led to jobs on a number of major films that were shot in Kenya. Mwangi was location manager for Shadow on the Sun, casting

director for Kitchen Toto, and assistant director for the Hollywood hits Gorillas in the Mist. White Mischief and Out of Africa. The result has been a decidedly cinematic vision in his writing and a narrative style reminiscent of fast-moving popular film. Mwangi's characters, like many Kenyans of Mwangi's generation and younger, are conversant in tough-guy American slang; they reflect the alienation and individualism most obvious in urban postcolonial Kenya. Not surprisingly, two of Mwangi's novels have been associated with films: Carcase for Hounds was made into Cry Freedom (note) and The Bushtrackers was a screenplay collaboration with the North American journalist Gary Strieker.

MWANGI THE MAU MAU HISTORIAN

Carcase for Hounds, although it was the first novel that Mwangi wrote, was his second to be published, as well as the second to be filmed (note: Barrett and The Standard). It has much in common with Mwangi's other Mau Mau novel, Taste of Death. Both feature the typical Mwangian style of fast-paced action and snappy dialogue. Both use an omniscient narrator who presents the perspective of both the Mau Mau fighters and of the white government forces opposing them. Both personalize the conflict by setting up an individual Mau Mau leader against an opposing colonial military commander. The film version of Carcase for Hounds. a Nigerian production

directed by Ola Balogun under the title _Cry Freedom,_ is a fairly loose adaptation of Mwangi's original story. The setting is generically African, not specific to Kenya or the Mau Mau. Balogun also included a number of romantic entanglements not found in Mwangi's original.

Reflections by historians and fiction writers on the experience of Mau Mau and the accompanying state of emergency—so divisive for both Kenya Colony and the Republic of Kenya—has led to debates over what is accurate and what is historical revisionism. Colonial writers like Robert Ruark and Elspeth Huxley (note) portrayed the Land and Freedom Army in a negative, atavistic manner; Kenyan writers, including Mwangi, have been accused of accepting and perpetuating that negative image. Because the national bourgeoisie are not the same people who fought the Mau Mau wars, the argument goes, that history had to be rewritten to downplay the heroism of the guerrilla fighters and instead emphasize the role of Jomo Kenyatta and other post-independence political leaders. Thus Mwangi, like Charles Mangua in _A Tail in the Mouth_ (East African Publishing House, 1972) and Godwin Wachira in _Ordeal in the Forest_ (East African Publishing House, 1968), participates in "criminalizing" the movement in his representation of Mau Mau in _Carcase for Hounds_ and _Taste of_ (Maughan-Brown 1985a, 1985b).

If Mwangi's adult novels are open to this charge, his children's stories, in which Mau Mau figures significantly, are not. When he began writing for children, Mwangi chose the setting that he knew best from his own childhood: Nanyuki of the 1950s. Jimi the Dog and Little White Man both deal with the adventures of young Kariuki, the son of a cook in the house of the settler farmer, Bwana Ruin. While the former book focuses on how Kariuki gets and raises a puppy, it also raises issues of social injustices under colonialism. Little White Man, on the other hand, deals directly with the armed resistance in a serious and in-depth way. "I am not certain," Kariuki begins, "when I first heard the word mau-mau". Mau Mau is an integral part of young Kariuki's experience. His friendship and adventures with Nigel, the son of a settler farmer, involve the boys in run-ins with the freedom fighters in the nearby forest and in a sobering conclusion, Kariuki's brother Hari is killed by government soldiers after arranging for the release of the two boys. This is in fact more than a typical children's story, as the treatment of all the characters is more complex and nuanced than in the relatively caricatured representations in either Taste of Death or Carcase for Hounds.

MWANGI THE POPULAR AUTHOR

The first generation of East African writers, indeed African writers in general in the independence era,

worked from a general and implicit consensus that a writer's task was one of involvement in and commitment to nation-building and social improvement. To be an artist was to be an activist. The creation of "committed literature," or literature engages as it was called in the francophone context, was the unquestioned task of the writer, and while there may have been disagreements about specific ideological positions, as in the negritude debate, no-one questioned that the writer's primary duty was to improve society. Not coincidentally, writers from this era emerged from the major regional educational institutions—Makerere University in Kampala, the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Nairobi—since these were the centers of debate about social direction in East Africa.

Beginning in 1970, however, there emerged in Kenya a new generation of writers who began to indulge in the creation of texts that fell under the general, usually pejorative category of "popular" literature. These popular texts stand in stark contrast to the committed writing that dominated in the previous generation, and have provoked one of the most heated critical debates surrounding Kenyan and East African writing in the decades since. They include a whole raft of detective stories, adventures, tales of crime and romances, and are characterized by shallow characters, simple plots and plenty of fast action. Unlike the committed writing, the

popular novels are generally acknowledged to be potboilers; some, like Charles Mangua's Son of Woman. which is often credited with being the first of this genre from Kenya, were created for novel-writing competitions sponsored by publishing firms. Western popular writers, most notably James Hadley Chase, Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming and Robert Ludlum, are frequently cited as models for this genre, as are popular Hollywood films.

Critics both locally and internationally have vilified these Kenyan popular texts, condemning them as amoral, pornographic, lacking a serious message, and generally being a bad influence on young people. Chris Wanjala, a leading Kenyan critic, has led the charge:

> There is a case of literature in Kenya which is a trashy and scabrous imitation of brothel and low life, especially yarned for the low-brow reader in this country. It portrays the depraved scenes of sex, the dilemma of the prostitute and the cancer of unemployment (Wanjala 135).

Bernth Lindfors, referring to the ubiquitous Tabanian metaphor, remarked that with this explosion in popular literature, the East African literary desert was "now germinating its first full harvest of weeds" (21; get permission)

Despite the criticism from various quarters, these texts have, as their name implies, proven immensely popular. Following the success of Son of Woman. Kenyan publishing houses in the 1970s began special series to

facilitate these types of books. Heinemann was the first with their Spear Books series, shortly followed by the Afromance series from Transafrica, Pacesetters from Macmillan, and Heartbeat Books from the now-defunct East African Publishing House. In addition to their racy content, these books tended to be short (around 100 pages), and featured colorful pictures on the front with enticing titles such as Sugar Daddy's Lover. The Double-Cross. Lover in the Sky, or A Girl Cannot Go On Laughing All the Time (note). An important sub-genre of this popular fiction is the "my life in crime" stories, featuring exciting stories of criminal exploits, experiences in prison, or both (note). One publisher even hired a single writer to produce as many such texts as quickly as he could, publishing them under various pseudonyms (note: Mazungumzo interview with Nottingham).

Beginning in the late 1970s, Meja Mwangi also began to write texts that qualified in the popular literature category. To many of his admirers, these texts were disappointing, lacking the critical edge that had marked his earlier works, especially his urban novels. Mwangi's response to this criticism has been sanguine: he has argued that at this point in Kenya's literary history, it is simply important to provide texts that people will read, and since people buy and read these popular texts, these are the sorts that should be made available. "My only mistake," he has said, "was that I

didn't use a pseudonym for my popular novels, and use my own name for the rest. That way I would have avoided all this criticism" (note: Kurtz interview). Mwangi in fact had used a pseudonym—David Duchi for one of his adventure texts, Assassins on Safari, but plans with the Longman publishing company for a whole series using this name never materialized.

Mwangi's writing style is in fact readily suited to the popular genre, since his cinematic vision comes to the fore in the popular novels. They feature spit-fire action and dialogue that moves along at a frantic pace. If disappointing when compared to his more serious works, these texts are certainly among the best written of their type from Kenya. Mwangi usually takes a historical or political event from recent Kenyan or African experience as his point of departure: The Bushtrackers is about poachers in Kenyan game parks; Bread of Sorrow features freedom fighters and diamond smugglers in Southern Africa; civil war and famine in the Horn of Africa are found in Weapon of Hunger: we return to the South African liberation struggle in The. Return of Shaka: and Striving for the Wind brings us back to Kenya and postcolonial land tenure issues.

Mwangi's foray into the popular genre began with his. Bushtrackers (1979), which was in fact collaboration with the North American television journalist, Gary Strieker. Film and novel were coordinated to debut

together; Mwangi and Strieker created the screenplay and Mwangi wrote the novel (note). The story treats one of the more well-advertised problems of Kenya in the late 1970s, namely the decimation of wildlife by poachers. Frank Burkell, a white Englishman, and the Kikuyu Johnny Kimathi are park rangers working together in Tsavo Game Park. Johnny retires from this dangerous profession upon marrying, and opens a shop on Nairobi's Grogan Road. When the American-based mafia step up their ivory-smuggling operations and even break into Johnny's store and home because of his refusal to pay "protection" money, Johnny gets mad. He teams up with Frank once again and amid exciting chase scenes, exploding cars and fancy shooting, the buddies successfully eliminate the poaching threat and Grogan Road's extortionists in one fell swoop.

Assassins on Safari (1983), written under the pseudonym David Duchi, also involves the Kenyan tourist industry and foreign operatives. Kanja, a police reservist turned freelance bodyguard, becomes embroiled in a plan by German mercenaries to assassinate the U.S. Secretary of State during a visit to Kenya's popular Amboseli Game Park. By foiling the plot, Kanja strikes a blow for Kenyan pride and national sovereignty.

Bread of Sorrow (1987) would also make an exciting screenplay, featuring blackmail, exploding airplanes, gun-running for the African National Congress (ANC), diamonds in the mouth of a corpse, Frelimo guerrillas,

Rastafarians, and spectacular scenery. The action moves from London to Johannesburg to Mozambique to Nanyuki and finally to Msimbati, a small island off the Tanzanian coast. Here we meet the character of Colonel Bridges, an eccentric white man who has declared the island to be his personal, sovereign realm. (Note: This is a reference to the historical character of Leslie Rogers, who after retiring from the East African colonial service, settled on a small Tanzanian island. He had his own flag, declared himself sultan, and declared the island an independent country.) Much of the novel is about how the politically conservative South African Peter Jones comes to side with the ANC.

The historical allusion in Weapon of Hunger (1989) is to the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s. The fictional nation of Borku is experiencing a drought and famine, exacerbated by a civil war in the separatist region of Arakan—clearly a reference to Eritrea, which in fact achieved independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Jack Rivers, an American rock star who had raised money for famine relief in the region (an allusion to the Band Aid money-raising and relief efforts of 1985-1986), is concerned by the fact that the food supplies are not getting through to the famine-struck areas. He organizes a crew of unemployed musicians and makes a daredevil attempt to drive a convoy of 100 lorries of food through

the desert, spurning government resistance and scorning rebels and bandits.

Of all the Kenyan popular novels, Meja Mwangi's are among the most creative and the most consistently well written, even if Mwangi's thrillers demonstrate weaknesses characteristic of many of his novels. The same inconsistency when it comes to details that has been criticized in his Mau Mau novels (Calder 179) may be applied to Mwangi's popular texts: plots tend to hinge on unbelievable assumptions; the fast-paced action and snappy dialogue (usually a plus) at times becomes so clipped as to strain credulity. Mwangi has a penchant for technical detail: if a character drives a car or flies an airplane, we are sure to be informed precisely what type of car or 'plane is involved, if a gun is loaded or fired, we will know its caliber and the precise sound it makes. Usually an effective technique, this misfires when these details are clearly inaccurate or impossibly far-fetched. As in his other works, the portrayal of women in Mwangi's thrillers is generally abominable. The role of almost every Mwangian female is as the object of male sexual desire. Women, like cars and guns, have little importance except as signifiers of male potency and control. All are discarded unceremoniously or even brutally. Mwangi's latest novels, The Return of Shaka (1989) and Striving for the Wind (1990) occupy ambivalent positions in relation to the rest of Mwangi's popular works. While

they read like popular texts, both demonstrate a concern for including a serious message. Mwangi by this time has clearly demonstrated his ability to write a thriller, but it seems he also wants to be considered a serious writer, a sentiment he was already expressing at the end of the 1970s:

> The popular writing can't go on. 1 mean, one can only write so much on a certain subject before the readers tire and eventually return to the more serious literature. The excitement caused by the emerging popular writing should soon settle down. There is a great future for serious writing here.... I like to develop a serious story in prose (Mazungumzo 1980, 76-79)

The result is a pair of hybrid texts, taking the form of typical Mwangian popular novels, but with a serious message. In The Return of Shaka. Mwangi has taken as his subject the situation of African students in the United States, with whom he had become acquainted during a term with the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1975-1976:

> When I was in the U.S., I met a lot of East Africans in my travels through San Francisco, Washington and Chicago. As we talked, *I* realized that there was a great need to tell their sad story. I hope to go back and learn more about this situation before finishing this novel (Mazungumzo 76)

Mwangi did not in fact go back, but has managed to tell this "sad story." Moshesh, the son and heir of the traditional leader in a fictional country reminiscent of South Africa, is studying in the United States and lays

plans with a number of his compatriots— also students or professors at U.S. schools—for an armed invasion and liberation of their homeland. Backed by the generous financial backing of the father of Moshesh's American girlfriend, the group hires weapons and a crack group of mercenaries, who are hanging out in Alabama pool halls. When everything falls apart in the end, however, it becomes clear that the whole thing was a grand delusion. The anticlimactic conclusion of The Return of Shaka contains a serious critique—on the one hand of those African students abroad who compensate for feelings of guilt or failure by inventing elaborate fantasies about who they are and what they will do for their homeland, and on the other hand of the texts that support those fantasies, namely the popular genre in which Mwangi himself has participated.

Striving for the Wind, another ambivalent text, is Mwangi's most impressive novel since his urban trilogy. While the prose is still snappy and the action still fast-paced, this is clearly a story with a "serious" message. This time the setting is Mwangi's home area in rural Central Province, and the issue is postcolonial land tenure. Baba Pesa (literally, "father of money") is a greedy landowner in the former white highlands, and is intent on capturing the remaining parcel of land in his area, owned by the poor Baba Baru ("father of dirt"). Pesa's intelligent but disillusioned son Juda adds

critical commentary. In the end, Baru and Pesa are forced to cooperate and help each other with their harvests, and Pesa rediscovers the importance of the land that he had previously seen as merely a source of income. Striving for the Wind was a Kenyan entry for the Commonwealth Book Award in 1991, where it received an honorable mention.

MWANGI THE CHRONICLER OF THE URBAN POOR

Meja Mwangi was not the first to write about the urban setting in Kenya. In the three years preceding the appearance of Kill Me Quick (1973), a number of Kenyan authors had already published novels dealing with what has since become a distinctive theme in Kenyan writing: life in the city (note). Whereas earlier writing focused on conflicts surrounding the integration of Western and traditional ways of life or on issues of nation-building following the colonial experience, beginning in 1970 there developed a veritable explosion of novels with an exclusively urban setting and dealing exclusively with the vagaries of city life. Not surprisingly, a large majority of these texts would qualify as popular literature, discussed above. The urban novel was a logical outgrowth of rapid urbanization in Kenya following independence, and has been a dominant feature of Kenyan writing ever since. Mwangi was thus neither the first nor the only writer to treat the urban setting in an in-depth way, but his urban novels remain the paradigmatic and in

many ways the most interesting examples of the urban genre from Kenya.

Urbanization is arguably the single most significant social phenomenon in postcolonial Kenya. Although East Africa is by global standards relatively under-urbanized, the rate of urban growth in the region has been extremely high and the accompanying problems have been manifested most evidently in the region's major city, Nairobi. Established as a depot and later an administrative center for the Uganda railway at the end of the 19th century, Nairobi became the capital of British East Africa in 1907, and has continued growing rapidly through the postcolonial era. Class and race segregation was structured into Nairobi's design during the colonial era, and many of these built-in disparities remain in the postcolonial. Perhaps the most obvious signs of these problems are the impoverished shantytowns and slums—Mathare Valley being the most infamous, though not the largest—that fill the marginal spaces within and between the more affluent suburbs and the modern downtown. Nairobi has become what Andrew Hake in his definitive study called a "two-faced" city, featuring a modern facade but with an increasing number of people in its backyard (note: mention the informal sector, ILO study).

Meja Mwangi's urban novels offer a riveting account of the constant struggle for survival that marks life in Nairobi's poorest sectors. Kill Me Quick. Going

Down River Road and The Cockroach Dance recreate landscapes of stinking back alleys, ramshackle dwellings, and the severe social problems that accompany them — inadequate housing and jobs, nonexistent waste removal services, corrupt officials, alcoholism, thievery and juvenile delinquency. Mwangi's vivid descriptions of Nairobi's underbelly are comparable to what has sometimes been described as the "excremental vision" of the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah: filth, grime and foul odors fill the text.

In his urban novels, many of Mwangi's narrative weaknesses are converted to strengths by nature of the setting he has chosen. The individualism that is so tiring in the adventure and Mau Mau novels is no longer cliché, but a fitting response to this tough, urban street setting. The inconsistency of detail is less problematic, because city life itself is inconsistent. Even the portrayal of women becomes less objectionable, if not yet laudable. Women are still only sex objects, but then everyone and everything is objectified and prostituted in this dehumanised urban setting. Mwangi's tales demonstrate the disruption by the urban social milieu of traditional structures, including family roles and gender relations.

The main characters in Mwangi's urban texts are examples of what Angus Calder has appropriately dubbed the "Mwangian Man." This character is an intelligent, usually

well educated individual whose inability to find a job that uses his skills (or sometimes any job at all) leads him to ever greater cynicism, disillusionment and despair (Calder 190). Meja in Kill Me Quick. Ben in Going Down River Road, and Dusman Gonzaga in The Cockroach Dance are, despite their differences, classic examples of the Mwangian Man, while Moshesh in The Return of Shaka and the young Juda Pesa in Striving for the Wind represent a recent if incomplete return of the Mwangian Man in Mwangi's writing. It has been this character who, above all else, has invested Mwangi's writings with their critical edge.

The problem of "street children" or the "parking boys" as they are sometimes known is the one that occupies Kill Me Quick, the novel that put Mwangi on the East African literary map. The novel is also at least partially autobiographical; Mwangi wrote Kill Me Quick after graduating from secondary school and discovering that he and his friends could not find jobs (Mazungumzo). Kill Me Quick is a first-person narrative in what might be best described as the picaresque tradition. Its protagonists, the adolescent school-leavers Meja and Maina, represent one of the major social problems of Nairobi: the growing number of orphaned or destitute boys (and, beginning in the late 1980s, girls as well) who roam Nairobi's streets, surviving on handouts and by their wits. Delinquency leads to involvement with street gangs

and more serious crimes; in the end, Maina is convicted of murder and will likely hang, while Meja languishes in prison. Kill Me Quick won Mwangi the Kenyatta Award for Literature, a significant achievement for a first novel.

Going Down River Road is the novel that solidified Mwangi's literary reputation, winning him the Kenyatta Award for a second time. It is the Nairobi novel par excellence, and has become recommended reading in most of the tourist guide books to Kenya, particularly those that cater to the hitchhiking set. In a more deliberate and ultimately more successful manner than in Kill Me Quick. Mwangi recreates what Hake called Nairobi's backyard, the peripheral areas such as Eastleigh and Mathare Valley that house the disenfranchised and the powerless and the River Road area, where Nairobi's inexpensive bars are located. Again, Mwangi takes a socially marginal character as his protagonist. Ben is a construction worker on a new addition to Nairobi's growing skyline—the 24-story, ironically-named Development House. When the novel opens, Ben has just moved in with Wini, a prostitute/secretary with a son called Baby. The tone (or perhaps more accurately, the smell) of the entire novel is established in the novel's memorable opening lines:

> Baby should not have drunk coffee. He urinated all of it during the night and now the smell lay thick and throat-catching, overcoming even the perfume of his mother's bed across the room. In the bed Ben lay with the boy's mother curled in his large arms, warm and soft and fast asleep. But Ben was not asleep

> anymore. The pungent baby urine stink had awakened him long before his usual waking up time (2).

When Wini deserts them both for a wealthy white man, Ben, in a moment of compassion that he occasionally regrets, continues to care for Baby. They are kicked out of Wini's Eastleigh apartment and take the decidedly downwardly-mobile step of settling in with Ben's work buddy, Ocholla, in a shantytown shack along the Nairobi River. Eastleigh, a section of Nairobi known for its Somali and Ethiopian refugee populations, at least had solid buildings, but the move to the Nairobi River slum places Ben among an even more destitute population. In this "illegal" settlement, the inhabitants are at the mercy of city council extortionists, who provide no basic services but will burn down the tenants' shacks when they cannot pay "tax" money. But even in Nairobi Valley, life is not as bad as it could be, Mwangi shows. Perhaps the lowest rung on the Nairobi social ladder is represented by Mathare Valley, "the only place in the city where they may keep chickens or perish" (100). In a brilliant passage, Ben passes along the lip of Mathare Valley aboard city bus number fourteen. He is on his way to Kariobangi, to pick up another supply of <u>bhang</u> with which to bribe his foreman:

> From up here the shanty town appears just as a rubbish heap of paper, scrap iron, dust and smoke. Appearances are deceptive. Down there live enough construction labourers, unlicensed fruit peddlers and illicit liquor brewers to cause concern to the whole

> city police. It can be nightmarish hunting for vagrants down there. Almost everyone is a vagrant, that is including women and children. And they drink chang'aa and smoke bhang.. two things that cannot stand the sight of a policeman. A few coppers have got themselves knocked cold by unknown assailants down there. Coppers find it easier to follow behind the City Council constabulary who have the right to raze the place down any day in the interest of public health. In the resulting smoke and chaos the policemen descend into the forbidden valley, make a few desperate arrests, then scramble out before the place regenerates into solid, obstinate, granite resistance to law and order (140).

It is in this vivid portrayal of Nairobi's marginal spaces that Mwangi excels. Morning finds Ben on the roads and paths leading to city center, along with the crowds of other workers who cannot afford bus fare. No other Kenyan writer has captured this "endless routine trudge, the tramp of the damned at the Persian wheel" (6) so effectively.

Nairobi, Mwangi shows, is replete with contradictions. Development House, for example, is located on Haile Selassie Avenue, at the edge of the financial and business district and next to the site for a new 800-bed tourist hotel. Workers like Ben and Ocholla, who are actually constructing the building, live in Nairobi's poorest areas and are unlikely to benefit from Development House, apart from their temporary, low-paying jobs. Mwangi uses the construction of the new building to structure the novel's action: the first chapter finds Development House four stories high; it grows to seven stories by chapter seven, thirteen by chapter eleven, and its final elevation

of twenty-four stories by chapter twenty. By contrast, River Road is the area of bars, night clubs and cheap hotels frequented by Nairobi's working classes. Here Ben and Ocholla down illegal _chang'aa_ and _karara._ find prostitutes, and pick fights. Mwangi portrays sympathetically the pathetic sense of belonging and importance that can be found in such places:

> Good old Karara Centre, stuffy as hell, warm as home. Here at last are people. People he understands, people who are people, human beings. Struggling, working, drinking, eating, hungering, living men (118).

But the momentary and illusory nature of that sense of belonging is also clear. Karara Centre, and other drinking houses like it along River Road, are dead ends when all is said and done:

> There is nothing to sing about, nothing to laugh at, nothing to fight for and nothing to vomit.... Bleak, contagious loneliness surrounds each and every one of them. Infectious hopelessness that angers and frightens Ben (214).

Going Down River Road ends on an ambivalent but predominantly somber note. A tentative but fragile hope for the future is maintained when Baby, after a bout of delinquency, is convinced by Ben to return to school. Meanwhile, Development House has been completed and the workers are out of a job; but another big building is about to be built. Ocholla's large, hungry family has unexpectedly joined him from their rural home, where the

crops have failed and life is hard. Ocholla tells Ben that he and Baby will have to move out. They argue, but as Ocholla runs out of the Karara Centre and down River Road, Ben chases him, calling out as the novel closes: "Ocholla!" Ben hollers hoarsely. "Wait for me; don't leave me here alone. Buddy!" (215)

In many ways, The Cockroach Dance is a perfected remake of Going Down River Road. Again, Mwangi has created a buddy story, this time featuring the Dacca House roommates Duisman Gonzaga and Toto. Dusman tries to convince himself that this unsightly address on smelly, undesirable Grogan Road is only temporary, but when thieves take the wheels from his broken-down Triumph Herald, Dusman's last symbol of freedom and possible escape is destroyed. Grogan Road is literally and symbolically adjacent to River Road. The excremental ambience, the bars and brothels, the thieves and cockroaches that operate with equal impunity, the streets filled with drunks, beggars, and survivors—all remind us that we are in the same landscape that we met in Mwangi's previous urban novels. Even some of the same lines are recycled. Compare Dusman's discovery of "a hungry cockroach gnawing at the plastic nozzle of a can of the most reputable insect decimator on the market" Cockroach Dance 189) to Ben's explanation that "You cannot kill them.... You find them playing with the insecticide container, trying to eat the plastic lid" (River Road 20).

Similarly, we are again confronted with the vividly portrayed "tramp of the damned" in Nairobi's underbelly. Mwangi's preferred metaphor in The Cockroach Dance, however, is Shakespearean rather than Dantesque. As Dusman observes in his typical free indirect discourse,

> The events that take place daily on these same streets leave you with a dry acid taste in your mouth. Real life dramas, written by an eccentric old bastard having no apparent beginning or end, no winners, only losers and choreographed -by a sadistic bitch-goddess (43).

In The Cockroach Dance, Mwangi is as creative as ever. His humor is as gut-wrenching as his sensory descriptions. Dusman is relatively fortunate, as Grogan Road characters go. He at least has an education and a job. Unfortunately, he belongs to that class of young Nairobians who are clearly overqualified and underemployed. He manifests his frustrations with his dead-end job through fantasies about the parking meters it is his duty to read:

> Dusman Gonzaga had dreamed ... he had become a parking meter magnate. He had installed miniature meters on the dirty kitchen table for the roaches that came in hordes to forage for crumbs. He had invented special ones with split-second electronic timing devices for the mice and rats out by the garbage cans (3).

Dusman even invents meters for the vagrants and beggars of downtown Nairobi. It becomes evident as the novel progresses that cockroaches are the predominant metaphor

for Nairobi's derelict populations. The Cockroach Dance is in effect the story of how Dusman changes his attitude toward these "milling masses" who "sweat sticky, black pitch" (57). His disposition is at first reactionary: "Give them a job, force them to work, or take them out and let the army use them as dummies for target practice" (58). But a week of sick leave gives Dusman time to reflect on his experience on Grogan Road and its living conditions. Slowly but surely, he begins to identify with the masses, beginning with "the faceless ones" who inhabit Dacca House. Dusman becomes obsessed with cockroaches, to the point of ordering them in a restaurant (94)! By the end, he is a tentative revolutionary, concluding that "the wretched of the earth will in the long run prise something out of the tight claws of the not so wretched" (157)—like tenacious cockroaches that survive despite the odds. Dusman leads the Dacca House tenants, the faceless ones that he had long despised, in a rent strike that is still unresolved as the novel closes.

This growth of social awareness is precisely the most important difference between Going Down River Road and The Cockroach Dance. Perhaps Mwangi had become aware of criticisms like those of Angus Calder, who constrasts Ngugi's communalism to Mwangi's "crude individualism" (Calder 186). Mwangi in The Cockroach Dance presents a broader historical and social vision. Nairobi's structure did not suddenly arise overnight; it developed over time,

with its roots in the colonial era, as two major narrative interventions on the history and development of Grogan Road testify.

Mwangi's characters are more vivid and memorable than ever in The Cockroach Dance. That many of them are deliberate caricatures is especially evident if one understands their Swahili names. For example, the residents of Dacca House include the family of Sukuma Wiki, the vegetable peddler. A green vegetable similar to kale, sukuma wiki is commonly eaten with the staple ugali. Its role as an effective budget-stretcher is evidenced by its name, which literally means "to push the week." In a comical extension, Mwangi names Sukuma's wife, Vuta (hence, "pull the week"). Chupa na Debe (literally, "bottles and cans") is modeled after real-life Nairobi characters, who eke out a living by collecting and reselling exactly what the name indicates. Mganga ("doctor") is the resident witchdoctor, whose dubious treatments Dusman carefully avoids. Then there is the Bathroom Man, with his wife and child. Dusman's change in attitude toward this family, that literally lives in a bathroom, is an individual instance of the way he reacts to the rest of the faceless masses. He finally stops directing his indignation at the family, turning it instead to the real culprit, landlord Tumbo Kubwa ("big belly").

To date, it is the urban setting that is Mwangi's most successful. The two short stories that he has published also deal with urban themes. "An Incident in the Park" is about mob justice, an all-too-common occurrence in Nairobi. A vegetable hawker, running from the police that are demanding his licence, is accosted by the lunchtime crowd in downtown Uhuru Park and stoned to death. In choosing Uhuru Park as his setting, Mwangi has chosen yet another important space in Nairobi's urban geography, an area where the unemployed sleep the day away, the quiet of the park only disrupted by the lunchtime rush of workers hurrying from their government offices to the downtown and back. The incident Mwangi describes in this story succinctly summarizes the issues of alienation and poverty that inform all of Mwangi's urban texts.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE 1990S

Mwangi came of age as a writer- just as Kenya was entering a brief golden age of postcolonial fiction: the 1970s saw more Kenyan titles from more Kenyan-based publishers than any decade before or since. Since then, the number of published titles has declined precipitously, and particularly with the dramatic deterioration of the Kenyan economy in the 1990s, publishers have tended to stick to the sure money-makers, namely school texts. At the same

time that all writers were being affected in this way, Meja Mwangi was feeling frustrated with the mixed critical reception his recent works had been receiving. The perceived disjuncture between his popular adventure texts and his serious urban novels was a common criticism of his more recent works, and while Going Down River Road and The Cockroach Dance are generally acknowledged to be his best works, they are inescapably similar to each other. Mwangi, it seemed, needed a new angle. His writing lacked a social vision and a sense of who his audience should be, to repeat one frequently-cited criticism (Calder 190).

The Return of Shaka and Striving for the Wind, discussed above, represent something of an attempt to find that new angle, and to create a blend of the popular and serious texts. It was also at this time that Mwangi began publishing children's stories, a project that he explains resulted from his frustration with the critical reception of his works. The children's stories are also an extension of Mwangi's earlier interests. When he was growing up in Nanyuki, Mwangi would wrote stories to entertain his brother, illustrating them himself. He has also explained his interest in children's writing in the same terms as his popular writing, as an outgrowth of his concern for getting people interested in reading. There is simply not enough written for children from a Kenyan or African perspective, Mwangi has argued (note: Kurtz interview). Mwangi's children's stories have in fact been

his most successful works, and Little White Man is Mwangi's best-selling book of all. Translations have been made in Dutch, French and German, and the German language edition received wide international exposure after being awarded the Deutscher Jugendliterature Preis in 1992.

Meja Mwangi had always been unusual among Kenyan writers in that he did not emerge from the university community. In fact, apart from a brief stint at the University of Iowa, in the United States, as a participant in the International Writing Program, Mwangi had not gone beyond two years of study at Kenyatta University College. Consequently, when he was awarded a scholarship to pursue a bachelor's degree in English at Leeds University in 1990, he took it, partly as a way to remedy what he considered a gap in his experience and partly as an opportunity to take a break from writing (note: Kurtz interview). It remains to be seen what influence the university experience will have on Mwangi's writing.

Perhaps inevitably, Mwangi's dissatisfactions with the written text have continued to push him toward the media of film. Even though Kenya has been used as the location for a large number of North American and British films, the local film industry is practically nonexistent. Funding constraints and bureaucratic restrictions have effectively stifled local initiatives in this direction,

making East Africa (once a literary desert, by Taban's assertion) still a cinematic desert, particularly when compared to developments in West African film. With his wealth of experience in the logistical aspects of film, with his decidedly cinematic vision, and with his previous forays into this new field, Meja Mwangi—who has done so much to help Kenya's literary desert bloom--is as well suited as anyone to alter the landscape in Kenyan film. Given his record as one of the most innovative and wide-ranging of contemporary Kenyan writers, it would be fitting for Mwangi to be a groundbreaker in this regard as well.

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