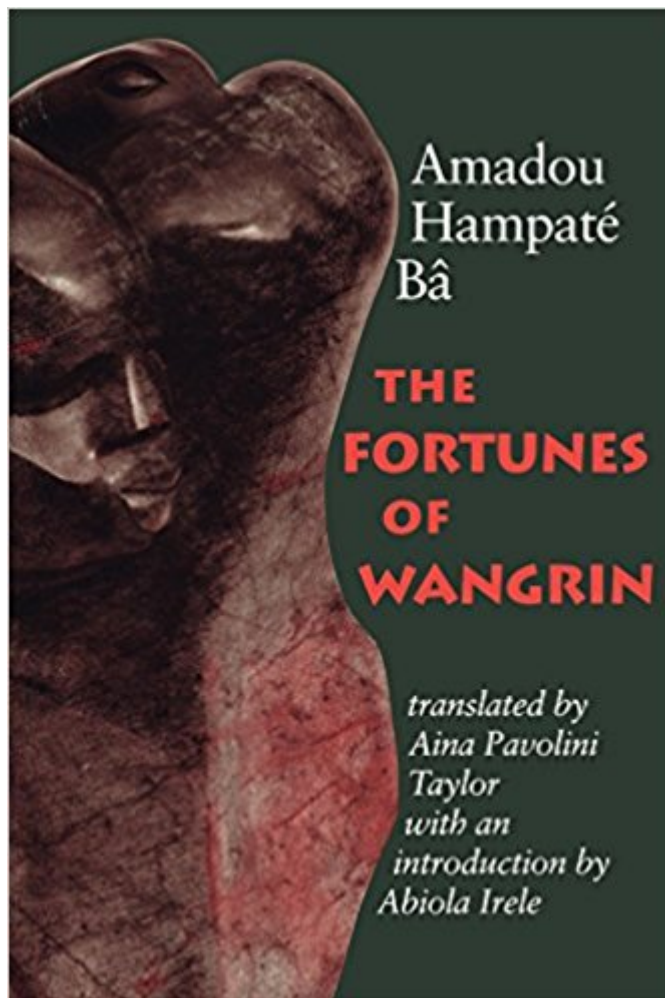


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The Fortunes Of Wangrin



Synopsis

The Fortunes of Wangrin Amadou Hampatã Bâ [note special accents on the "e" in Hampate and "a" Ba not correctly reproduced here – see ms.] Translated by Aina Pavolini Taylor with an Introduction by F. Abiola Irele Winner of the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noire "I think this is perhaps the best African novel on colonialism and it draws very richly on various modes of oral literature." – Ralph Austen, University of Chicago "It is a wonderful introduction to colonial rule as experienced by Africans, and in particular, to the rule of African middlemen." – Martin A. Klein, University of Toronto "The Fortunes of Wangrin is not only a wonderful novel by one of Africa's most renowned intellectuals, it is also literally filled with information about French colonization and its impact on traditional African societies, African resistance and collaboration to colonization, the impact of French education in Africa, and a host of other subjects of interest." – Francois Manchuelle, New York University Wangrin is a rogue and an operator, hustling both the colonial French and his own people. He is funny, outrageous, corrupt, traditional, and memorable. Bâ's book bridges the chasm between oral and written literature. The stories about Wangrin are drawn from oral sources, but in the hands of this gifted writer these materials become transformed through the power of artistic imagination and license. The Fortunes of Wangrin is a classic in Franchophone African literature. Amadou Hampatã Bâ was a distinguished Malian poet and scholar of African oral tradition and precolonial history. Aina Pavolini Taylor is an independent translator with wide experience of Africa, now living and working in Italy. F. Abiola Irele is a professor in the Department of Black Studies at Ohio State University.

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Customer Reviews

A searing fictional indictment of colonialism and its corruption of both its French citizens and African subjects, this novel written by the late Malian scholar presents the life of Wangrin, a child of great intellect and promise, who veers from the traditional customs of his West African society to embrace the worst characteristics of his foreign benefactors. Determined to exploit his education, he gains employment as a primary school teacher through an assist from the district officer, but he has his eye on life's better things. The wily and resourceful Wangrin seizes every opportunity to advance himself, running several ingenious scams on both his French employers and his own people. His jealous rivals and outmaneuvered European foes repeatedly try to get the elusive rogue arrested and humiliated, but the African finds ways to beat back their assaults, overcoming every attack from the relentless Count de Villermoz and his ally, Remo. Skillful in his detailed characterizations of the Africans and French, Hampat? B? uses each of Wangrin's skirmishes with the law as a chance to explore harsh bigotry and blind nationalism, which served as the pillars of colonial rule. His best work surfaces in his depiction of Wangrin, whose cunning and clever tongue are only a part of the man's complex personality. Ultimately, the continual struggle to keep his enemies at bay while acquiring more wealth takes a fateful toll on Wangrin, and his fall is as sensational as his rise. Though the plot's momentum is occasionally slowed by the narrator's asides, this award-winning novel, first published in French in the '70s, is memorable for its trenchant political and cultural commentary on the effects of colonialism in Africa. (Nov.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

In French Africa at the beginning of the 1900s, a young African man determines to work his way up in the civil service maintained by the conquerors. The chaos of France's colonies is reflected by the chaos of Wangrin's life and the lives of those around him. Ba's 1976 novel, an acknowledged African classic, shows how Wangrin is forced to adapt to the social and political changes the French impose upon his culture and also shows the fates of those not as able or willing to adapt as Wangrin. As interpreter for a French officer, Wangrin is uniquely placed to see both sides of colonialism, and his ability to function in the conqueror's realm allows him to secure himself and his family in a time of economic and political uncertainty. Always looking out for his own interests yet always willing to help out a less fortunate friend, Wangrin is a fascinating character. Greedy but compassionate, he is often just a step ahead of his French superiors and of compatriots jealous of his relative wealth. Bonnie Johnston --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Wangrin is just a portrayal of the african subject playing the colonizer's game against his opponents. It is the definition of a real man that do not let religious poison take over his mind, even though he lets his indigenous beliefs lead him to ruin when he is at the apex of his glory. The same beliefs that took him to the top led him to see himself vulnerable toward the end of his life. Very smart guy with a sharp mind and understanding of human relations.

Not as described

A classic, quite well translated in English. As engrossing as the original version and a definite must read for lovers of great books

Despite what the Editorial Review says, this is not a work of fiction. This is the exact account of Wangrin's life through the words of Wangrin and those who knew him. This premise might seem preposterous - but not accepting this takes almost the whole value of the book. And accepting the fact that it is a biography, despite all the unbelievable african lore in it, is very important in order to assimilate the great lesson of this work. Had I not been to Mali, and talked with the people (the real people, not the ones that dwell outside hotels, ong's headquarters and all the places where the presence of white people destroy local culture) and seen what I saw, I would read this very review and call it's writer either naive or stupid. But since I was lucky enough to go there (and many might perceive it without going there), I can perceive Hampatã Bâ not as a writer, or a storyteller, but as a humble and powerful messenger of his own astonishingly rich culture.

Don't be put off by the truly terrible cover, this prize-winning novel by Malian author Ba is an entertaining masterpiece of African literature. Originally published in French in 1973, the book won the "Grand Prix Littéraire de L'Afrique Noire", and is a vivid window into colonial French West Africa circa 1905-25. In a nutshell, what makes the book so special is that Ba refuses to allow his protagonist to be a defenseless victim of colonialism, but paints a complicated portrait in which the protagonist is the engineer of his own rise, and his own downfall. The story is essentially a biography of Wangrin, a noble-born West African boy sent to a French colonial "hostage school" for the sons of chiefs and other African notables. There, his quick mind and facility with French takes him to the top of the class and sets him on a path of prosperity. He enters the service of the colonial administration as a schoolteacher, but soon machinates his way into a clerkship, and eventually into a position as all-powerful, indispensable interpreter. (One of the novel's many comments on French

colonial rule comes via the role of the interpreter, who, although ostensibly an aide to the French officer in charge of a region, was the only person who knew everything that was going on.) The story charts Wangrin's gradual rise to power, as he craftily maneuvers his way, all the while making the most of his position to enrich himself. Wangrin is very much a trickster character, however, unlike many portrayals of colonial lackeys, his rise in status and wealth comes solely at the expense of the powerful and rich. Never in the story does Wangrin take advantage of the poor or destitute -- quite the opposite, he is a munificent bestower of alms and largesse. These battles with other Africans for influence and wealth go a long way toward dispelling the framework of colonizer vs. colonized. In Wangrin's world, the colonial rulers are essentially very powerful pieces in the chess game of his life. Which is not to suggest that the institution of colonialism isn't severely criticized in the course of the book -- topics coming in for special derision include the requirements for forced menial labor, the practice of taking native sexual partners, and the possibility of unchecked cruelty. That said, the story also provides plenty of examples of administrators being careful to act within certain boundaries lest they be censured. It is Wangrin's mastery of both the colonial and the native languages, traditions, laws, and beliefs that allows him to blossom. This adaptability is also evident in his personal blending of Islam and animism (a fluidity of belief still common in West Africa), that the book does a wonderful job of displaying. And yet it is this adaptability which is his ultimate undoing. In a sequence rich in meaning, he is speeding at night in his European sports coupe along a road built by forced labor, only to run over and kill a python. His imprudent use of this modern foreign luxury machine has killed a creature that is taboo to him, and it the physical representation of the spirit of a nearby lake, portending his fall. Similarly, his rapid descent into alcoholism and poverty comes at the hands of a beautiful European woman -- the message couldn't get much clearer! On the whole, the translation is very readable, although at times it can be a little clunky due to having to try and capture all the various traditional allusions, formal and informal speech patterns, and nuances of meaning. Still, the rhythms are much more fluid and enjoyable than many translations of African literature. There are numerous annotations explaining elements throughout the book, and it's rather annoying that the publisher has done them as endnotes rather than footnotes, since one essentially has to keep flipping back and forth. The characters all come alive, especially the titular hero, who is perhaps best captured by the following quote from a foe: "Wangrin is a scoundrel of the first order and a most skillful schemer but paradoxically he is also a gentleman." His story should be read by anyone with an interest in French colonialism, West Africa, or African literature in general. And oh yes, Ba claims the whole thing is true.

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