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INTERVIEW

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MANU HERBSTEIN – AUTHOR OF *AMA: A STORY OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE*

Narrating the Atlantic Slave Trade: Manu Herbstein on "Ama" and the Silences of History

EBG: First of all, thank you for agreeing to answer our questions. It is an honour to have this conversation with you. Today, we will focus on your novel *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, which received the 2002 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. The book addresses a difficult and painful history, and through it, you bring to life a voice that is too often absent from the record. To begin, we would like to ask about that central choice: you placed an enslaved Black woman at the heart of the story. What kinds of dilemmas – narrative, ethical or political – did you face in making that decision?

MH: To answer this question, I need to think back some thirty years. I don't recall ever having made the carefully considered choice that your question implies. I first visited Elmina Castle soon after setting up a temporary home and office in Cape Coast in late 1961. It was then in use as a Police Training College. I was totally ignorant of its historical significance and there was no tourist guide to enlighten me. In the years that followed, the Castle was opened to tourists. I took visitors there, friends and family members, and must have listened to the spiel of several guides. Fast forward to 1994. I read reports in the newspapers of the violent disturbances in northern Ghana – disturbances which came to be known as the Guinea Fowl War. The participants were, on one side, the Konkombas, and on the other, the Dagombas and Nanumbas. My questions as to the underlying cause yielded the answer, "As for the Northerners, they are like that," implying an inherent general tendency to violence. That struck me as, at best, unsatisfactory; at worst, racist. In a library, I found a book entitled *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana* by David Tait, edited from his published and

unpublished writings by Jack Goody after Tait's death in a car accident. It is a scholarly work, full of anthropological jargon that was beyond my understanding. However, it had one chapter of history that suggested to me that the present conflict had roots several centuries in the past. I didn't keep a diary, so I have to guess what prompted me to start writing. The first chapter I wrote would turn out to be chapter 13 of the published novel. An early draft starts with this paragraph, later edited out: "The female slaves are exhibited in a courtyard. Hidden from view, the Dutch governor, De Bruyn, inspects them. Ama is stripped and subjected to a humiliating examination before De Bruyn selects her. She's taken to his room, but when he attempts to handle her, she's taken by surprise and strikes out, knocking him to the floor. De Bruyn, attracted by her spirit, decides to keep her in his quarters as his maid and concubine." My knowledge of Ghanaian history had hardly improved since 1961. I must have recalled the tourist guides' spiel. I had no idea whether I had the skill to write fiction. I sent the draft of the chapter to a cousin who was a practising journalist. He recommended that I go ahead. I had created Ama. Now I had to discover her back story and her forward story. To do that, I spent long hours in the Africa section of the Balme Library at the University of Ghana, reading between the lines of primary and secondary historical texts and searching for revealing anecdotal material. Ama's story, I felt, lay hidden there. I just had to find it. In a synopsis dated 25 March 1994, I wrote that themes which arise in the context of the narrative are roots, adaptation to exile, resistance to persecution and solidarity.

JK: We learned that early on, you considered publishing under a colour-blind pseudonym to obscure your identity. What led you to think about that and why did you ultimately decide to publish under your own name? How has that decision shaped the reception of the book?

MH: In the autumn of 1996, the US Information Agency ran a workshop in Accra entitled *Corridors of Culture at the du Bois Centre*. What, I wonder now, was the USIS doing in running this workshop in Accra and Harare? It's not relevant here, but among the participants were Cyprian Ekwensi and Ishmael Reed. One of the panellists was a successful American novelist, a white woman. I told her that I was writing a novel set in the Atlantic Slave Trade, with a Black woman as the central character. She replied that she would think twice before doing that; America wasn't ready. She might have mentioned the reception of William Styron's novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, first published in 1967, which was widely praised by white

literary critics and sharply criticised by Black writers. The publishing industry in Ghana was small. My aim was to get published in the West. I'm not sure whether it was this discussion that led me to consider using the neutral pen-name: I. Moses. On further thought, I decided that doing so would be a capitulation to unwarranted prejudice. Responses to the published novel supported my decision. A few African American reviewers had initial doubts, based on seeing me as a white South African. They were swayed by reading the novel. African reviewers might have had such doubts, but only one has expressed them and explained how she dealt with them. In fact, a PhD dissertation at the University of Ghana in 2022 about the Ghanaian novels on slavery reflected on exactly this point. The researcher, Philomina Afua Odi Mintah, noted that some might question including my work in a Ghanaian study of slavery because of my background as a white South African of Jewish ancestry. However, she explained why it made sense: my novels focus on Ghanaian people and places, and they approach the history of slavery from a Ghanaian perspective rather than a European one. She also pointed out that I've lived in Ghana for most of my adult life since 1970, that I'm married to a Ghanaian, hold both South African and Ghanaian citizenship and, that in my writing and interviews, I've always identified closely with Ghana. For her, those were reasons enough to treat me as a Ghanaian writer in this context.

EBG: As researchers of difficult heritage, we often reflect on the limits of historiography and what it cannot fully capture. Writers like Toni Morrison and Chinua Achebe have often reminded us that the novel has a unique power to reach beyond those limits. You chose fiction as your medium, so what do you think a novel like *Ama* can achieve that history books, even the most critical ones, cannot?

MH: The Historical Fictions Research Network[1] has been holding annual conferences since 2016. At their conference held at the University of Malmö in February 2024, Mary Afolabi-Adeolu presented a paper entitled *From History to Fiction: "Adapting Stories of Trans-Atlantic Slavery to Novel: A Study of Manu Herbstein's "Ama"*. That paper offers an excellent response to your question; look out for a published version. Looking ahead, at its 2026 conference in Erlangen, the HFRN will focus on the theme of feelings and emotions in historical fiction, which I think will open up even

[1] https://historicalfictionsresearch.org

more interesting perspectives. Historical fiction such as *Ama* can hardly be created without recourse to primary texts found in archives and to the published work of academic historians. I have several lever arch files full of photocopies of relevant texts from such works. In many of them, I highlighted passages of interest. After *Ama* was published, I assembled a number of these passages on a website, www.ama.africatoday.com. Before putting it online, I asked for permission from around two hundred copyright holders. That gives a measure of the research backing this novel. I have deliberately refrained from updating this website. In a sense, it takes on the character of an archive. What is absent from all these texts? Firstly, there are hardly any accounts by individuals who suffered enslavement. The writing of one notable exception, Equiano, is strongly influenced by his acquired Christian belief. Secondly, practically all the primary texts were written by Europeans, many of whom were involved in the trade. There is a lack of direct evidence of what the enslaved Africans thought and felt. In *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, the historian Ali Mazrui points out that very few enslaved people were able to leave behind memoirs of their experiences. Because of that, and because of the strict rules of the historian's discipline, it is almost impossible for historians to capture how they truly felt – unless they step into the realm of historical fiction.

JK: Some readers, especially those who are academic or diasporic, note that *Ama* is powerful in its detail but at times emotionally detached. How do you respond to the idea that the novel prioritises research and documentation over character immersion?

MH: Back in late 1997, a literary agent in New York, Richard Curtis, offered to represent me. I had sent him a manuscript of about 300,000 words, and he came back with a fax suggesting that I cut it down to around 200,000. I remember writing him a long reply, by fax and email, in December of that year. In that message, I tried to establish some principles for what I could cut. I thought of the book in three parts: first, Ama's own story; second, descriptive material directly related to the slave trade; and third, other descriptive passages that aimed to give readers a sense of the societies Ama passes through. I admitted then, and I still feel this way, that I wasn't trained as a literary critic or even really as a fiction writer. On reflection, I may have been addressing the historians of the slave trade more than the general reader, and I realised I would have to set that aside. Writers are often told to "kill their darlings" to take out anything that doesn't move the story forward. I probably didn't follow that advice fully, but I don't regret

it. Readers who find certain passages slow are free to skip them. Curtis also encouraged me to develop Ama's relationship with Tomba. My response was that romantic love, as Europeans think of it, wasn't really widespread in that context, and even today, it's mainly an idea within a Westernised elite in Africa. Traditionally, intimate matters weren't spoken about openly. Out of respect, I didn't want to intrude too much on Ama and Tomba's privacy. Besides, in her earlier relationships, she was always positioned as an object of male power, so I never intended *Ama* to be read as a romantic novel. Curtis tried to auction the edited manuscript but didn't get any offers. Later, he founded E-Reads, an early digital publisher, and *Ama* became his first e-book and print-on-demand title. Apart from his guidance, though, the book has never really had the benefit of detailed professional editing.

EBG: Yes, one African American reviewer admitted initial scepticism: "I didn't trust a white South African writer to tell this story." Others were moved by the book. How do you engage with the legitimacy question of who has the right to narrate traumatic Black histories?

MH: That quotation is a symptom of a sickness that afflicts United States society, a failure by many, if not most, citizens to come to terms with uncomfortable aspects of their history. In short, the European settlers stole the land from the native inhabitants and developed the land with the labour of enslaved Africans. Ghana has problems with coming to terms with some aspects of its history, but no Ghanaian reader has ever said anything like that to me. On the contrary, I have been praised and honoured for giving a voice to forgotten ancestors through *Ama*. Once I started researching and writing the novel, Ama spoke to me as if she were my own ancestor.

JK: You began writing *Ama* in the mid-1990s, shortly after apartheid ended. How did South Africa's transition and your own biography shape your view of slavery as a system of domination, complicity and racial capitalism?

MH: That's a difficult question. It might need a session with a shrink to provide an answer. South Africa was a racist society long before the introduction of formal apartheid in 1948. Slavery was practised under the Dutch and the English. Discrimination based on "race" survived the abolition of slavery. I grew up white and automatically privileged. Even in primary school, I was aware that the history of South Africa taught there was biased. I consequently declined to take history as one of my six subjects in secondary school. My knowledge of South African history derived from later reading. The books that come to mind are Eddie Roux's *Time Longer*

than Rope, Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* and *Mhudi* and Noel Mostert's *Frontiers*.

I left South Africa in 1959 and didn't pay a return visit until 1992. During those years, in London, Nigeria, Bombay, Lusaka, Glasgow and Accra, I was active in opposition to apartheid. In the 1994 South African election, I cast my vote in Accra for the ANC.

I guess that scholars might identify some similarities between the practice of slavery in South Africa and that in West Africa, particularly the Gold Coast. However, I don't recall that the struggle against apartheid and my modest role in it had any direct influence on my writing of *Ama* and its sequel.

EBG: In *Ama* and *Brave Music of a Distant Drum*, the Atlantic world expands towards Brazil. What kind of response have you received from lusophone readers in Brazil and Portuguese-speaking Africa? How do those audiences differ from others?

Ama arrives in Salvador, Bahia, in the late eighteenth century. I have never visited Brazil. My writing was based on my reading of contemporary travellers' tales and the published work of scholars. Soon after Ama was published, the African Review of Books published a long review entitled *A Map of Slavery Across the Atlantic* by the Mozambican literary scholar Tony Simoes da Silva. The African Review of Books has since disappeared, but Tony's review has been preserved on my website.[2] In 2007, I received an invitation from the Instituto Sacatar, "a transcultural artist residency" in Itaparica, Bahia. I signed up for Portuguese classes at the Ghana Institute of Languages. The invitation was cancelled at the last moment for reasons I still don't understand. In April 2014, I attended the annual conference of the US-based African Literature Association at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. There, I met the only delegate from Brazil, Gustavo Brito. Back in Brazil, Gustavo invited me to address the question, "Why should Brazilians read African literature?" I did this in a YouTube presentation.[3] He later established The Rising Sun English Course[4] in which he used *Ama* as the focus in teaching English to a class of Brazilians. On several occasions, I have met Gustavo's current English class on Zoom.

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[2] http://www.ama.africatoday.com/reviews.htm and https://www.manuherbstein.com/menuB/reviews.htm

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2zFB-WImzo

[4] https://web.facebook.com/therisingsuncursodeingles/posts/1048471930614251

JK: Speaking about Dr Gustavo Brito, who translated *Ama* to Portuguese, can you tell us more about how that collaboration took shape? Are there any kinds of interpretive choices or tensions that emerged in rendering the story for a lusophone readership?

MH: That's a question better answered by Gustavo. Once he had completed his PhD dissertation, he set about translating *Ama* into Portuguese. On his first visit to Ghana for the 2024 Pa Gya literary festival in Accra, he talked about his experience of doing so.[5] He is currently looking for a publisher in Brazil. Publication in Mozambique, Angola and Portugal might follow.

EBG: You've written about the silences surrounding slavery in Ghanaian and African communities. What role do you see literature playing in countering inherited silences, not just in the diaspora, but on the continent itself?

I have a problem with that question. You might have asked, "What role do you see literature playing in countering inherited silences amongst the descendants of the slave traders or the contemporary beneficiaries of economies built upon the slave trade?" The answer to your question requires the skill of a literary scholar. I am a novelist, not a literary scholar. If we asked AI, it would probably say something like, *"Literature possesses a unique power to confront inherited silences because it works on the level of human experience, not just historical abstraction."* And maybe that's true – those silences are like unhealed wounds that still shape who we are and how we relate to each other. But I wrote *Ama* to address a different silence. Funerals are key aspects of African life. The living have a responsibility to bury the dead in accordance with traditional custom. Unless the proper rites and ceremonies are performed, the spirit of the deceased may not be able to join the ancestral spirits. I share this belief in a metaphorical sense. Few of the enslaved received proper funerals when they died. I have a vision of millions of the spirits of the enslaved wandering, unable to join their ancestors. One way to appease them might be to tell their life stories. Since many years have passed since their deaths, fictional biographies, like that of Ama, might be an acceptable substitute.

I chose the sub-title deliberately, *A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, using the article "a" to express a hope that other stories might follow. Once I had a complete manuscript, I looked for similar stories that had

[5] https://kapitalradio971.com/linking-africa-and-brazil/

been published. I found only two: Judith Gleason's *Agotime: Her Legend* and Harold Courlander's *The African*. Sadly, there have been few since.

JK: You began this project at a later stage in your career. What drew you to this history at that point in your life and what gave you the stamina to carry it through in the face of rejection and revision?

MH: What was the alternative – to play golf? As I mentioned above, the initial impetus was news of the Guinea Fowl War. Having written the first chapter based on a story told by a tourist guide at Elmina Castle, I felt compelled to discover Ama's backstory and what might have happened to her afterwards. I'm 89 and still at work, presently transcribing a lifetime of letters for possible future publication.

EBG: You've written to us previously about the struggle to publish *Ama* in Western markets. Editors doubted its emotional force or dismissed it as commercially unviable. What does that tell us about how African-centred historical fiction is valued (or not valued) in the global publishing economy?

MH: I suppose that in the global market, African-centred fiction, especially by unknown authors, rarely fits the algorithmic profit models. Yet in March 2025, McClelland & Stewart (M&S), once a leading Canadian publisher and now reduced to a department of Penguin Random House, made a welcome announcement, stating that it would temporarily open submissions to unagented writers from Black, Indigenous and other underrepresented communities, aiming to lower some of the barriers that have long limited access to mainstream publishing. I submitted *Ama*[6] to M&S backed by loads of evidence of its potential commercial success: published reviews, published scholarly essays and PhD dissertations and evidence of sales. Under the heading "What Happens Once You Submit", M&S assured writers that submissions would be read carefully and that the team would respond within nine months if interested, though they could not reply to everyone due to the high volume of submissions. It would be interesting to read an unbiased review of this project. One wonders why they cannot

[6] *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* was first published as a print-on-demand novel by E-Reads in 2001 and later by Picador Africa in 2005, after winning the 2002 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book – the first such award ever given to an electronic book. A Ghanaian paperback edition was published by Techmate in 2010, with reprints in 2016, 2020 and 2024. An Indian edition was published by Bookmann in 2010. Open Road Integrated Media purchased the E-Reads list, including Ama, in 2014. In 2015 they returned their rights to Ama to the author, who then self-published at KDP (Amazon) and Ingram Spark, with e-book distribution by PublishDrive.

send a simple boilerplate message to those whose work is rejected. I remain hopeful for *Ama*, but experience over more than two decades warns me of the strong possibility of yet another rejection, or worse still, silence.
JK: Looking back now, are there things you would write differently? Has your perspective on narrative voice, gendered experience or cultural positioning shifted in the years since *Ama* was first published?
MH: In 2003, Prof. Kenneth Wilburn described his experience of teaching a class of 13 male and 17 female students from ethnically diverse backgrounds about the Atlantic Slave Trade and Reparations. They were required to read *Ama* and to keep a journal as they did so. He reported that all students agreed: Ama riveted them to the mind and heart of a courageous female slave. She became their sister, their universal family member – we are all Africans; she touched them. for the Best First Book. Most of the students were destined to become public school teachers. One of them asked, "Could the author write another work more appropriate for younger students?" In response, I set about writing an abridged version of the novel. It soon turned into a sequel, later published in Ghana and Canada as *Brave Music of a Distant Drum*. In it, I had Ama, now old and blind, dictate the story of her life to her only son, Kwame Zumbi. In doing so, I addressed issues missing from the original novel. In her first-person narrative, Ama takes command. She attempts to ensure that her story will survive for future generations. In writing down his mother's story, Kwame has to come to terms with the African identity he has inherited. Finally, I deal with the suppression of the stories of the lives of enslaved Africans by their enslavers and by the succeeding generations of their descendants. Taking the two novels together, there is nothing I would change. That said, there is one issue that leaves me somewhat uneasy: the plausibility of her relationship with De Bruyn. I introduced this in order for her to have the opportunity to learn English and so to reveal to her the world of the slave traders.
EBG: When we exchanged emails, you mentioned your granddaughters, who are navigating a layered identity (South African, Ghanaian and Polish). In what ways do their lives echo the entangled histories you trace in your fiction?
MH: That question might best be directed to my granddaughters, M. and S., but I'll have a go. They belong to a privileged middle class. They were born in the UK and spent their early years there. Then they moved to Warsaw, where they became part of their mother's Polish extended family. My

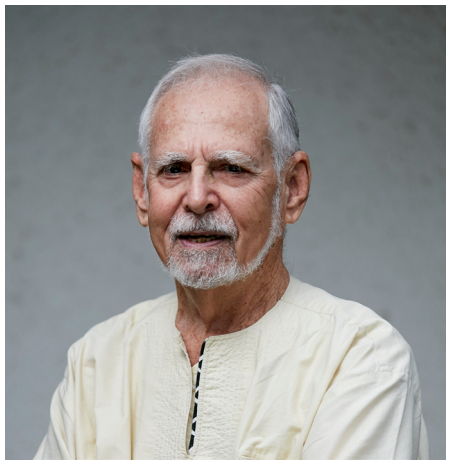
father's mother grew up in Latvia, emigrating to South Africa when she was sixteen. Together, we drove from Warsaw to visit her hometown, Goldigen/Kuldiga, where all the Jewish townsfolk were murdered by the Nazis early in 1942. If my grandmother had not emigrated, she would have been one of them. On the way, we spent a night in Vilnius, driving through the suburb of Šnipiškės, where my mother's parents grew up. We have family in Israel, which they have visited. M. is studying Law at the University of Cape Town. I believe that South Africa's accusation of Israeli genocide in Gaza at the International Court of Justice will have been a subject for discussion amongst her professors and fellow students. The girls were already teenagers when they emigrated to South Africa with their parents. They will have seen the scars left by apartheid but have hardly been affected by them. M. has visited the High Court in Cape Town, where my father's photograph hangs on the wall amongst those of other former judges. They have visited Ghana several times. I took them to Elmina Castle, which features in *Ama*. During their most recent visit, I took them to the Ghana Museum and to the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park. They have spent holidays with their parents in Namibia and Zanzibar. So, in a sense, they have already become citizens of the world.

JK: Finally, what should young people, especially in Africa and its diasporas, ask or remember about slavery today? What forms of cultural work, education or storytelling do you find most urgent?

MH: Why "especially in Africa and its diasporas"? Why not "throughout the Atlantic world and beyond"? And why only "young people"? The Industrial Revolution is generally held to have begun in Britain in about 1780, around the time when Ama's story starts. During the 18th century, the British and the Portuguese were among the world's leading slave trading nations. Sugar plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean were central to the colonial economies from the 16th to the 18th centuries and played a significant role as precursors and funders of the Industrial Revolution. The plantations relied heavily on enslaved African labour. The Atlantic slave trade was the base upon which modern Western capitalism was constructed. That potted history is largely absent from the educational curriculum in wealthy Western countries. Most leading politicians are reluctant to accept it. Perhaps they fear that if they were to apologise for the actions of their ancestors and the benefits they have inherited, they might face pressure to compensate the descendants of the enslaved. That history is also largely absent from curricula in the West African countries from which

the enslaved unpaid workers were drawn. It belongs there. Its absence is a distortion of the past. What this misses is the human element. Well-researched historical fiction can fill that gap, connecting us to the struggles of our forebears. In a recent personal email message, an African literary scholar writes, "*Ama* is really a gift to the world, a gift that no historian thought of or achieved before you." I am humbled by that recognition.

EBG & JK: Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your reflections with us.



Manu Herbstein was born near Cape Town in 1936. He left South Africa in 1959, returning for the first time in 1992. He lived and worked as a civil engineer in England, Nigeria, Ghana, India, Zambia and Scotland. He has lived in Ghana since 1970 and holds dual South African and Ghanaian citizenship. He started writing fiction at the age of 60. His first novel, *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, won the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book. A sequel, *Brave Music of a Distant Drum*, was published by Red Deer Press in Canada. His novel, *The Boy who Spat in Sargrenti's Eye*, set during the British invasion of Asante in 1873–74, won the African Literature Association's Book of the Year Award for Creative Writing in 2014 and has been selected for teaching Literature-in-English in high schools in Ghana from 2027 to 2031.