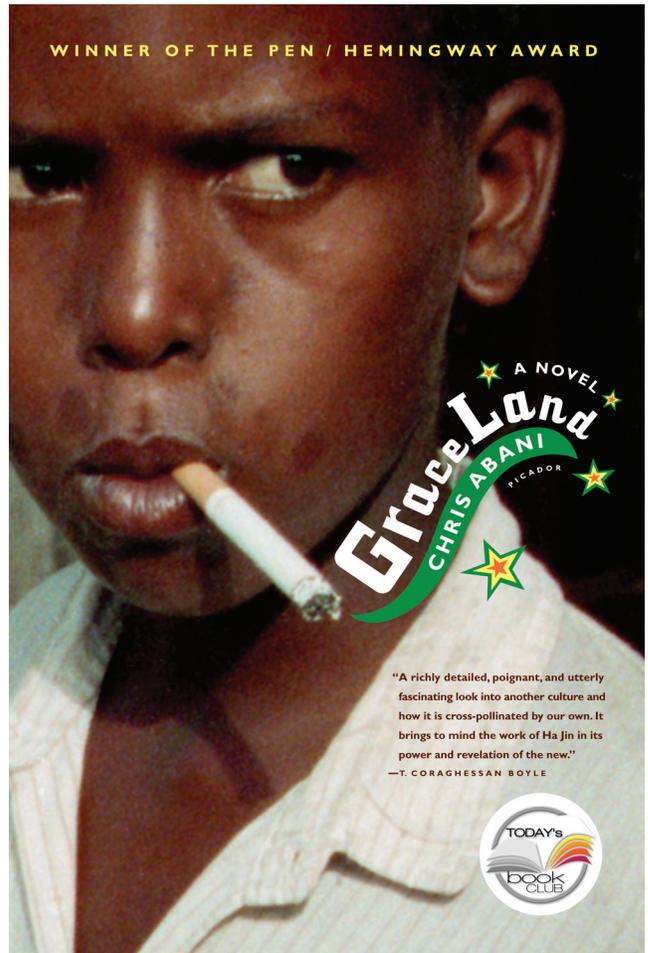


BABEL

Chris Abani



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Christopher (Chris) Abani is a Los Angeles based, internationally-recognized Nigerian writer whose poetry, plays, and fiction have been praised for their unblinking look at war and all of its attendant horrors: brutal violence, loss of innocence, postcolonial poverty, political corruption, and the communal heartbreak of a shattered but proud native culture. Abani's own life as an outspoken political activist-in-exile has been the basis for much of his creative work which gives a non-conformist nod to the influences of noted Nigerian authors such as Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, and Wole Soyinka.

Abani was born in 1966 in the Nigerian city of Afikpo, at the start of the Biafran-Nigerian Civil War, a clash between Nigerian federal troops and native secessionists who wanted to create a separate state called Biafra. His father, an educator, was Igbo (EE-BOW), the same ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria that had led the Biafran movement. He met Abani's mother, a white Englishwoman,

at Oxford University during the 1950s, but the couple raised their son in Africa. Abani was sent to good Catholic schools and had a comfortable life as a self-described "privileged, middle-class activist" who soon joined his friends in protesting the Nigerian military dictatorship in power after the civil war. He discovered books early, picking up a copy of Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart* when he was ten and writing his first novel, *Masters of the Board*, when he was only sixteen. The book's plot, about a failed Nigerian coup by neo-Nazis, caused such a sensation in his country that two years after its publication in 1985, the budding author was sent to jail for six months on conspiracy charges. Abani was imprisoned two more times: in 1987 following the publication of *Sirocco*, his second novel, and later in 1990, when he was convicted of treason following a performance of his subversive play, *Song for a Broken Flute*, which was commissioned by his undergraduate alma mater, Imo State University. This time sentenced to death, Abani was tortured and spent six months of his 18-month stay in solitary confinement. Friends were eventually able to free him by bribing prison officials, so Abani left the country with his mother and four siblings for England, where he continued to hone his writing and protest the Nigerian regime before fleeing to the United States in 1999 after a friend was murdered. Having found no language for the horrors of prison, he once said, he began to stitch those painful memories into his poetry, for which he has garnered praise from the likes of Harold Pinter and many other Western and African writers.

In his award-winning 2004 novel, *GraceLand*, Abani creates a moving, yet unsentimental version of his troubled journey to adulthood, including the post-war aftermath during the 1970s and 1980s in Nigeria's capital city, Lagos, through the eyes of a sensitive, well-educated young boy named Elvis Oke. The book's autobiographical themes are illustrated by the simple joys and disappointments of everyday West African life: masculine rites of passage and strict definitions of sexuality, gender power-struggles, familial obligations, and cultural taboos. Larger questions of morality and humanity can be found in the small acts of compassion taking place against a backdrop of unspeakable violence and corruption in Nigeria's rural towns and urban ghettos.

When *GraceLand* was published, Abani said in an interview that American pop culture—especially films and television—helped shape his childhood views of living as a black person in an African nation first exploited and then abandoned by the British. “The whole thing about American culture—because it is driven by capitalism—is this sense of global whiteness through global assimilation,” he said. “It’s sort of a new wave of empire.” This seductive dream of escaping Lagos’s Third-World conditions give Abani a frame around which he builds the story of Elvis, who moves from his bucolic childhood village to Maroko, a Lagos slum, following his mother’s death. He longs to be a dancer in the city’s famous nightclubs and impersonate the “King,” but instead is swept up into a violent nightmare of drug trafficking, incest, and child kidnapping. At first, Elvis and the other Igbo youth survive by worshipping on-screen heroes like John Wayne rather than their own fathers or the country’s crumbling Catholic icons. As Elvis’ mysterious new friend, Redemption, says at one point, “Television is the new oracle.” But that soon changes as the cinemas and small-bit street gambling grow old, and Redemption leads the reluctant Elvis into increasingly dangerous, illicit attempts to make money and define themselves as men.

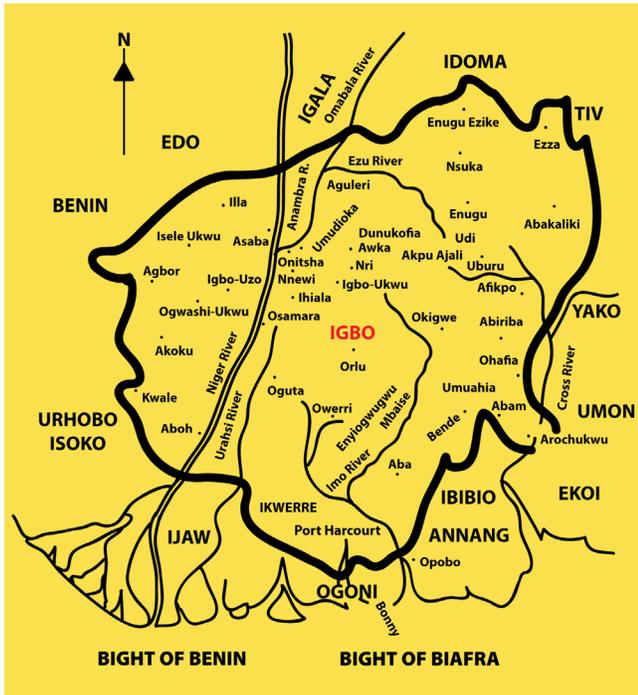
Elvis realizes the futility of this existence after most of his family and friends are lost to military raids, and he prepares to leave Lagos for good. Although the dream of a new life in the United States is how some Africans define a hopeful future, Abani implies that Nigerians must instead find something “essential” and of quality in their African identities in order to escape their homeland’s troubled past.

Abani’s own identity has been an understandably fluid one which suits him well; whether in Lagos, London, or Los Angeles, he sees narrative as a metaphor for personal transformation and self-discovery. But his Nigerian roots show in how he invokes the classic African philosophy of “ubuntu,” or connection to community, in his work: the only way for someone to experience being human is in the presence of other people who reflect your humanity back to you.

In addition to *GraceLand* and *Masters of the Board*, Abani’s published fiction includes *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), set in multicultural East Los Angeles, and the novellas *Song for Night* (2007) and *Becoming Abigail* (2006). His poetry collections are *Kalakuta Republic* (2001), *Daphne’s Lot* (2003), *Dog Woman* (2004), *Hands Washing Water* (2006), and in 2010, *Feed Me The Sun - Collected Long Poems*, *There Are No Names for Red* and *Sanctificum*. Abani earned a master’s degree in Gender and Cultural Studies from Birkbeck College, University of London, and holds master’s and doctoral degrees in English and Literature from the University of Southern California. His many literary honors include a PEN USA Freedom-to-Write Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, three Pushcart Prize nominations for his poetry, a PEN Beyond the Margins Award, the PEN Hemingway Book Prize for *GraceLand* and, in 2009, a Guggenheim fellowship in fiction. He is also the series editor for Black Goat, an independent poetry imprint that publishes “experimental, aesthetically or thematically challenging work” by poets from around the world. He currently teaches Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside.



Understanding Igboland



Although the history of the Igbo people in Nigeria goes back thousands of years, as a people, they have more recently been defined by the country's tumultuous post-colonial history following its break from British rule in 1960. Elvis Oke's life during the late 1970s and early 1980s—the same coming-of-age period for Chris Abani, and modern Nigeria itself—is best understood in the context of how the country's shifting economic and political fortunes influenced traditional Igbo life.

Nigeria, named after the vast Niger River, was created by England in 1914 to become part of the British Empire. The young country was a case study in Western-style nation building: its disparate ethnic groups—who spoke between 350 to 400 languages and sub-dialects—were forced to adapt to rapid change, first from colonial rule and then independence, which resulted in ethnic competition, violence, and discrimination as Nigerians fought over control of the new nation. Two military coups, a civil war, an oil boom, severe drought, and a recession all took place before 1990. Meanwhile, modernization stimulated education, jobs, politics, and urban and industrial development, creating new multicultural connections between Nigeria's people where there had been none—for better or for worse.

The dominant ethnic groups and their traditional regions were (and still are, for the most part) the Hausa (north), Yoruba (southwest), and Igbo (southeast). Igbo, pronounced EE-bo, refers to the language and the people living in clusters of farming villages concentrated in southeastern Nigeria, or Igboland. The Igbo erroneously have been called a stateless society, partly because they mixed well with other cultures, and because many were sold as slaves to the Americas and Europe before slavery was outlawed by Britain in 1820. Today, many African Americans and Caribbean blacks are of Igbo descent. The Igbo's social openness also spurred their own diaspora; they have been known within Africa for being ambitious, willing to leave their villages to find material success abroad. But despite physical dislocation at various times in their history, most Igbo have remained part of a highly organized agricultural society (their staple crop is yams) that believes in a complex religious system called *Odinani*.

Nigeria's three main ethnic groups eventually became separate political parties whose natural differences were exaggerated by a British government that refused to see them as a single, native people. Bolstered by the discovery of oil in the 1950s, Nigeria's ethnic factions began to argue over how to form a unified government free from British rule. Inflamed by questionable election results, violence erupted in Nigeria's western and predominantly Muslim northern regions as Igboland's growing independence threatened their power. In 1966 and 1967, Igbo living in the north were killed and persecuted, leading Igboland to attempt secession from Nigeria and form their own independent state, called the Republic of Biafra. Federal Nigerian troops invaded Biafra in 1967, beginning the Nigerian Civil War, or the Nigerian-Biafran War. The conflict lasted until 1970, when Biafra surrendered. Altogether, there were five military coups between 1966 and 1985, and the resulting violence, poverty, and disease killed an estimated three million people, many of them Igbo. Nigeria existed as a military state for nearly three decades afterward.

Despite these conflicts, there was notable growth and progress during the war years. Money poured in from the new petroleum industry and, during the 1970s, Lagos became the fastest-growing city in the world. It was the

commercial and cultural center, the birthplace of Nigerian “highlife” music, and the epicenter of multicultural Africa. It nurtured wealth and prosperity as well as Third-World poverty and despair. New roads and bridges improved transportation but soon crumbled due to hasty construction and inferior materials. As Lagos’ population swelled, well-groomed government palaces and residential mansions sprang up across town from sprawling, garbage-choked slums like Maroko, and the city became infamous for its traffic jams. Depending on whom you asked, the Igbo were repelled by or attracted to the city’s flash and promise, and the Oke family embodied this tension.

Following the civil war, the Igbo displaced following Biafra’s collapse found themselves politically marginalized and without jobs, their previous properties and houses razed or reclaimed by the government. Following the coups, the regime of Nigeria’s military leader, General Yakubu Gowon, bred bribery, drug trafficking, and patronage. Pseudo-military gangs with shifting allegiances resorted to firing squads, kidnapping, torture, and rape to keep order. Among the masses, vigilante justice became commonplace and Nigerians began to grow resigned to violence as a way of life.

Amid this upheaval, the Igbo retained their cultural identity—a more peaceful existence illustrated by Elvis’ early years in Afikpo. His grandmother, Oye, a “witch” and spiritual healer who was converted to Christianity by missionaries, knew how important Igbo traditions were to saving her grandson’s life. Elvis’ father and other male relatives knew, too; although they were attracted to Lagos’ get-rich-quick ways, they taught the younger males Igbo traditions as a way to cope with modern life. Against the pull of Western values, Igbo culture stressed honest work, education, and monetary wealth as ways in which a man could honor his family name—the most important part of his identity.

Post-war Nigeria posed other challenges for women. Although females had influence in local village markets and often led households, many men took multiple wives even up until the 1990s; divorce rates were high and unmarried women were considered social outcasts and sexual objects. Unlike Igbo men, who won respect through their occupations, women were simply defined as daughter, wife, mother, or widow. They ran the bukás, or eating houses, and produced and cooked the food, which dominated rural Igbo life, but received little compensation or status.



TRADITIONAL IGBO MASK

In addition to food, the kola nut Abani describes at the beginning of each chapter is part of an important religious tradition in Western Africa. The lobed nut is presented to guests, and special significance is given to how many lobes are broken off. The kola ceremonies included honoring ancestors and celebrating rites of passage like naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. Based on her Odinani beliefs, Beatrice knew she would be reincarnated, and that there was hope in the next life. Sunday’s tough-love fathering and addiction to palm wine, on the other hand, was his way of searching for hope in the here-and-now.

Post-colonialism threatened but could not destroy Igbo culture any more than colonialism did; instead, it offered new institutions and values for re-defining its identity. Elvis’s personal journey—from the shelter of his mother’s garden in Afikpo to the famous nightclubs and dangerous underworld of Lagos—typifies Abani’s theme of transformation. *GraceLand’s* personal narratives echo Nigeria’s brutal evolution into a modernized, post-colonial state, and of the Igbo, as they became one of the most dynamic African cultures of the 20th century.

Study questions for *GraceLand*

1. Each chapter begins with a passage about the kola nut ceremony. How do the descriptions of the kola nut's significance in Igbo culture connect to the story of Elvis Oke and his family?
2. What is the significance of the recipes in the book? Name some examples in Elvis's life that illustrate how food functions for the Igbo.
3. Chris Abani himself is a well-known musician—a saxophone player—and he includes both popular Nigerian and American music throughout the book. What does music represent for Elvis as well as for the other characters?
4. Why are dancing, music, movies, and books so important to Elvis?
5. The Igbo and many other African ethnic groups believe in reincarnation which is why Oye is preparing Beatrice for the next life. How do you think this belief helps the Igbo cope with reality in Nigeria?
6. What does Beatrice's garden reflect about life in Nigeria? What does it say about her relationship to Elvis?
7. What do his mother's Bible and journal mean to Elvis? How does that meaning change throughout the book?
8. What does Redemption mean when he tells Elvis to "think beyond his guns?"
9. Names and naming are very important to the Igbo. Why do you think Abani gave his characters names such as Sunday, Innocent, Redemption, Elvis, Freedom, Confidence, Comfort and Blessing?
10. What seems more meaningful and real to the Nigerians in *GraceLand*: Western religions or traditional magic and witchcraft? Give some examples.
11. At the nightclub, Elvis bumps into the Colonel and nearly gets killed by his officers. What does this scene reveal about law and order in Nigeria? What are some other examples of how the police and other military officers in Lagos are corrupt?
12. When the accused thief, Jeremiah, is killed by the crowd, why does Abani describe it as "biblical, animal... sensual?" Identify some other examples of when a character in the book struggles with feeling pleasure while doing or witnessing something that he or she knows is immoral or inhumane. What is Abani suggesting about humanity and its relationship to violence?
13. After Uncle Joseph rapes Elvis, he tells Efua that he tried to tell Sunday about the rapes, and she only says, "Grown-ups do not believe children." What do you think she means? Where else does this separation between adults and children appear in the novel?
14. Do you think the book is sentimental about the loss of innocence? Why or why not?
15. Women are a vital but subordinate part of Igbo domestic life. How are single women in the book—Efua Comfort, Madam Caro, Oye—portrayed? Which of them manages to subvert traditional female roles, and how?
16. Explain what you think Elvis means at the end of the book when he wonders, "why all the women in his life had to take care of him—even those he should have been taking care of."
17. Homosexuality is taboo in African society, yet Abani often includes a conflicted sense of sexuality in scenes involving Elvis and other men—from dancing and cross-dressing to homosexual assaults in prison and in a church. What do you think he is suggesting about African masculinity? About power and freedom?
18. What lesson does Sunday try to teach Elvis by shaving his head, and why is this scene so important to understanding *GraceLand*? How else does Sunday try to protect his son?
19. Why do you think the "King of de Beggars" and Elvis become friends?
20. What do you think Sunday means when he warns Elvis about the King and says, "sometimes even good people use us?"

21. Do you agree with Redemption when he calls Elvis “selfish?” Why or why not?
 22. When Elvis joins the King’s performance troupe, the Joking Jaguars, in Chapter 26, what does George mean when he warns Elvis about “de insanity of de muse?”
 23. How does torture transform Elvis? Use his time in Bridge City as an example. What are some other examples of transformation in the book—for its characters and for the places in which they live?
 24. What does the scene with Beatrice’s ghost and the leopard “totem” mean? Why do you think Abani includes magical realism here?
 25. What is the significance of Redemption giving Elvis his passport? After Elvis insists that Nigeria “is just as good as America,” what does Redemption mean when he answers, “Not for you?”
 26. Why is Elvis at first reluctant to go to America? How is this important to understanding his character?
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