

# SPLENDID LICENCE

A review of *AKE: THE YEARS OF CHILDHOOD*  
by Wole Soyinka (Africasouth Paperbacks,  
David Philip, 1984)



*Wole Soyinka*

Wole Soyinka's story of the first eleven years of his life is one of the best books to come out of Africa. He is a master of the English language, he has a sharp sense of humour, and he has the greatest gift that a writer can ask for — the ability to communicate. It's the kind of book that, once put down, is easy to pick up again.

Aké is the name of the village where he lives and where his father is the headmaster of the primary school. Aké is in the Western Region of Nigeria, and is not far from the town of Abeokuta, and the city of Lagos. His father's initials are S.A., and he is very appropriately called Essay. His mother has been given by the small boy Wole the name of Wild Christian. Both his parents are industrious and upright, and are extremely strict with their children. They use the cane, very often it seems, but this does not seem to alienate them in any way from their children.

The teller of the story is Wole himself, obviously a child of exceptional gifts, a perpetual asker of questions, and a maker of some very witty sayings. Sometimes the older Wole makes the younger Wole a bit too wise and witty for his years. In other words Soyinka the novelist strongly influences Soyinka the autobiographer, and some of the stories related are more entertaining than true.

A good example of this is the story of the boys at the Abeokuta Grammar School, who stole one of the headmaster's chickens and roasted it over a fire in a remote glade of the estate. The spokesman for the offenders,

(Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian dramatist, poet and novelist (born in 1934) is Professor of English at the University of Ife. He studied at the Universities of Ibadan and Leeds, worked at the Royal Court Theatre in London, and has taught and worked also at the Universities of Ibadan, Lagos and Cambridge. He was imprisoned for a time in Nigeria during the civil war. His best-known works are the plays *The Road* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, and the novels *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*.)

a boy named Iku, explained to the headmaster, a formidable man nicknamed Daodu, how they had decided to investigate spontaneous combustion, and how delighted they had been when their heap of twigs and fibre burst into spontaneous flame. Meanwhile they had observed that one of the headmaster's chicken had escaped from the coop, and they desired above all else to restore this chicken to the headmaster. During their attempts to catch the chicken, it unfortunately flew onto the spontaneous fire, and was then done to a turn. Iku explained to the headmaster that it was impossible to save the chicken, because the heat of a spontaneous fire is much greater than that of any ordinary one. After listening to this audacious fabrication Daodu dismissed the charge of theft, but punished the three for concealing an accident. The penalty was that they were to have no food but the chicken for the next seven days.

It would be petty to object that Soyinka's autobiographic licence exceeds anything known in the conservative West. That is how Soyinka writes, and that's an end of it. The anti-West bias in Nigeria is there, but it is certainly not obtrusive. Many Nigerians were suspicious of Ibadan High School because it was run by whites. The white principal would not allow the use of pockets, though he himself was a very high Scoutmaster, and had a uniform full of pockets. The headmaster of the Grammar School could not see how a white teacher could impart **character** to a black pupil. The headmaster's wife was outraged that America had dropped a bomb on the Japanese, but never dropped one on the Germans, simply because they were white.

**Aké** gives a fascinating picture of a society that has many common elements with a Western society, and many elements that are quite different. Morality and immorality are seen to be human attributes, and Nigerian morality, as seen in this story of Wole's home, is as stern and as humane as it is anywhere in the world. There is however one respect in which the Nigerian society differed from our own South African society. Although Nigeria was then a British colony, Wole's father Essay held a high and dignified position in the community; in South Africa his status would have been considerably less dignified. Essay's wife, the Wild Christian, and Daodu's wife Beere, were strong and independent characters, and it would

appear that they enjoyed a degree of independence unknown to many Black South African women. The closing pages of **Aké** concern the women's demonstrations before the ruler's palace, protesting against women's taxes, the behaviour of police and officials, and the corruptness of the administration. There can be little doubt that these strongly held views on human freedom were passed on to the small boy, who as a man and a writer was later subjected to imprisonment and detention by his own modern Nigerian government.

People often ask me if I can recommend a good book. Well today I can. I recommend Wole Soyinka's **Aké**, the story of his first eleven years. It is intensely readable, funny, serious, and splendid. □

by M J DAYMOND

## CONTROLLING VOICES

A review of **ADVANCE RETREAT** by Richard Rive : David Philip, Cape Town 1983  
R14.85 excl.

Although Richard Rive is one of South Africa's internationally better known black writers, not much of his work has appeared in his own country. If the intention in publishing *Advance, Retreat* was to make Rive's stories better known here, then it is a pity that four of the stories currently in print in *Selected Writing* (Ad Donker, 1977) should reappear in this present volume of twelve stories. Also, if this volume is intended as a representative collection, then it is a pity that the date of each story's first appearance is not given. The volume has been generously illustrated by Cecil Skotnes. It is pleasing to see a publisher using the talents of a local painter in this way; perhaps David Philip's example will encourage other publishers to do the same.

The collection shows Rive to be an ambitious writer who undertakes an impressive range of subject matters and narrative modes. Range is important for, as Ahmed Essop has said in a collection of statements in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing* (Natal University Press, in press), what the South African writer has to protect above all is the capacity to be many-voiced:



Richard Rive

Under the pressure of a crushing social reality . . . The writer may reduce himself to the level of the secretary, the journalist, the zealot, the demagogue . . . To be many-voiced . . . is not easy . . . But I believe that the creative imagination reveals perceptions and truths that are not otherwise discoverable . . .

Sometimes Rive's stories attain a many-voiced power to reveal otherwise undiscoverable truths; sometimes they don't. "The Bench" demonstrates the difficulties. It dramatises the first moments of political awareness in Karlie as he sheds the teachings of Ou Klaas that all races must accept their different, God-given places in