Brooks on Books African, January to June, 2019

**Africa United: Soccer, Passion, Politics, and the First World Cup in Africa**/2010 by Steve Bloomfield

This charming book more than lives up to its subtitle, and if I were teaching a course on African politics, I’d be very tempted to use it. Ten chapters, 14 soccer clubs: all respectfully documented. Map included, passion apportioned. Just a few of the teams: The Desert Hawks, The Harambee Stars, the Super Eagles, and Les Elephants. OK—where was the 2010 World Cup held and which African teams qualified?

**Ancestral Passions: The Leakey Family and the Quest for Humankind’s Beginning**/1995 by Virginia Morrell

This volume is voluminous in detail and a testament to the author’s abilities to command and structure detail. It lives up to its full title. The emphasis is split between the history of the Leakeys in Kenya and the fossils they and others found. But what a title! And what stories: tiny bones and big explanations. The back story is the extent of the Leakey commitment to Kenya. The first generation Leakeys arrived in 1892; the 5th generation was born in 2004. Mary Leakey died in 1996. Richard and Maeve’s daughter, Louise, has been in the family business since her own youth in the 80s to her current work in the Turkana Basin in northern Kenya.

**The Barefoot Woman**/2008 in French, 2018 in English by Scholastique Mukasonga

The book is meant to be a tribute to the author’s mother, but reads more like a description of Tutsi farmers in Rwanda in 1964, not a good time for Tutsis in Rwanda. The author escaped from Rwanda in 1992, but many of her family did not survive 1994 (an even worse time than ’64). To get a better flavor of Tutsi conditions in Rwanda, reading the author’s book *Cockroaches*. For more see [https://www.kenyonreview.org/reviews/cockroaches-by-scholastique-mukasonga-738439/](https://www.kenyonreview.org/reviews/cockroaches-by-scholastique-mukasonga-738439/).

**The Moor’s Account**/2014 by Laila Lalami

Excellent historical fiction of one of the more obtuse aspects of African history: an enslaved Moroccan taken to the Florida Gulf in 1527 by Spanish grandees survives to write the expedition’s history. The expedition really did happen, and the Moor is referred to (but only once) in the surviving text. Fascinating stuff. Score again for literacy (cf, *Someone Knows My Name* by Hill). At the novel’s end Mustapha the narrator says to his wife, Oyomasot: “What story should I tell our child?...And in this relation I tried to tell the story of what really happened when I journeyed to the heart of the continent….Maybe there is no true story, only imagined stories, vague reflections of what we saw and what we heard, what we felt and what we thought.” Say ‘amen,’ somebody.
North of Dawn/2018 by Nurudinn Farah

The plight of Somalis wherever they may be is Farah’s lifetime subject. North of Dawn takes place in Oslo, Norway, among Somalis, Somali-Norwegians, and Norwegians. The central protagonists are grandfather Mugdi and grandson Naciim. The central antagonist is Waliya, Mugdi’s daughter-in-law, who comes to Oslo from a refugee camp in Kenya following the death of her husband and Mugdi’s son, Dhaqanaeh, who blew himself up as a fervent member of Al-Shabbab. The tone of the last quarter of the book brings together fundamental Islam, family loyalties, and endearing characters. It is troubling in the ways that consistent if abhorrent behavior sometimes is and represents one of the many powers of fiction.

The Old Drift/2019 by Namwali Sherpell

A work of fiction that takes place mostly in Zambia which begins— “It sounds like a sentence: Victoria Falls. A prophecy. At any rate, that’s the joke I used to make until Her Majesty Queen Victoria actually died in 1901, just before I landed on the continent.” Action continues right through to the future in 2023 involving grandmothers, mothers, and children from Italy, England, and Zambia. Plots and connections abound. Stories emanating from the immigrants to Zambia. Could have had more focus.

She Would Be King/2018 by Wayetu Moore

The novel is about Liberia in the 1840s around the time that American Blacks came to colonize the Grain Coast of West Africa. It is the intertwined stories of Gbessa, June Dey, and Norman Aragon and their chi and their people. The novel illustrates the following quotation from its middle: “They were together now. It had begun. I dwelled in that hiding place with the three of them that night. However present the stronghold of loneliness had been on each of their lives, there lingered a hope that perhaps one day they would find others. In that moment, hope’s shell melted, and it extended its limbs and breathed, became real. Became true. Alike spirit separated at great distance will always be bounds to meet, even if only once; kindred souls will always collide; and strings of coincidences are never what they appear to be on the surface, instead are the mark of God.”

Sir Ali bin Salim: The Making of Mombasa/2018 by Judy Aldrick

This biography by a 22-year resident of Mombasa sets the history of the Kenya Swahili coast from 1880 until 1940. It is published by Old Africa Books, a venerable Nairobi institution. Aldrick’s book gives substance to the part of Kenya which many of us dismissed as “the coast.” You’ll find out what a “liwali” is. Plentiful footnotes if you wish to read further.

The Viceroy of Ouidah/1980 by Bruce Chatwin
Only the wazee know of the author who began his professional career as an art dealer and transitioned to an author of books about strange places and died all too quietly of AIDS in 1989. He was a writer of sensibilities and reflections, more than facts or data. John Updike described Chatwin's writing as "a clipped, lapidary prose that compresses worlds into pages."*Out of Patagonia* is one of the best travel books I have ever read. This book is about Dahomey>Benin, about Portuguese intrusions into the Slave Coast of West Africa, about rapacious personalities and habits. The protagonist Francisco Manoel da Silva is based on the historical figure of Francisco Felix de Sousa who died at age 94 in Ouidah, Benin. Chatwin is a complex individual, and I recommend the Wikipedia entry for him.