



# A Man of the People

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## A Man of the People Chinua Achebe

By the renowned author of "Things Fall Apart," this novel foreshadows the Nigerian coups of 1966 and shows the color and vivacity as well as the violence and corruption of a society making its own way between the two worlds.

## A Man of the People Details

Date : Published August 16th 2016 by Penguin Books (first published 1966)

ISBN : 9780385086165

Author : Chinua Achebe

Format : Paperback 160 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Africa, Literature, African Literature, Historical, Historical Fiction, Western Africa, Nigeria

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## Grace says

A gripping tale, with vividly described characters like the bootlicking Nwege, Edna's greedy, avaricious father, the absurdly hilarious chief Koko, and Odili's own proud, well known and widely hated Father, Hezekiah. This story chronicles the politics of African states, and it's eat-and-let-eat leaders. I read this book 11 years ago in school and I can probably remember it word for word, a must read for anyone seeking insight into the very nature of African state of affairs, from overnight inflation to the disillusion poverty brings, and the rise of unknown backbenchers who will support unpopular motions in parliament if only for personal gain. Achebe tells this tale with multiple hilarious references, and makes even the most mundane story come through with such a fine mastery of humor. A thought provoking read.

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## Aziz says

Pokok persoalan novel ini bukanlah tentang hero atau penjahat. Walaupun naratifnya memuncak dari pertelingkahan kuasa diantara 'Saya', seorang intelektual muda dan Ketua Nanga, seorang menteri yang rasuah dan bobrok namun kelihatannya apa yang menyebabkan pertelingkahan itu bukanlah berpunca daripada niat yang murni intelektual itu untuk mengubah keadaan yang sedia diketahuinya bobrok. Penentangan yang lebih berpunca daripada masalah peribadi itu memaparkan secara bijaksana inti cerita Achebe ini bahawa masalah salah guna kuasa di mana-manapun ialah berpunca dari kejahilan rakyat itu sendiri. Kejahilan yang membenarkan penyelewengan dan menanggapnya perkara biasa kemudiannya menjadi budaya yang sukar dipisahkan.

Sepanjang novel ini, banyak sekali ungkapan-ungkapan sinis daripada watak-wataknya yang mengabsahkan akan betapa kuatnya budaya itu di dalam masyarakat negara dalam novel ini.

Di sini kelihatan betapa geniusnya Achebe mempertemukan watak utama dan sang antagonisnya dalam suasana mesra sehingga memungkinkan watak utama tinggal di rumah Ketua Nanga sewaktu urusan permohonan biasiswanya. Lebih awal diceritakan betapa Perdana Menteri menyelar golongan berpendidikan sebagai tidak memahami rakyat malah sebagai pengkhianat negara dan 'pengampu barat'. Dari situ kita hampir dapat meneka kemana arahnya cerita ini. Dan itulah sebenarnya yang berlaku apabila pada akhirnya berlaku rampasan kuasa oleh tentera, namun, sekali lagi bukan oleh sebab salah guna kuasa pemimpin tapi oleh sebab kekacauan oleh samseng-samseng yang digunakan untuk eksploitasi pilihanraya.

Membaca novel ini mempertemukan kita dengan ironi dunia ketiga yang pada satu masa berusaha membebaskan diri dari pengaruh penjajahan namun pada masa sama sering saja terperangkap dalam putaran ganas kejahilan yang akhirnya melahirkan pemimpin-pemimpin korup yang bijak memanipulasikan keadaan.

Sekali lagi, cerita ini bukanlah tentang hero atau penjahat, tetapi lebih kepada gambaran sebuah masyarakat yang tidak berdaya membebaskan diri dari kejahilan...dan sudah pasti kisah tragis ini diceritakan dengan penuh seni. Bukan propaganda murahan.

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## Ben Dutton says

Chinua Achebe's 1966 novella, *A Man of the People*, was selected by Anthony Burgess as one of the best novels in English since 1939. So reading this work one comes with high expectations. It is present day (1966) in an unnamed African nation and a well educated man is about to meet the country's leader, Chief the Honourable M. A. Nanga M.P., or M. A. Minus Opportunity as he is sometimes known. Our hero Odili Samalu is ambitious, and as his life becomes entwined with Nanga's, his sense of ambition inflates.

Upon its release the Nigerian poet and playwright John Pepper Clark declared "Chinua, I know you are a prophet. Everything in this book has happened except a military coup!" Later that year, Nigerian Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu seized control of the northern region of the country as part of a larger coup attempt.

Reading Achebe's political satire on the same day as the Zimbabwean elections were internationally called a disgrace was an odd convergence of fiction and reality and a prescient reminder that Achebe is a writer with a keen socio-political awareness and that his involvement with Nigerian politics at the time would have placed him in a position to witness the corruption and scandal that can move some African politics.

*A Man of the People* contains two firsts for Achebe as a novelist: this is the first time he attempts comedy and satire – much of the doom and portent of *Things Fall Apart* has now gone – and this is also the first time he has chosen to write in the first person. This form of narration works well, placing us directly in Odili's head, writing after the events of the novel have transpired – so we know from the outset that he cannot win the election race in which he places himself. But the build-up to it still retains much tension, and the bloody dénouement even manages to shock with its sudden, unexpected deaths.

But Achebe is as interested in telling this dramatic (albeit comic) story as he is in exploring the deeper questions of how such deeply repellent men such as Nanga can remain in power. In an early sequence of the novel, when Odili meets Nanga again for the first time in decades and from where he secures his first job with the leader, Nanga is wowing the crowds, leading Odili to muse:

"Somehow I found myself admiring the man for his lack of modesty. For what is modesty but inverted pride? We all think we are first-class people. Modesty forbids us from saying so ourselves though, presumably, not from wanting to hear it from others. Perhaps it was their impatience with this kind of hypocrisy that made men like Nanga successful politicians while starry-eyed idealists strove vaingloriously to bring into politics niceties and delicate refinements that belong elsewhere." (P.11)

Odili, at the start of the novella, is one of those starry-eyed idealists:

"As I stood in one corner of that vast tumult waiting for the arrival of the minister I felt intense bitterness welling up in my mouth: Here were silly, ignorant villagers dancing themselves lame and waiting to blow off their gunpowder in honour of one of those who had started the country off down the slopes of inflation." (P.2)

Odili is one of those men that sit at home feeling he knows how things could be improved, if only he had the chance. Nanga gives him that chance. Knowing and now seeing firsthand how Nanga's government is betraying the common man, Odili and his friends strive to do something about it:

"That first night I not only heard of a new political party about to be born but got myself enrolled as a foundation member. Max and some of his friends having watched with deepening disillusion the use to which our hard-won freedom was being put by corrupt, mediocre politicians had decided to come together and launch the Common People's Convention." (P.77)

Only as we know and they know, the enterprise is doomed to failure. The subsequent reprisals launched by Nanga leave one in no doubt that the country is corrupt, where everybody is on the make, and that where there is no overall law – just tribal groupings – that the corrupt will always win. Only Achebe has one final twist of the knife, and to spoil that would be wrong.

It is interesting to compare this book with Achebe's more famous works. In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe's only other contemporary novel (at this stage in his career – another, *Anthills of the Savannah*, would follow in 1987), we see a Lagos that is still an African city in thrall to Western ways. The unnamed country of this novel is almost devoid of white men, and though the political figures in this work have all had a British education, though are not keen to retain those Western ideals. The country in this novel is one the white men have clearly abandoned – as was done all over Africa in reality – so that tin-pot dictators such as Nanga can come to power and be overthrown by another power hungry figure indecently quickly. There is no sense of permanence here, no sense of history of tradition. In *Things Fall Apart* we saw a culture whose history was ingrained in the very skin of its people. In *A Man of the People*, history has no relevance, and the mistakes are destined to be repeated.

Achebe's novel is a deeply satirical one, in tune with modern African politics that retains much of the resonance it must have had for a 1960s audience as it does to us, forty years later.

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### **Tatuu says**

Ladies and gentlemen...a reread coming up with a truer review! I have given it 3 stars because I read it in school and the fact that I read it against my will. :D

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### **Winter Sophia Rose says**

Moving, Funny, Witty, Powerful & Timeless! I Loved It!

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### **Steve Gordon says**

I think what I like best about Achebe's writing is his use of African proverbs to reinforce many of the themes of his novels - especially since Western / European proverbs have been overdone to death in literature. I particularly like the narrator's voice in this novel - struggling politically yet still very much in touch with the everyday life of love and family.

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### **javiruchi says**

Seriously?

A novel assigned for our post-colonial discussion; very sarcastic and has a very witty way of using pidgin to bastardize the English language. The post-colonial significance of this novel is very promising. The prose is somewhat dragging, though.

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## Lindsey says

This is a great political satire and has one of the best last lines of any books I've ever read. (Some of the dialogue is in pidgin, which was a little confusing at times, but Brian helped me out with what he's learned at his lessons, and I used some Nigerian web sites, as well.)

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## Hadrian says

I confess I never really understood Achebe's popularity until very recently. *Things Fall Apart* barely held my interest, and I was almost going to give up on him.

I abandoned that horrid misconception after reading *A Man of the People*. Here, Achebe shows more clearly what I had missed. He is a savvy chronicler of language, personality, and greed. He writes with affectionate and mocking detail.

The story revolves around a young educated man, Odili, and his relationship with Chief Nanga, a corrupt, swaggering Minister of Culture in an unnamed country. Odili tries at first to become friends with Nanga. After a falling out, Odili plans an elaborate revenge, involving Nanga's young wife and the recent elections.

It is easy to say, "This book is an allegory" - there's politics as the most brutal infighting, the young and educated versus the old and traditional, the power and brutishness of corruption, and so forth. But the story is a bit more subtle than that. Internal tyrants join in with the external ones in the great Scramble for power. Our heroes tell little lies about themselves to make themselves look better. Achebe savors personal tics, details, dialects, and especially little ironies.

Of course, there was a coup, in Achebe's own Nigeria. The book mirrored reality so well that Achebe had to flee for his life, after the government suspected that Achebe must have been a conspirator. This, of course, is the greatest possible irony an author can aspire(?) for.

A short yet pungent look on disillusionment and even hope.

In such a regime, I say, you died a good death if your life had inspired someone to come forward and shoot your murderer in the chest-without asking to be paid.

Rest in Peace.

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## nick says

Ideally I would have given it three and a half stars for I liked it more than 'No longer at ease' by the same author. The book however does not deserve four stars due to the fact that it were the last four pages that

made the book, were it not for the ending the book would not have made such a positive impression on me. Achebe writes amazing endings, just perfect and that is what makes him to me such an incredible author.

The story is an educated African cynic story on African early post colonial politics. I liked reading the story a lot, however the political message felt a bit like a side dish, the core of the book is Odili the young both cynic and naive but well educated Nigerian and his encounters with Mr Nanga the self proclaimed Man of the people and hero of Nigeria. In one way it made a perfect combo, Odili's involvement in politics is directly linked to his personal encounter with Mr Nanga but on the other hand I could not escape the feeling that for it to work completely there should have been less about Odili's struggle for love (the conflict issue between him and Mr Nanga) and more on politics itself. The ending was written to balance the personal and political events but the balance in the books was more of a 30% politics and 70% personal emotions and relations issue. I would have loved to have read more about Odili's involvement in politics then Odili's personal issues and dilemma's but that is a personal opinion perhaps linked again that to me Achebe never reached the same level of character build as he did with old Okonkwo.

Having said that the book is a worthwhile to read novel and anyone interested in the period and region should pick up a copy.

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### **Afnan says**

What is amazing about Achebe is how simple and deep is his language. The novel addresses the theme of corruption in the post-colonial era and the tyrannic leaders or (the puppets of the colonial authority). LOved it!

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### **Rebecca says**

Excellent and honest look at human nature.

A lot of human weakness cleverly and honestly exposed. I wanted to grab Odili, the narrator, and shake him.

But we are guided not to judge him from a distance but rather look at him as a mirror: Achebe hints that this person is not a million miles away from himself (Odili wants to write a novel about the first white men who came to his people). For me this is a signal that I am not to take this as an indictment of any one person or group of people but of all of us.

[spoiler]

This might be why the character feels so real and familiar despite being so duplicitous and self-centred and disloyal. I can't call him a coward, he is brave enough at times, but it didn't cross his mind to defend Elise when she was raped, or to stand by her or support her. He seems to see everyone as a means to an end and I don't think there is a single point in the book where he shows any genuine concern for another human being. (Correct me if I am wrong!)

Despite all this he is well able to see almost everything that is vile in Chief Nanga, he thinks clearly and has a strong sense of what is right. Or is he just waiting for "his turn to eat"? He is very skilled at seeing what is wrong with the world and never stops to look at what might be wrong with him. His chief motivations are

sex, revenge and greed. But through all this he manages to truly believe he is a noble man.  
[/spoiler].

Some interesting quotes:

[spoiler]

"This man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you—as my father did—if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth."

"But we are eating too. They are bringing us water and they promise to bring us electricity. We did not have those things before; that is why I say we are eating too."

"Not what I have but what I do is my kingdom" - Thomas Carlyle quote

There is a bit about voting for someone just because they come from the same village as you, which is also rampant in Ireland and I assume that's the case everywhere. He calls it "primitive loyalty" which seems appropriate.

"Some people's belly is like the earth. It is never so full that it will not take another corpse."

"What money will do in this land wears a hat."

"I could tell by watching his face that his final state of knowledge was achieved through an act of will."

"She had been like a dust particle in the high atmosphere around which the water vapour of my thinking formed its globule of rain."

"As a rule I don't like suffering to no purpose. Suffering should be creative, should give birth to something good and lovely."

[/spoiler]

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## **Anita says**

Timeless, gripping and hilarious story, shows us how top guys exploit those below them and flourish even more. They only care about themselves, that's African politics. All laid out clear in this book.

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## **Doug Wells says**

There is really no one that writes stories like Achebe. I find some of it hard to read and understand - but in that way he reminds me of Faulkner. (for me that is high praise)

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## **Miranda says**

A friend described this book to me as being the best way to explain why Africa is the way it is... As well as being a very good read, the complexities of African politics are clear here, the tensions of post colonialism, the ambition and criticism of government, and the corruption. Very interesting.

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## **Daniel Parker says**

Small masterful piece of fictional work most likely based upon real events and people. About 150 pages of soap opera African politics in the 1960's that reads like it could be written today. This was near the top of the list of the 75 best books of the last hundred years. It is beautifully written with good detail and use of local dialect. I enjoyed it and would pick up any of the other author's writings when I run across them.

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## **Sofia Samatar says**

I just reread this book for a class, and was surprised how much I enjoyed it. What I remembered from over a decade ago as a rather heavy-handed political satire turned out to be sly, smart and laugh-out-loud funny. Odili is a wonderful narrator, flawed yet so pained by his circumstances it's impossible not to sympathize. The "attempted poisoning" of Chief Koko made me burst out laughing in a coffee shop. Too bad the political had to become so personal in the end--it was more entertaining when it was political.

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## **Jack Kruse says**

Achebe's Man of the People Notes, Discussion and Summary from my For Unofficial Use Only Blog

This novel takes place in 1964 examines the institutions of Nigeria. Coming out of colonial times, the people have no sense of taxes or being taxed, especially the farmers (because the tax is just being wrapped into the purchase price). Originally published in 1966, during which there were two coups in Nigeria. The first coup ended the first republic. After these two coups Achebe went to Biafra to join their independence movement. When Biafra lost that bid, Achebe headed to the US for an extended period. Without understanding that Chief Nanga is a man of the people, the story does not work. In the novel, it's the people that drive the action. It's important that Nanga is the only character that talks to the people. Odili never talks to the people in the same manner. Even at Odili's rally, it's Maxwell who speaks, and he still doesn't speak to them in the way Nanga does (paragraph's ideas mainly attributed to prof).

Questions and Discussion Points:

- How sympathetic is Achebe's hero? Achebe portrays Odili as symbolic of the next generation. It's important to note that Achebe writes in the first person, a departure from his previous novels.
- How do women in this book represent society at large?

Edna is a pawn and passive figure--the least of the actors.

Elsie shows a keen lack of fidelity.

Eunice symbolizes accountability, which is what you want in a nation.

Akilo is educated but also a prostitute.

Mrs Nanga: what's the deal with her Adam's apple?

\*In the novel, women go along with objectification. If they symbolize society at large, they are treated as objects that don't care that that is the way they are treated.

- Where did lack of selflessness come from? Who's to blame for this endemic corruption? Achebe blames it on scale of largesse--in the nation/state there's no ownership (like that exists at the village level). Before independence stealing was fine because it was from the White man, but now it's stealing from the people?
- How is religion replaced by materialism in the novel?
- Examine the inversion of education's importance.
- Could Chief Koko's overreaction (when he thinks that he's been poisoned) be a dig at the alarmist nature of that region by Achebe?
- Examine how he uses different women in the novel:
- Examine the theme of infidelity among men and women. Does this transfer to a lack of fidelity in society at large?
- Jale is Soyinka (Sho-yeen-kah). How does this idea fit into the novel's meaning? Incidentally, read some of this man's poetry! It's essential.
- The novel offers Achebe's commentary on education--they purge the western-educated ministers at the beginning and voice a disdain for their education abroad. The action highlights this competition, as well as the inability of society to hold anyone accountable, because they don't understand how their country fits into the larger global context.

Examine the roles played by fathers in the novel.

## Chapter 1

Chief Nanga (Minister of Culture) comes to his hometown (village) of Anata. He is "a man of the people." Background on his rise to power. He recognizes and remembers Odili, who is a teacher in the village. He invites him to come stay with him in the city. The corruption and the politics are introduced.

- would a sensible man "spit out a juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth."
- showing tip of tongue to sky to swear oath?

## Chapter 2

Background on Odili and Else, his friend with benefits. Also meet his friend Andrew. Odili is firm in his aspirations and his work to keep his actions 'clean.' He will not stoop to cronyism to get the scholarship to London that he desires. There is a universal disdain among politicians for education abroad, however Nanga still looks forward to his upcoming honorary law degree from a small college in US.

- Objectification and devaluation of women shown in anecdotes.

## Chapter 3

Odili goes to Nanga's and is welcomed warmly. Background on Odili's father, a district interpreter--a powerful and hated man with five wives and 35 children. Odili's mother died giving birth to him--there's shame associated with this. Odili and Nanga visit Chief Koko, who handles education abroad, but they don't get a chance to discuss the scholarship.

- After independence the value of education becomes inverted. Proximity to power is most important.
- Corruption feeds and multiplies bureaucracy and vice versa.
- OHMS, which the elite don't use. (Our Home Made Stuff)
- the gap between power and previous life is so huge that it feeds corruption

## Chapter 4

Mrs. Nanga gets ready to leave with the children to visit her village, which they do at least once a year. Americans John and Jean stop by. Jean flirts shamelessly with Nanga while her husband highbrows it with Odili. Jean and John work in public relations for Nigeria in their efforts with the U.S.

- Good details about racism and lynching in the US to contrast with Nigeria's problems.

#### Chapter 5

Odili goes to Jean's party and ends up sleeping with her. He finds that he doesn't really like her but asks to see her again. For Americans, Africans are a novelty, one that they hold apart and distinct from the 'blacks' back home. At the dinner party, Odili has a good time. Nanga never ends up going because Mrs. Akilo arrives at his home--we find out later that he sleeps with her.

- Shaking the fist is a sign of great honour and respect.

#### Chapter 6

Odili visits Elsie and sets up a date. He takes Nanga's Cadillac which impresses her. They all go together to a book exhibition to hear Nanga speak.

- Objectification of women again.
- Jaliro wrote fictional Song of the Blackbird

#### Chapter 7

Nanga makes a good speech and they return home. He comments that he likes Jaliro after he sees various ambassadors fawning over the author. They eat dinner and Nanga has sex with Elsie! Odili loses it when he hears them (she is screaming Odili's name in a perverse twist) and leaves the house at 4AM. He comes back in the morning and curses out Nanga and heads to Maxwell's.

- a dash is a small loan or bribe--this destigmatizes corruption--it's just a small quick thing after all.

#### Chapter 8

Odili plots revenge against Nanga. Maxwell holds a meeting of the Common People's Convention (CPC). While the party has Communist undertones, Maxwell is quick to reject that label. He reveals that the CPC has an inside man in the current government.

- All the politicians care for are women, cars, landed property. It's like a rap video today. Case in point:
- some in the older generation wish the white man had never left
- "it is only when you are close to a man that you can begin to smell his breath"

#### Chapter 9

Odili goes back to Anata and we hear the story of Josiah, the bar-owner who took too much. Odili visits Mrs. Nanga and gets Edna's location and then visits her, saying that Nanga sent him to inquire after her mother (who is in the hospital). He gives Edna a lift to the hospital on his bike but also crashes it, humorously.

- No greater condemnation: taking things till at last the owner (the people) notice.

#### Chapter 10

At Christmas, details of major corruption (more than their fair share) break out in the media concerning current government. The CPC has Odili run against Nanga. Odili implores Edna not to marry Nanga! Odili meets a lot of opposition in his campaign. It's important that he rejects Josiah's offer of support.

- now we see a dash of a four-story home!
- we also see that the wooden masks are now a game played by drunkards and children
- we see Odili enjoying the fear in another person--enjoying power
- whereas a telegram might take 3 days to reach the country, rumour took a day or less

#### Chapter 11

Odili gets bodyguards as the campaign gets vicious. Through it all, he pines for Edna (probably more than he cares about the CPC). Nanga approaches Odili's father and tries to buy off Odili with 250 pounds and a two

year scholarship. Odili firmly rejects this.

- "Eating the hills like yam"

## Chapter 12

Maxwell arrives from the city with his CPC staff to drum up support for Odili. Maxwell admits he took a bribe similar to the one offered to Odili, however, he insists that the bribe carries no weight and he just did it to take the money. When Odili approaches Edna, she angrily dismisses him. When the POP finds out that Odili's father indirectly supported his son's campaigning, they nearly jail him and levy convenient overdue taxes against him. Odili's home village loses their pipes for supporting him. Odili writes off Edna.

## Chapter 13

In disguise, Odili goes to Nanga's campaign meeting. Josiah sees him though and calls him out. Odili is beaten severely, with only Edna vainly trying to help. He wakes up in the hospital and ends up winning Edna. A military coup occurs in the country, overthrowing the government and suddenly Max is a martyr and a hero.

- corruption equated with "a warrior eating the reward of his courage" at throwing the white man out
- the people had nothing to do with fall of government--it was unruly mobs and private armies.
- "but in the affairs of the nation there was no owner, the laws of the village became powerless."
- you've lived a good life when someone will shoot your murderer without expecting anything in return.

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## Rushay Booysen says

I love this novel. The writing seems so personal. I don't want to write a review just get a copy and delve into it

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## Hanaan says

I strongly disliked the first two thirds of this book, but I really enjoyed the last bit. As with other Achebe books, it has a strong sense of foreboding throughout, and at first it seemed like just another moral fable, of a good man going bad. But then the narrator, an idealistic young man in his twenties, decides to stand up to a bully, though for some of the wrong reasons. At that moment, Achebe somehow perfectly captures what it is like to be young and foolish and headstrong and selfish and idealistic and generous, all at the same time. Also the treatment of the narrator's relationship with his father is just great. It is really exciting and somehow so easy to relate.

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