



The Heart of Redness: A Novel

By Zakes Mda

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The Heart of Redness: A Novel By Zakes Mda

A startling novel by the leading writer of the new South Africa

In *The Heart of Redness* -- shortlisted for the prestigious Commonwealth Writers Prize -- Zakes Mda sets a story of South African village life against a notorious episode from the country's past. The result is a novel of great scope and deep human feeling, of passion and reconciliation.

As the novel opens Camugu, who left for America during apartheid, has returned to Johannesburg. Disillusioned by the problems of the new democracy, he follows his "famous lust" to Qolorha on the remote Eastern Cape. There in the nineteenth century a teenage prophetess named Nonqawuse commanded the Xhosa people to kill their cattle and burn their crops, promising that once they did so the spirits of their ancestors would rise and drive the occupying English into the ocean. The failed prophecy split the Xhosa into Believers and Unbelievers, dividing brother from brother, wife from husband, with devastating consequences.

One hundred fifty years later, the two groups' descendants are at odds over plans to build a vast casino and tourist resort in the village, and Camugu is soon drawn into their heritage and their future -- and into a bizarre love triangle as well.

The Heart of Redness is a seamless weave of history, myth, and realist fiction. It is, arguably, the first great novel of the new South Africa -- a triumph of imaginative and historical writing.

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The Heart of Redness: A Novel By Zakes Mda Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In Mda's richly suggestive novel, a Westernized African, Camagu, becomes embroiled in a village dispute that has its roots in the 19th century. The war between the amaXhosa and the British in South Africa (known to Westerners as the Zulu Wars) was interrupted by a strange, messianic interlude in which the amaXhosa followed the self-destructive commands of the prophet Nongqawuse and were split between followers of Nongqawuse (Believers) and their opponents (Unbelievers). In the village of Qolorha-by-Sea in the late 20th century, the Believers still flourish. They put the onus for the distressing failure of Nongqawuse's visions on the Unbelievers' unbelief. The chief Believer is Zim; his rival, the chief Unbeliever, is Bhonco. The white store owner, Dalton, whose ancestor killed Zim and Bhonco's forefather, Xikixa, is on the Believers' side in the village's current controversy over whether or not to allow a casino in the village. The Believers oppose the changes they foresee coming to the village's traditions. The Unbelievers want economic development. Camagu originally comes to Qolorha looking for a woman whose memory haunts him. He ends up being associated with the cold, beautiful Xoliswa Ximiya, Bhonco's daughter, whose scorn for tradition eventually drives her from the village. Secretly, however, Camagu lusts for Qukezwa, the squat but sexy daughter of Zim. Mda's sympathies are with the Believers, but his eminent fairness forbids mere didacticism, and his joy in the back and forth of village politics beautifully communicates itself to the reader through poetic language enlivened by humor and irony.

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From [Booklist](#)

Writing from the heart of the new South Africa, Mda tells his country's stories through beautifully realized characters whose search for love and connection takes you up close to the black experience, past and present. In *Heart of Redness*, protagonist Camagu (like the author) had left South Africa during the apartheid years, but now he's back. Camagu has trouble finding his place in the new system until he lands in a coastal village in the eastern Cape, where a "black empowerment" company wants to develop a tourist heaven with casinos and theme parks. The villagers are split between those who welcome "progress" and those who fear it. With the present conflict, Mda weaves in the infamous history of this place, where the savage white conquerors came with "civilization" and a Xhosa prophetess told the people to resist by destroying their cattle and crops. Then, as now, the community was split, and the questions remain. The constant weaving together of past and present slows the narrative, but Mda does a great job of subverting the heart-of-darkness stereotypes, and he does it without romanticizing the "primitive." Today's villagers want electricity, running water, literacy. But they also want to conserve their Xhosa culture and the natural beauty of their place, not as tourist fodder, but as a dynamic contemporary community. Can Camagu help find a way? The parallels with the Native American experience will grab readers, as will the personal search for home. *Hazel Rochman*

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Review

"Brilliant...A new kind of novel: one that combines Gabriel García Márquez's magic realism and political astuteness with satire, social realism and a critical reexamination of the South African past." ?The New York Times Book Review

"Quiet, subtle, and powerful...Mda's enormous skills as a storyteller are everywhere in evidence, making the book impossible to put down." ?The Washington Post

“A major step in the new South African novel.” ?The Village Voice

“At once legend and historical document...Mda's novel is the next Things Fall Apart....This is a major new novelist.” ?The San Diego Union-Tribune

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Phyllis Richards:

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