

COVER FEATURE

MIA COUTO

Laureate of the
2014 Neustadt Prize

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MIA COUTO

Laureate of the 2014 Neustadt Prize

One of the most prominent writers in Portuguese-speaking Africa, Mia Couto was born in 1955 in Beira, Mozambique. Couto studied medicine and biology in Maputo and began his literary career during the struggle for Mozambique's independence.

The first Mozambican author to be nominated for and to win the Neustadt Prize, Couto has also received many other literary prizes, including the Prémio Vergílio Ferreira (1999), the Prémio União Latina de Literaturas Românicas (2007), and the Camões Prize for Literature (2013), a prestigious award given to Portuguese-language writers. In 1998 he was elected to the Brazilian Academy of Letters, the first African writer to receive this honor, and in 2003 he was decorated with the Order of St. James of the Sword in Portugal and the Order of Rio Branco in Brazil.

The author or co-author of more than thirty books—including novels; story, essay, and verse collections; and children's books—Couto has also worked as a journalist, biologist, and environmental consultant. His first novel and the novel that was the representative text for the Neustadt Prize, *Terra sonâmbula* (Eng. *Sleepwalking Land*, 2006), was published in 1992 to great acclaim and is widely considered one of the best African books of the twentieth century.

Couto's works have been translated into more than twenty languages. In English, *Confession of the Lioness* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and *Pensativities and Other Interinventions* (Biblioasis) are both forthcoming in spring 2015.

Re-enchanting the World

The 2014 Neustadt Prize Lecture

by Mia Couto

DEAR FRIENDS,

It is a great honor to receive this award. I am saying this not just as a simple formality. It is a deeper feeling. The importance of this award goes far beyond the work of a particular writer. What we are celebrating here, in Oklahoma, year after year, is more than literature. With the Neustadt award we all praise the cultural diversity of our world and the cultural diversity of each one of us. That is crucial in a moment where personal and national identities are constructed like fortresses, as protection against the threats of those who are presented to us as aliens.

This prize is important for the relations between our worlds, which seem to be situated not only on different continents but on different planets. Despite all diplomatic and political efforts, a considerable reciprocal ignorance still prevails between Mozambique and the United States of America. We tend to assume this remoteness as natural, given the physical location of our countries. However, we must nowadays question what is presented as “normal” and “natural.” There are, indeed, other reasons that lead to our mutual lack of knowledge. And those reasons have nothing to do with geography.

We have a common struggle for freedom, democracy, and independence. We share a past and a present of resistance against injustice and discrimination. But in the quest to affirm the uniqueness of our nations we have created, without knowing, a reductive and simplistic vision of the other, and of ourselves. We suffer from a narrow and stereotyped vision of a multicolor reality. We are only able to recognize one cultural dimension of reality. We have fallen into the temptation of the “Single Story” against which the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie so eloquently warned us.

The Neustadt Prize has the merit of promoting dialogue between cultures and creating bridges where there is distance and, worse than that, mere indifference.

It's good to know that literature can help build neighborhoods in a world which imagines that the proximity between cultures is totally resolved by technological solutions.



DEAR FRIENDS,

I am the second son of a Portuguese couple forced to emigrate, trying to escape from the fascist regime in Portugal. Each night,

my mother and my father told me stories. They thought they were getting us to sleep. In fact, they were producing a second and eternal birth.

What fascinated me was not exactly the content of those tales. As a matter of fact, I can't remember a single one of those stories. What I remember, first of all, is having my parents just for me, next to my bed, next to my dreams. More than anything I remember the passion that they found in the invention of those stories. That intense pleasure had a reason: using words, they could travel and visit their missing homeland. They could erase time and distance.

In that very familiar and domestic moment, the very essence of what is literature was present: a chance to migrate from ourselves, a chance to become others inside ourselves, a chance to re-enchant the world. Literature is not only a way to affirm our existence. It is a permission to disappear and to allow the presence of those who seem to be absent.

We Africans come from a long and painful narrative to affirm our nations and our singular identity. I am afraid that, although historically necessary, part of the nationalist discourse has become a burden that prevents us from being plural, available to be others and to travel inside other lives. That availability is the essence of literature. And the essence of our humanity.

I come from a nation that is regarded as one of the poorest in the world. I don't know how poverty is measured, but many of the African languages spoken in my country do not have specific words for saying “poor.” To designate a poor person, one uses the term *chissiwana*. This word means “orphan.” A poor person is someone who lives without family and without friends. He is someone who has lost the ties of solidarity.

This other poverty, born of solitude, is more widespread than one might think. Never before has our world been so small, so simultaneous, so instantaneous. But this speed has not solved our solitude. Never before have there been so many roads. And



ABOVE Mia Couto in conversation with a student after giving the Neustadt Prize Lecture. More than five hundred attended the event, held on the University of Oklahoma campus in October 2014.

never before have we made so few visits. What could bind us together would be the desire to tell and to listen to stories.

There are many hidden dimensions of the art of writing. A few years ago I experienced an episode that showed me a different meaning of what I do as writer.

It happened in 2008, in northern Mozambique in a coastal village called Palma. It's a remote region, without water, without electricity, in the middle of the savannah. I had finished my day's work as a biologist, and I was in the shadow of my tent, when a peasant came and called me. *Come here*, he said. *Come and see a man who's been killed*. I went into the darkness, and I followed the old man along a path in the middle of the bush. *How did he die?* I asked. And the man replied: *He was killed by a lion. That lion is still nearby. And he's going to come back to fetch the rest of the body*. I returned hastily to the tent, with no wish to see whatever he had to show me.

I closed the zipper of the tent, knowing how inadequate this gesture was as protection. A short distance from me lay a corpse ripped up by a lion, and a wild beast roamed nearby like a murderous shadow. During my professional life, I have worked for many years in regions where there are still dangerous animals. But I

didn't know how to deal with a situation like that. I remember that the first thing I did was to switch on my small flashlight and begin writing in my notebook. I was not describing what was going on, because I didn't know, nor did I want to know what was happening. The truth is that until day-break, I was busy writing in order not to be overcome with fear.

That fear was a primitive feeling, a memory of another time, in which our fragility was more evident. I am an urban man, born and raised in modernity. I had no defense against a fear that was more ancient than humanity itself. I gradually realized that the wild creatures were not lions but the monsters that have dwelt within us for centuries.

Only later did I understand; I wasn't really taking shelter in the tent. I was taking shelter in fiction. I was creating a story like someone making a house not just to live in but to erase reality. Without knowing it, I was beginning to write a novel called *Confession of the Lioness*.

But another one of my novels served as the basis for the choice of this prize, the novel *Terra sonâmbula* (*Sleepwalking Land*). This book speaks of a dramatic moment in the history of Mozambique. For sixteen years we suffered a civil war, which killed the economy and crippled the country.

Those sixteen years of conflict left a million dead out of a population of 18 million. In its intention, violence is opposed to the art of telling stories: that intention is to dehumanize us, a dehumanization achieved in various ways. We were living in a kind of absolute solitude: isolated from hope, incapable of turning the present into a treasure trove of stories. We were all alone, the dead and the living. Without a past, without a future, without stories. The present was only worthwhile insofar as it was born to be forgotten.

Terra sonâmbula was the only book I found painful to write, because it was written during the war, at a time when I was also besieged by despair. For months I

"When I was invited to be part of this most distinguished panel, the first thought that came to mind was that I would nominate an African woman writer. But then my heart spoke up and posed a question: What does being a writer mean to me? A writer is not simply a person who knows how to shape and mold words to tell a story but who, in doing so, helps us view its limits and dream of a way of going beyond them, to where the dream takes on the power of vision. Someone who is able to communicate not only with his or her 'local' world but also with the 'global' one, and who can express all this in words, in stories, in narratives. This being the case, there was only one possible candidate for me. Only him. Mia Couto, a writer from Mozambique, the author of *Sleepwalking Land*."—Gabriella Ghermandi, from her nominating statement for the 2014 Neustadt Prize

spent sleepless nights visited by friends and colleagues who had been killed during the conflict. It was as if they came knocking on the door of my insomnia, asking to live in stories, even if they were lies, or just a way for me to fall asleep.

I remember that once, after one of these sleepless nights, I came out of the building of the biology station where I was working and sat on the beach. And I realized that there, very close to the breaking waves, was a whale which had decided to come and die on the beach. Then I saw people arriving hastily at the beach. In an instant they rushed together at the dying animal to hack chunks from it, ripped to pieces with the greed of a hunger of centuries. It had not yet died, and its bones were already shining in the sun. Little by little, I came to think of my country as one of those whales coming to die in agony on the beach. Death had not yet come, and yet the knives were already stealing chunks of it, each person trying to take as much as possible for himself. As if that were the last animal, the final opportunity to grab a meal. I went back to my room weighed down by an incurable sadness. On that early morning I wrote the final chapter of my novel. Two months later, when I was delivering the text to my publisher, the news arrived of the peace agreement.

When the peace agreement was signed in 1992, we thought that revenge and the settling of scores would be inevitable. But it didn't happen like that. People decided on a kind of collective amnesia. The reminders of violence were cast into a pit of oblivion. We know that this oblivion was false. A war is impossible to forget. But we wanted the war to forget us.

Mozambique's experience showed how literature can play an active role in the construction of peace. Fiction and poetry do not cause the guns to fall silent. But they can reconcile us with the past, no matter how painful it might be. Fiction and poetry can help reconquer our inner tranquility and promote reconciliation with others. By means of stories,

In that very familiar and domestic moment, the very essence of what is literature was present: a chance to migrate from ourselves, a chance to become others inside ourselves, a chance to re-enchant the world.

these others were freed from the condition of demons. I can say with pride that poets and writers have helped to rehumanize my country.

Unfortunately, it is not so much stories that unite humanity. What unites us today, in all countries, on all continents, is above all fear. The same feeling of abandonment and insecurity brings us together everywhere. There are no great or small powers that are safe from fear. We live the same anguish faced with the other transformed into an enemy. We all live in a small tent surrounded by the threat, real or imaginary, of a beast in the dark wanting to devour us.

The fear that rules us is, in large measure, nourished by the profound ignorance we have of one another. Literature can be a

response against the invitation to fabricate fear and mistrust. Literature and storytelling confirm us as relatives and neighbors in our infinite diversity.



DEAR FRIENDS,

It is very gratifying to know that the next laureate is an African as well. [Editorial note: Meshack Asare is the 2015 laureate of the NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature.] We know that the Neustadt Prize is not limited by the author's geographical origin; the only issue is the quality of his or her work. This means that Africans are imposing themselves on the international scene without recourse to any paternalistic criteria. In truth, for some years now, we African writers are freeing ourselves from a literature dominated by a desire to affirm our identity. Formerly, we felt a historic and psychological need to demonstrate that we were as able as others. This period of affirmation made sense after centuries of cultural and historical denial. But today we are more free to act without fulfilling our function as the Other.

A new generation of Africans is more and more free to act as universal writers. They feel free to write about any subject, in the language they choose. Our



Paul Fauvet is the editor of the Mozambique News Agency (AIM). A British journalist, Fauvet moved to Mozambique in 1980, in the midst of the country's civil war, and has lived there ever since.

new literature is now less afraid of the accusation of not being faithful to genuineness, or not respecting the so-called "tradition." We are producing a literature that is free from having to show its Africanness as a kind of passport to be accepted.

Many of our young writers are using literature to denounce the arrogance, corruption, and nepotism of some current political leaders. But more than that, they are busy producing good literature. And they know that there are as many Africans as there are writers, and all of them are reinventing continents that lie inside their very selves. This is not a quest that is exclusively ours, as Africans. There isn't a writer in the world who doesn't have to seek out his or her own identity among multiple and elusive identities. In every continent, each person is a nation made up of different nations.



DEAR FRIENDS,

The Neustadt Prize is announced as follows (and I quote): "This is the first international literary award of its scope to originate in the United States and is one of the very few international prizes for which poets, novelists, and playwrights are equally eligible."

I would like to thank the Neustadt family, the University of Oklahoma, and *World Literature Today* for the open and all-embracing conception of this initiative. The format of this celebration reveals a concern not to reduce the event to an award ceremony alone. In this way, justice is done to the principle that what is important are books and not so much their authors.

One of the merits of this prize is that it is guided by criteria devoted exclusively to literary quality. I present myself to you not as a representative of a place, of an ideology, of a religion. But I will never forget those who give meaning to my writing, the anonymous people of my country. Some of those Mozambicans—who are, together with me, author of my books—do not know how to write. Many don't even speak Portuguese. But they are guardians, in their everyday lives, of a magical, poetical dimension to the world that illuminates my writing and gives delight to my existence.

It would be an injustice not to mention here the people who have given my presence here their support: The first of these people is Gabriella Ghermandi,

Fiction and poetry do not cause the guns to fall silent. But they can reconcile us with the past, no matter how painful it might be.

the member of the panel that proposed me as a candidate. Without her, I would not be here. I would not be here if it weren't for my longtime translator, David Brookshaw. A translator is a co-author and should appear on the covers of books, and his presence in this ceremony is totally justified. Accompanying me is my wife, Patricia, who is my primary inspiration and my first reader. Present with us is my daughter, Luciana, and she represents here my other children, Madyo and Rita. No prize can prove stronger than the delight we have in seeing ourselves born in our own children. To them I owe this feeling of lived eternity.

I shall end by reading a poem I wrote some years ago. I remembered these verses when I discovered that the emblem for this prize was an eagle's feather. This symbolic representation is a metaphor for writing that seeks to have the lightness of wings. I shall ask David Brookshaw to read this poem, in his own translation:

In Some Other Life I Was a Bird

I preserve the memory
of landscapes spread wide
and escarpments skimmed in flight.
A cloud and its careless trace of white
connect me to the soil.
I live with the heartbeat
of a bird's wing
and plunge like lightning
hungering for earth.
I preserve the plume
that remains in my heart
as a man preserves his name
over the span of time.
In some other life I was a bird
in some other bird I was life.

October 24, 2014
Norman, Oklahoma

Translation from the Portuguese
By Paul Fauvet

A Conversation with Mia Couto

Sexuality, Orality, and Cultural Frontiers

by Nancy El Gendy

When Mia Couto visited the University of Oklahoma in October 2014, he graciously agreed to sit down and discuss his work with me. Many of my questions arose from teaching his novels, short stories, and essays during the fall 2014 Neustadt course. The following excerpts include highlights from our conversation.

Nancy El Gendy: I'd like to begin with a question about your novel *Sleepwalking Land*. It seems to me that Kindzu's mother's body posture embodies a whole philosophical statement on strategic invisibility. At one point, Kindzu describes his mother as follows: "She taught us to be shadows, our only desire being for our bodies to seep into the earth. Her lesson required no words, she just sat there, her legs folded, one knee over the other." This beautiful scene has made me eager to know: to what extent do you see the body as a mirror for Mozambican culture today?

Mia Couto: Mozambique is defined by orality, and that is part of the reason why people from Mozambique speak with their entire bodies, not just words. When Mozambicans meet in the street, they touch each other, unlike here in the West; their bodies express a kind of relationship. This is just as impor-

tant as spoken language. It's the same as using the body to dance, using the body to love. But there is also the religious aspect of it: in contrast to the monotheistic religions, in African religions the concept of sin, or disobeying God, is not so present. There is no judgment after death, because there is no afterlife; you will always be living with your family or friends. So I think that's why people feel free to use their entire bodies.

NEG: How do you see the position of women in today's Mozambique? I've been grappling with this rich scene in *Sleepwalking Land* between Muidinga and Tuahir, in which Muidinga feels lonely and Tuahir tells him that his loneliness signifies his need for a woman in his life, especially since the boy (Muidinga) has been reading the story of Kindzu's beloved, Farida, which contains numerous sensuous details. Tuahir says, "Women are good when

there isn't any love. . . . For love is a slippery thing. People build a house for it, and it springs up in the garden. Now a whore is worth having, boy. We empty our pocket and not our heart. We never invest our heart in a whore." What social and/or cultural issues are you commenting on here?

MC: It has to do with the ways women are converted to bodies, and not just bodies, but things, objects; it is like they don't have a story. This is what those type of men, those visions do: they kidnap the story of their women because it's the story that makes you a human being. A person without stories becomes a mere object.

NEG: If you don't have a story you are no longer a human being.

MC: It's kind of a dehumanization of women, and I believe this not only as a writer but also as a biologist. The only way you can commit violence against another person is that first you must dehumanize them, which absolves you of any guilt when you abuse them.

NEG: Absolutely, and that's how colonization acts.

MC: Yes, it's a type of colonization in terms of the relationship between men and women.

NEG: As a writer, are there certain topics that you consider to be taboo?

MC: Yes, there are taboos in Mozambique, and I respect them. There are some unresolved issues in our recent history, many ethnic conflicts and religious conflicts between different types of Mozambicans,

I do not belong to any world. I'm in between, in between worlds.

and people have a way of dealing, or not dealing, with those conflicts by remaining silent. It's a strategy of oblivion: people think that the passing of time will resolve them. So I respect that as a writer and as a citizen—I'll touch those topics, but in a very cautious way.

NEG: What are the major ideologies, institutions, and/or mythologies that you hope your readers will question or at least reconsider? And would it matter if the reader is from Mozambique?

MC: I think what I'm dealing with is the borderline, the frontier between different situations, ideologies, and cultures. This is the area where I belong. I do not belong to any world. I'm in between, in between worlds.

NEG: And how do you feel about being in this position?

MC: I love it now. I used to consider it something dramatic before, something to be solved, but now I accept it. There's nothing to be solved, and this is the best way to be available—that is the exact word, *available*—to listen to different things and be open to all cultures. So I think not having certainties is a way to be happy. When I'm sitting on the ground, say, with witch doctors, I'm not looking at what is true or not. I'm asking myself, Is this touching me? Is this involving me? If it touches me, and I'm transported to something else, then it's beautiful.

NEG: Speaking of certainties, *Sleepwalking Land* offers examples of certainty. For instance, the simultaneity of literacy and orality is an emphasized value in the novel. Here I recall that conversation between Tuahir and Muidinga in which the old man (Tuahir) states that Muidinga has something he lacks: the ability to read. The larger context in which their conversation takes place suggests that education is a certainty, is important, but that there is no one

I would say that humanity makes me afraid and hopeful at the same time, because everything is inside us: the only way we can survive is by telling stories and producing fiction and poetry.

way to go about it, and storytelling can be as important as schooling. This goes back to the theme of in-betweenness we were just talking about. What are your thoughts on this?

MC: Once again, this is a frontier, a zone of contact between two different worlds. The old man is representing this orality of the stories as always present—the knowledge is inside stories—whereas the young man is from the written world; he comes from school and can read. So, the solution for a country is the same as the solution for a person in terms of acceptance of this overlap. You are in a position now in which orality is something minor—it's a passage to come to the written world, written knowledge. And it's a pity because orality is not just a lack of something, it's not a lack of technique; it's another way to see the world. The ideal solution is to have both.

NEG: So the overlapping worlds, the position of in-betweenness, should be embraced as opposed to having to choose between them?

MC: Absolutely.

NEG: In your article "The Frontier of Culture," you talk about the differences between Mozambicans from the capital versus Mozambicans from the rural areas. To what extent would you say that your literature brings the various Mozambiques together?

The Streets

by Mia Couto

In the time
when there were streets,
my mother would summon us
at the end of the afternoon:
it was time to go home.
And the street entered
our house with us.
Time so
lived in us
that we dispensed with the future.
Secluded in my bedroom,
the city fell asleep
with the same sway as our mother.
Getting into bed,
I shook off the sand of dreams
and awakened far-off lives.
No door fit
between house and world:
what dead-bolt can lock together
the two sides of infinity?

The Rain's Translator

by Mia Couto

A white handkerchief
suffocates the sky.

The speech of wings
translates the rain:
there is no good-bye
in the language of birds.

The world flies by
and only the poet
keeps the ground company.

Editorial note: Unless otherwise noted, the poems in this special section were translated from the Portuguese by David Shook. Turn to page 29 to read David's bio.

MC: My goal is to combine these different universes. It's not just different religions or cultures but different universes. The way you conceive of time, for example. In Mozambique, there isn't a word for "future." Instead, it's a circular vision of the world—time is not linear. I was born in a time and a place where, even at the level of language, you felt secure in a place, felt a sense of certainty. Now everything is moving; it's changing. I'm feeling like a bird in the sense that I don't have a real place to be.

NEG: Like a bird?

MC: In terms of inventing a place where I can stay, but I don't belong there and that place doesn't belong to me. Earlier in my life, I thought that a lack of roots was sad. But the solution is to have wings and roots at the same time. What I'm trying to suggest, in telling stories, is that the mixture between those different positions and different attitudes may be a way to be happy. Nothing more than that. It's not the solution because it's not a problem; we invented the problem, so now we are looking for a solution for something that is not a problem.

NEG: I have observed that war and women seem to be two dominant topics in your work. Given our conversation, is it true to infer that by discussing these two topics, you aim to face what you are afraid of?

MC: On the one hand, it's a way to escape, but on the other hand, I'm flirting with the subject, the issue of fear, because fear comes from a lack of knowledge. You feel afraid of the things that you don't really understand. Giving names to things and humanizing them changes our relationships with them.

NEG: So I've asked you about what makes you worried and afraid, but what gives you hope, and what keeps you going as a writer?

MC: I would say that humanity makes me afraid and hopeful at the same time, because everything is inside us: the only way we can survive is by telling stories and producing fiction and poetry. In the ancient world, our ancestors created art in caves, which is also a way of telling stories. The hunters were not just hunting; the day before, they were dreaming about the animals and were *being* animals, and so this ability to be something

Poetic Error

by Mia Couto

I am the sugar
hunting the ant.
My path
isn't straight.
It's a speck, a planetary grain.
My nature
is unfinished calligraphy:
only the errors defend me.
Love just
scrapes away my soul.
With the ant
I share hallucinogens:
migas of passion, crumbs of sweetness.

Numbers

by Mia Couto

Unequal counts:
for each angel, two demons.

For a single sun, four moons.

For your mouth, all lives.

Giving life to the dead
is the work of infinite gods.

Resuscitating the living:
just one love accomplishes the miracle.



Nancy El Gendy is a visiting assistant professor and postdoctoral fellow in the English Department at the University of Oklahoma. In her recently defended dissertation, she analyzed the Muslim female body across twenty-first-century Arab and Arab American novels by women. She is currently revising her dissertation as a book.

else, to be the other, is what makes us human. Now is a difficult time because it is so easy to have stereotypes about "the Arabs," "the Africans," immigrants, etc. It is so easy to construct enemies and to assume that the reason everything has failed is because of *them*, to build those damned categories. I'm afraid that we are losing this ability to be others. As a writer, I can travel through lives, through time. I would say the secret is to be available to listen.

October 22, 2014

Mia Couto

A Literary Voice from Mozambique

by David Brookshaw

MIA COUTO WAS BORN IN BEIRA, Mozambique's second city, in 1955, and belongs to a generation of writers who emerged during the 1980s and were concerned with exploiting the aesthetic potential of Mozambican literature rather than the utopian truths imposed by the revolutionary regime that had come to power in 1975, following the country's independence from Portugal. For his part, Couto was close to the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) and interrupted his university studies in Maputo, the country's capital, in order to become director of the state news agency and editor of a news magazine and daily newspaper in the late 1970s and early '80s. However, intensive travel throughout his country at this time gave him a sense of Mozambique's cultural diversity and imbued in him a desire to reflect in his work the many different voices that went to make up Mozambican identity. Indeed, he came rapidly to the conclusion that one cannot talk about a monolithic national identity in a nation-state like Mozambique, which contains such a wide diversity of linguistic, ethnic, and religious cultures within its borders.

Identities are, inevitably, plural and prone to change and reinterpretation and, above all, involve shifting narratives.

Couto had written from an early age, coming as he did from a family in which his father was a journalist and poet, his mother a skillful teller of stories to her children. His first published book, in 1983, was a collection of poetry entitled *Raíz de orvalho* (Root of dew), but it was in the short narrative genre that he would first reach international acclaim. His collection of short stories *Voices anoitecidas* (subsequently translated as *Voices Made Night*) attracted the attention of a Lisbon publisher in 1986 and had an immediate impact among a Portuguese readership avid for novelty and experimentation in literature. Indeed, it was Couto's unorthodox and playful use of language, inspired by the way Mozambicans spoke Portuguese, along with his use of oral storytelling techniques, and his poetic evocation of

Couto has an understanding of those groups who inhabit the in-between world of exile and un-belonging.

Sadness

by Mia Couto

My sadness
isn't the landless peasant's.

My sadness
is the blind astronomer's.

The Neighborhood of My Childhood

by Mia Couto

It's not creatures that die.

It's the opposite:
only things die.

Creatures don't die
because they become themselves.

And one born of himself
is condemned to eternity.

A tomb's dust
suffocates my past
whenever I visit my old
neighborhood.

The house died
in the place I was born:
my childhood
has nowhere else to sleep.

But behold,
from any patio,
the wild laughter
of boys playing reaches me.

They laugh and spell out
the same revelry
of castles and chimeras
I once was sovereign over.

I touch the cold wall again
and feel in me the pulse
of one who lives forever.

Death
is water's impossible embrace.



David Brookshaw

is an emeritus professor at the University of Bristol, UK. He has published widely in the field of Brazilian and lusophone postcolonial studies.

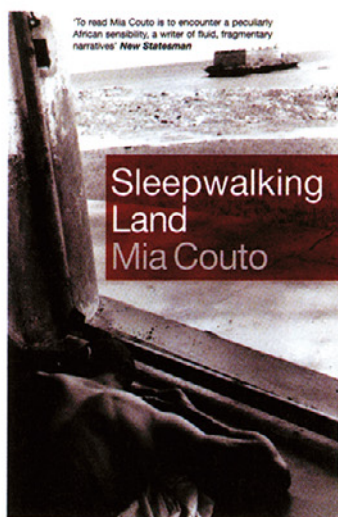
His translations include, most recently, Mia Couto's *Confession of the Lioness* and *Pensativities and Other Interinterventions*.

Selected Essays, both forthcoming in spring 2015. His translation of Couto's "In Some Other Life I Was a Bird" appears on page 53.

the harsh realities of Mozambique, then at the height of its long civil war, that gave him a major following in Portugal and later Brazil. Since then, he has published some thirty books, including further collections of short stories, poetry, novels, essays, and children's stories. He is his country's most prolific and best-known writer, his work having been translated into more than twenty languages, and having been the subject of various international awards, including the Camões Prize in the lusophone world, the Prix de l'Union Latine, based in France, and, most recently, the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in the United States. His first novel, *Terra sonâmbula* (1992; Eng. *Sleepwalking Land*)

was named one of the twelve best novels to come out of Africa in the last century by a panel of judges at a book fair in Zimbabwe. Since then, he has published eight more novels that engage, in one way or another, with Mozambique's recent history—namely, the civil war, the transition to peace, postwar reconstruction, and the country's jettisoning of the last vestiges of revolutionary socialism in favor of parliamentary democracy and what some see as a virulent form of capitalism with attendant widening social inequalities.

Couto's work evokes such themes as the encounters and profound misunderstandings between the traditional, rural world of Mozambique and that of urban modernity; the treatment of women in the country's still-patriarchal society and the issue of domestic violence; corruption and poverty of spirit among sections of the country's fledgling elite; and issues relating to conservation, a subject close to the author's heart because of his work as an environmental biologist. It



also seeks to give a voice to those who have somehow been sidelined in Mozambique's march for progress: the countryfolk, most of whom do not speak Portuguese, the state language, and those who might be considered history's vanquished, the people who were caught on the wrong side in the country's many conflicts. In this sense, he has an understanding of those groups who inhabit the in-between world of exile and un-belonging, whether, for example, in the figure of Domingos—the elderly Portuguese in *Under the Frangipani* who stayed on in Mozambique after independence but is never quite accepted in the new country, yet who cannot return to Portugal, where he no longer feels at home—or in the figure of the Indian, Surendra, in *Sleepwalking Land*, whose idealistic dream of a Mozambique proclaiming an Indian Ocean identity is his way of reconciling his identification with his adopted country and the land of his birth.

What gives Couto's fiction such an appeal to readers in Europe and America is his engagement with the major issues that concern us all in our modern, diverse, but globalized civilization, and that is the fluid nature of identity, the fallacy of assumed notions of cultural authenticity invariably propounded by Western commentators on African culture, and the challenge of adapting to the pressures of globalized culture without losing one's own cultural personality. In one of his recent novels, *O outro pé da sereia* (The mermaid's other foot), a witch doctor in the interior of Mozambique avails himself of a cell phone. It may seem incongruous that such a symbol of modern life should be integrated into time-honored practice and ritual, especially deep in Mozambique's rural heartland, where phone signals are, at best, sparse, but it may also serve as a metaphor for the way in which traditional culture might adapt to modernity in its own time and on its own terms. In its poetic depth, humor, and humanity, Mia Couto's writing speaks to us all.

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