

# WORLD AUTHORS 2000 – 2005



Courtesy of Christopher Abani

## Abani, Christopher

1967– Poet; novelist; playwright

A political dissident in his native Nigeria, Christopher Abani has endured imprisonment, torture, and exile. "However much [he] deserves respect for his political courage," Dan Cryer wrote for the *Chicago Tribune* (February 29, 2004), "that's no rationale for praising his fiction. . . . His writing can stand on its own." Since his first novel, *Masters of the Board*, debuted in 1985, when he was still a teenager, Abani has published several other works, among them the poetry collections *Kalakuta Republic* (2000), *Daphne's Lot* (2003), and *Dog Woman* (2004), as well as the critically acclaimed novel *GraceLand* (2004). "GraceLand," Merle Rubin wrote for the *Los Angeles Times* (April 5, 2004), "amply demonstrates that Abani has the energy, ambition and compassion to create a novel that delineates and illuminates a complicated, dynamic, deeply fractured society."

Christopher Abani was born in 1967 in Afikpo, Nigeria, a nation in West Africa that won its independence from Great Britain in 1960. The postcolonial years found Nigeria in the grip of a civil war, a series of oppressive military regimes, increasing tensions between the Christian population and fundamentalist Muslims, and mob violence. In a brief reminiscence for the *New York Times Magazine* (February 1, 2004), Abani recalled that as a 10-year-old boy he watched a man accused of stealing be burned alive by an angry mob: "As the man burned, people began to file past him in an orderly manner like the offertory line in the Catholic Church I attended," Abani wrote. "As they walked past, they spat on the incandescent figure. My aunt spat. I looked away, hand held over my nose at the smell of burning flesh, horrified that it reminded me of kebabs. 'Spit,' she snapped, rapping me on the head with her knuckles. I spat."

Abani started writing as a teenager and completed his first novel, *Masters of the Board*, when he was 16. Speaking with Andie Miller for the South Africa *Mail & Guardian* (March 11, 2005, on-line), Abani described his first novel as "a very bad crime thriller about neo-Nazis taking over Nigeria to reinstate the Fourth Reich." He explained, "Thrillers were fascinating to me because you can indulge all your adolescent fantasies about guns and women in them. I thought it would bring me fame and wealth." The manuscript won Nigeria's Delta Fiction Award, in 1983, and was published two years later. Abani was then arrested for treason by the Nigerian government, then under General Ibrahim Babangida. The head of the Association of Nigerian Authors, General Mamman Vatsa—who also happened to be Abani's mentor at the time—was accused of plotting a coup and using Abani's novel as a blueprint. "In the novel certain strategic targets had to be blown up, and when he [Vatsa] was arrested he was carrying a copy [of] my novel," Abani told Miller. Abani was imprisoned for six months, and though, as he told Miller, he had not been political before his internment, he emerged from prison with "a mix of idealism and a saviour complex."

In 1987, while a university student, Abani ran afoul of the authorities once again, this time for belonging to an allegedly subversive theater group that conducted impromptu performances outside of government buildings. The manuscript for his second novel, *Sirocco*—a tale of Palestinian

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terrorists planting a biological agent in Europe's water supply—was seized by the government, and Abani was sent to Kiri-Kiri, an infamous prison located in the Nigerian capital of Lagos, where he was subjected to torture, before being released one year later. “I’m not sure what they were thinking when they released me,” he told Michael Datcher for *Black Issues Book Review* (May–June 2005). “That I would stop making art?”

In 1991 Abani graduated magna cum laude from Imo State University in Imo, Owerri, Nigeria, with a bachelor’s degree in English and literary studies. For his university’s convocation ceremony, he wrote *Song of a Broken Flute*, a controversial play that criticized the rampant corruption in Nigeria’s government; the government responded by arresting him a third time. Sentenced to death Abani endured almost two years of imprisonment—six months of which he spent in solitary confinement—before friends bribed prison officials to arrange for his escape.

Settling in Great Britain Abani completed a master’s degree in gender, society, and culture at Birkbeck College, at the University of London, in 1995. He then wrote a collection of poems, *Kalakuta Republic*, that served as a sort of prison memoir in verse. In an interview posted on the Voices in Wartime Web site, Abani explained that he began writing poetry in an attempt to capture his experiences as a political prisoner: “What really drew me to poetry, I suppose you could say, is the brevity in it. . . . It’s a form that resists sentimentality. And when you are dealing with a difficult subject, sentimentality is a problem because you’re sign-posting how people should feel.” Described by Robert Winder for the *New Statesman* (May 21, 2001) as “a sequence of poems scraped from the harsh walls of a prison cell in Nigeria,” *Kalakuta Republic* is composed of “short, bloodstained notes from a place where few of us have any wish to go.” One poem from the collection, “Ode to Joy,” as quoted on the Web site of the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre, details the brutal death of a young inmate: “John James, 14 / Refused to serve his conscience up / to indict an innocent man / handcuffed to chair; they tacked his penis / to the table / with a six inch nail / and left him there / to drip / to death / 3 days later.” The British playwright Harold Pinter avowed, as quoted on Abani’s official Web site, “Abani’s poems are the most naked, harrowing expression of prison life and political torture imaginable. Reading them is like being singed by a red hot iron.”

While Abani was living in Great Britain, the Nigerian government accused him of treason and sought to have him extradited. When Abani’s neighbor, the only other Nigerian in the apartment building, was mysteriously murdered, the writer began to suspect that he was being targeted for assassination by agents from his homeland. He subsequently left Great Britain and moved to Los Angeles, California. In 2002 Abani earned a

master’s degree in English from the University of Southern California (USC).

The poems contained in Abani’s 2003 compilation, *Daphne’s Lot*, address war and violence, as well as the universal themes of compassion and coming-of-age. In a representative review Ronald Gottesman, a professor emeritus at USC, wrote, as quoted on Abani’s Web site, “Chris Abani’s poems remind us of what happens when moral boundaries are obliterated and the sacredness of life becomes a kind of cynical joke. But these poems also remind us of the human capacity for compassion and love in the face of unspeakable cruelty and fiendish conditions.”

Abani’s novel *GraceLand* is set in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Maroko, a slum on the outskirts of Lagos. The protagonist of this dark bildungsroman is Elvis Oke, a bookish Nigerian teenager who earns his living by impersonating his namesake, Elvis Presley, for tourists. Elvis’s widowed father, Sunday, is unemployed, alcoholic, and bereft of hope for himself and his country. Elvis, in his struggle to escape his surroundings, enters Nigeria’s criminal underworld, trafficking in drugs and human organs for a mysterious and sinister figure, dubbed the Colonel. Scattered throughout are excerpts from Elvis’s deceased mother’s journal, which recall the family’s earlier life in the countryside, with its singular folklore and recipes. Though some critics felt the passages from Elvis’s mother did not always mesh seamlessly with the rest of the story, *GraceLand* by and large earned high praise, particularly for its evocation of the squalid streets of Lagos; in a passage quoted by Chris Lehmann for the *Washington Post* (February 3, 2004), Abani described the Maroko slum: “Half of the town was built of a confused mix of clapboard, wood, cement and zinc sheets, raised above a swamp by means of stilts and wooden walkways. The other half, built on solid ground reclaimed from the sea, seemed to be clawing its way out of the primordial swamp, attempting to become something else.” Writing for the *Boston Globe* (April 11, 2004), Melvin Jules Bukiet opined, “Abani’s *GraceLand* is both a poetic meditation on urban decay and a coming-of-age picaresque. . . . Abani creates an intensely vivid portrait of an artificial nation whose people have as much emotional vigor as natural resources and, scarily, some have as much likelihood of throwing away their potential as making the most of it.” Sophie Harrison wrote for the *New York Times Book Review* (February 22, 2004) that the notion of a Nigerian teen doing Elvis Presley impressions was “almost too weird to swallow.” She admitted, however, “The book works brilliantly in two ways. As a convincing and unpatronizing record of life in a poor Nigerian slum, and as a frighteningly honest insight into a world skewed by casual violence, it’s wonderful.”

In 2006 Abani published the novella *Becoming Abigail*, another coming-of-age tale about a Nigerian youth, but with a female protagonist this

time. Left to fend off the sexual advances of her male relatives after her mother's untimely death, young Abigail acts out, practicing self-mutilation. Her situation only worsens when she is sent to live with relatives in London. "This portrait of a brutalized girl given no control over her life or body . . . features Abani's lyrical prose (Abigail's father's armchair 'smelled of the dreams of everyone who had sat in it') and deft moves between short chapters titled 'Then' and 'Now'—with the latter offering little promise," a reviewer wrote for *Publishers Weekly* (January 9, 2006). In a review for *Library Journal* (February 1, 2006), Kevin Greczek wrote, "Abani's abundant talent is clearly evident throughout, as is his willingness to be brutally honest without being grotesque. Perhaps because of the book's brevity, Abani also refrains from polemics and focuses solely on the artistic presentation of a young, tragic life, leaving interpretation to the reader."

In 2006 Abani also published the poetry collection *Hands Washing Water*. His most recent novel, *The Virgin of Flames*, was published in 2007.

In addition to the works already noted, Abani has published a bilingual, Dutch/English poetry collection, issued in the Netherlands in 2003, entitled *Maar mijn hart is onvergankelijk* (*My Heart Is Unending*). His poetry collection *Dog Woman* was described by the poet Maurya Simon as "a mesmerizing, haunting, and sometimes subversive exploration of the personal and cultural politics of disempowerment and power," according to Abani's Web site. Abani has also

written several plays, including one aimed at young adults, entitled *The Poet, the Soldier, the Lover and the Paper-Kite Maker* (2003). Abani has received a number of honors and awards, including a Prince Claus Award, the PEN USA Freedom to Write Award, a Hellman/Hammett Grant from Human Rights Watch, a Lannan Foundation Literary Fellowship, and the PEN/Hemingway Prize.

Abani, who received a doctoral degree in literature and creative writing from USC in 2004, has taught writing as an associate professor at Antioch University, in Los Angeles, since 2001; he has also been a visiting assistant professor at the University of California, at Riverside.

In addition to writing Abani enjoys playing the saxophone.

—P.B.M.

**Suggested Reading:** *Boston Globe* D p7 Apr. 11, 2004; *Chicago Tribune* C p3 Feb. 29, 2004; Christopher Abani's Web site; *Los Angeles Times* E p10 Apr. 5, 2004; *New Statesman* May 21, 2001; *New York Times Book Review* p8 Feb. 22, 2004; *New York Times Magazine* p74 Feb. 1, 2004; *Washington Post* C p4 Feb. 3, 2004

**Selected Books:** fiction—*Masters of the Board*, 1985; *GraceLand*, 2004; *Becoming Abigail*, 2006; *The Virgin of Flames*, 2007; poetry—*Kalakuta Republic*, 2000; *Daphne's Lot*, 2003; *Dog Woman*, 2004; *Hands Washing Water*, 2006

## Aczel, Amir D.

Nov. 6, 1950– Nonfiction writer

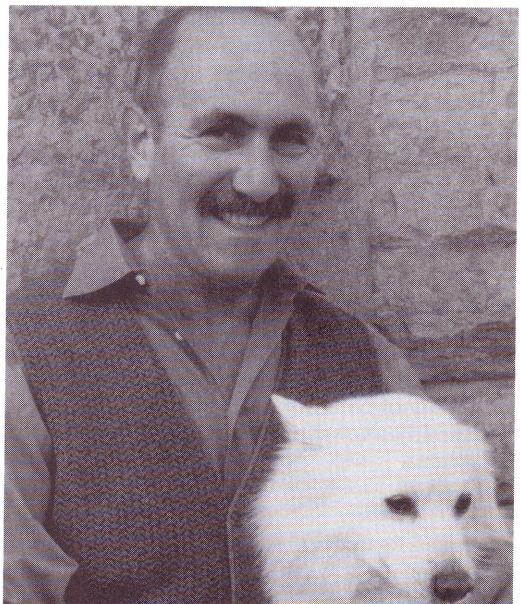
Although Amir Aczel had written books on business statistics and on taxes (including a provocative 1995 volume entitled *How to Beat the I.R.S. at Its Own Game*), it was when he started publishing engaging accounts of the history of scientific and mathematical concepts that he became better known to the general reading public. Such titles include *Fermat's Last Theorem: Unlocking the Secret of an Ancient Mathematical Problem* (1996); *Probability 1: Why There Must Be Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1998); *God's Equation: Einstein, Relativity, and the Expanding Universe* (1999); *The Mystery of the Aleph: Mathematics, the Kabbalah, and the Search for Infinity* (2000); *The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention that Changed the World* (2001); *Entanglement: The Greatest Mystery in Physics* (2002); *Pendulum: Leon Foucault and the Triumph of Science* (2003); *Chance: A Guide to Gambling, Love, the Stock Market, and Just about Everything*

*Else* (2004); *Descartes's Secret Notebook: A True Tale of Mathematics, Mysticism, and the Quest to Understand the Universe* (2005); and *The Artist and the Mathematician: The Story of Nicolas Bourbaki, the Genius Mathematician Who Never Existed* (2006). Bryce Christensen, in a review for *Booklist* (October 1, 2000), wrote of Aczel's "gift for interpreting complex concepts" and ability to penetrate "to the human drama behind the formulas."

Amir D. Aczel was born in Carmel, Israel, on November 6, 1950. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in mathematics from the University of California, at Berkeley, in 1975 and 1976 respectively. He went on to earn a Ph.D. in statistics from the University of Oregon, in Eugene.

Pierre de Fermat, a French jurist living in the 17th century, had a passionate interest in mathematical theory, and in about 1637 he scribbled a note in the margin of one of his books stating that he had solved a well-known mathematical problem—but neglected to show his solution. For more than three centuries, mathematicians tried, fruitlessly, to piece together

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Debra Gross Aczel/Courtesy of Harcourt  
Amir D. Aczel

the puzzle Fermat had left. Finally, in 1995, a mathematician named Andrew Wiles discovered the answer. *Fermat's Last Theorem: Unlocking the Secret of an Ancient Mathematical Problem* is Aczel's account of the mathematics, people, and sometimes highly dramatic events involved. "The author has taken a recent and newsworthy mathematical topic and made it into a fascinating story," Gary Klinger wrote in a review for *Mathematics Teacher* (September 1997). "Presented in a conversational tone that is both readable and attractive, the story downplays the technical jargon and mathematical details while still presenting a logical and adequately complete picture of the solution. The middle of the book discusses the various mathematical contributions even remotely related to Fermat's conjecture, from ancient times to the present." [Aczel] "has written a tale of buried treasure, the treasure here being immaterial, intellectual, of no practical benefit, but rooted in the pleasure of pure knowledge," Richard Bernstein wrote for the *New York Times* (December 16, 1996, on-line). "His book is modestly but lucidly presented, most (though not all) of the technical material understandable to people with only a smattering of mathematical skill. This is a captivating volume even when it comes to those few passages that you might not entirely understand." While praising Aczel's lucidity, Bernstein concluded, "Equally important is the sense of awe that Mr. Aczel imparts for the hidden, mystical harmonies of numbers, and for that sense of awe alone, his slender volume is well worth the effort."

Aczel used his skills as a statistician to support the thesis of his next book, *Probability 1: Why There Must Be Intelligent Life in the Universe*. Chris Aylott, writing for Space.com (January 24, 2000), noted that "Aczel bases his argument on Frank Drake's method for calculating how many civilizations might currently exist in our galaxy. By estimating all the factors likely to influence the answer, this method—famous as 'Drake's Equation'—cuts the problem down to size." Aylott continued, "Drake suggested figuring out how many habitable planets there are in the galaxy, how many are likely to develop life, how likely that life is to develop civilization, and so on. . . . Aczel spends most of *Probability 1* going through each of the factors in Drake's Equation, presenting what astronomers now know about how common planets are and how likely life is to develop. His writing is clear and engaging, and Drake's Equation is so broad in scope that *Probability 1* becomes an excellent general survey of current astronomy. Fans of Asimov, Sagan and other science writers will find much of the material familiar, but Aczel also presents a lot of exciting new developments in the field." Aylott, finding the book ultimately disappointing, concluded, "Unfortunately, the final 'proof' that appears in the book's final chapter wastes this survey of astronomy and math, using almost none of it. Instead, Aczel simply makes the point that even using arbitrarily tiny values for the factors in Drake's Equation, the number of stars in both our galaxy and the greater universe is so vast that it's impossible for the equation not to return the practical certainty of alien life. Therefore, he announces triumphantly, it's certain there's at least one other civilization somewhere in our galaxy."

In *God's Equation: Einstein, Relativity, and the Expanding Universe*, Aczel examines the "cosmological constant," a component of Einstein's field equation for general relativity that the famed physicist later disavowed. In a review for *Booklist* (October 15, 1999), Bryce Christensen wrote, "Even readers without exceptional mathematical sophistication will grasp why Einstein first conceived of a cosmological constant and then later repudiated it as [a] bad mistake. But Aczel's greatest accomplishment lies in his deft weaving together of the seemingly disparate research projects in cosmology and quantum physics that have unexpectedly provided fresh evidence for the validity of Einstein's cosmological constant as the key to understanding the 'strange energy' filling quantum space and driving our universe ever outward. A marvelous distillation of epoch-making science." Writing for *Discover* (November 1999), Jeffrey Winter concurred: "It is . . . a wonderful time to glance back over Einstein's path in developing the field equation. [But] it's not an easy road to follow. . . . Fortunately, we have a fabulous guide in Amir D. Aczel."

*The Mystery of the Aleph: Mathematics, the Kabbalah, and the Search for Infinity* is Aczel's look at the concept of infinity and includes the story of Georg Cantor, a 19th-century German mathematician who formulated an equation using the *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, to describe infinity. "A single formula that purports to hold within itself the deepest mysteries of existence: the idea rings with all sorts of spiritual and scientific implications. The drama deepens because at least two of the mathematicians who explored the mystery most avidly—Cantor and Kurt Gödel—went mad," Richard Bernstein wrote for the *New York Times* (November 15, 2000, on-line). Bernstein, while complaining—as did many reviewers—that *The Mystery of the Aleph* was less accessible to the layperson than some of Aczel's previous efforts, concluded, "Mr. Aczel's book remains highly enjoyable and frustrating at the same time. It deals, after all, with great minds venturing into the farthest reaches of speculation, with the nature of endlessness itself, both mathematical and religious, subjects that were not meant to be easy."

In the first chapter of *The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention That Changed the World*, Aczel wrote about growing up on a passenger ship that his father captained around the Mediterranean. (He spent a few months ashore each year, to attend school.) When Aczel was not yet in his teens, his father taught him to steer the massive vessel. "Steering by compass is both an art and a science, as I learned at the age of ten," he wrote. "Many years later I can still hear in my mind the ticking of the compass, degree by degree, as the ship turned." Inspired by his childhood experiences, Aczel wrote *The Riddle of the Compass*, a richly detailed history of the instrument. The book received largely mixed reviews, with most critics praising its accessibility but wishing for more detail. In a representative assessment, Robert C. Cowen wrote for the *Christian Science Monitor* (September 13, 2001), "This [is an] interesting little book. . . . One wishes that the author had given his story greater depth and set it in [a] broader context. Instead, we have a sketchy account fleshed out with potted histories of such relevant developments as Marco Polo's travels and the rise of Venice as a mini-superpower. If you take this essay on the level of an after-dinner conversation, it's an entertaining read. Meanwhile, we await a more incisive history."

*Entanglement: The Greatest Mystery in Physics* discusses a phenomenon that occurs in quantum physics in which two subatomic particles remain bafflingly connected, even when separated physically. (If a change is made to one of the particles, then instantaneously the same change is manifested in its entangled partner.) In *Pendulum: Leon Foucault and the Triumph of Science*, Aczel examines another area of physics, visiting the life of the 19th-century French physicist Leon

Foucault, whose pendulum experiments resulted in the first real proof of the Earth's rotation. With *Chance: A Guide to Gambling, Love, the Stock Market, and Just About Everything Else*, Aczel returned to statistics and probability. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* (September 13, 2004, on-line) wrote, "[Aczel] untangles a number of urgent conundrums, including why buses always seem to run late, why any group of 31 people will include two with the same birthday and why random walks can model the stock market. The book abounds in counterintuitive life lessons. You shouldn't gamble, he says, but if you do then you are better off, probability-wise, if you blow your whole wad on a single spin of the roulette wheel than if you parcel it out in smaller bets. And the lovelorn can take comfort in knowing that, if you just keep dating, the odds are surprisingly good that your soul mate will turn up. . . . Aczel's treatments of some topics, like game theory, are so perfunctory as to barely register, but his light touch generally makes probability come alive." In an assessment for *Booklist* (November 1, 2004), a critic wrote, "People, as a rule, perform poorly when it comes to estimating risk and chance. Casinos profit from this ignorance about probability, and statistics in the news tend not to be well understood by the public. Aczel takes on the noble mission of enlightening readers with the theory behind everyday probability. . . . Extending his winning track record of popularizing science, Aczel entertains readers with ways to tame the guesswork."

In *Descartes's Secret Notebook: A True Tale of Mathematics, Mysticism, and the Quest to Understand the Universe and The Artist and the Mathematician: The Story of Nicolas Bourbaki, the Genius Mathematician Who Never Existed*, Aczel delivers the type of human drama that has proven exceedingly popular with his readers. Of the first volume, a *Publishers Weekly* (August 29, 2005, on-line) reviewer wrote, "What Aczel did for mathematician Fermat (*Fermat's Last Theorem*) he now does for Descartes in this splendid study about the French philosopher and mathematician (1596-1650) most famous for his paradigm-smashing declaration, 'I think; therefore, I am.' Part historical sketch, part biography and part detective story, Aczel's chronicle of Descartes's hidden work hinges on his lost secret notebook. . . . As Aczel so deftly demonstrates, Descartes's mathematical theories were paths to an understanding [of] the order and mystery of the cosmos, and he kept the notebook hidden because it contained a formula that—because it supported Copernicus's model of the solar system—Descartes feared would lead to his persecution by the Inquisition. Aczel lucidly explains the science, mystery and mathematics of Descartes, who has never been so lively as he is in the pages of this first-rate [book]."<sup>1</sup> The other volume tells the story of a group of French mathematicians who published their collective work under an imaginary name in the 1930s.

## ALEXANDER

(Although it started as simply a prank, the group published several highly influential works.) *The Artist and the Mathematician* stirred some excitement when the *Washington Post Book World* (October 15, 2006) published a particularly vicious review by Charles Seife, who accused Aczel of plagiarism: "A reader without a PhD in mathematics will be baffled by Aczel's prose. In all probability, so would an intellectual property lawyer. Even in passages dealing with mathematicians, Aczel seems more than a little inspired by other writers." Aczel responded in a letter to the publication on October 22, 2006: "Unlike Seife, I am doubtful that an intellectual property lawyer would ever be 'baffled' by my book—but perhaps a libel lawyer might be baffled by his review."

Aczel has taught at various institutions, including Bentley College, in Waltham, Massachusetts. He is currently a visiting researcher in the Department of the History of Science at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The departmental Web site states, "Our faculty and students employ historical, textual, ethnographic, and social scientific methods to ask larger questions about how the various sciences work in practice, the basis of their authority, how ethical and political decisions are made about their regulation and applications, how they relate to larger intellectual, cultural, social, and political trends and changes, and much more."

Aczel lives with his wife and daughter in Brookline, Massachusetts. On his Amazon.com profile page, he described his next book: "I began work on this book in China in the summer of 2005, when I visited the Peking Man site—the place 25 miles southwest of Beijing at which fossils of 'the missing link' were found in 1929. Several skulls and bones dated to 500,000 years ago were discovered here and recognized as belonging to the human ancestor named *Homo erectus*. This was a hominid found in Africa and in Asia that predates the Neanderthals and modern humans. My book describes this amazing discovery by an international team of scientists, which included the enigmatic figure of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—a Jesuit priest who was also a mystic and a renowned paleontologist. Teilhard remained a devout Jesuit all his life, but he also believed in evolution. The Jesuits exiled him to China for his views on evolution, which he often expressed publicly. As fate would have it, he arrived in China just in time to take part in one of the most important discoveries in support of evolution. The title of the book is 'The Jesuit and the Skull,' and it [is scheduled to] appear in September of 2007."

—S.Y.

Suggested Reading: *American Libraries* p68 Dec. 2000; *Booklist* p206 Oct. 15, 1999, p296 Oct. 1, 2000, p450 Nov. 1, 2004; *Choice* p1,375 Apr. 1997; *Christian Science Monitor* p21 Sep. 13, 2001; *Economist* p9 July 17, 1999; *Mathematics Teacher* p498 Sep. 1997; *New Scientist* p49 Oct. 19, 1996; *New York Times* E p8 Nov. 15, 2000; *New York Times Book Review* Nov. 15, 1998; *Publishers Weekly* (on-line) Sep. 13, 2004, Aug. 29, 2005; *Science News* p50 Jan. 27, 2001; *Scientific American* (on-line) Feb. 1999; *Space.com* Jan. 24, 2000; *Washington Post Book World* p5 Nov. 19, 2000, p2 Aug. 23, 2001, p10 Oct. 15, 2006

Selected Books: *How to Beat the I.R.S. at Its Own Game: Strategies to Avoid—and Survive—an Audit*, 1995; *Fermat's Last Theorem: Unlocking the Secret of an Ancient Mathematical Problem*, 1996; *Probability 1: Why There Must Be Intelligent Life in the Universe*, 1998; *God's Equation: Einstein, Relativity, and the Expanding Universe*, 1999; *The Mystery of the Aleph: Mathematics, the Kabbalah, and the Search for Infinity*, 2000; *The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention that Changed the World*, 2001; *Entanglement: The Greatest Mystery in Physics*, 2002; *Pendulum: Leon Foucault and the Triumph of Science*, 2003; *Chance: A Guide to Gambling, Love, the Stock Market, and Just about Everything Else*, 2004; *Descartes's Secret Notebook: A True Tale of Mathematics, Mysticism, and the Quest to Understand the Universe*, 2005; *The Artist and the Mathematician: The Story of Nicolas Bourbaki, the Genius Mathematician Who Never Existed*, 2006

## Alexander, Caroline

Mar. 13, 1956– Travel writer

Though Caroline Alexander, the author of six nonfiction titles, began her career as a travel writer, she is perhaps best known for her extremely popular revisionist works about Sir Ernest Shackleton's doomed expedition to the South Pole and the famous mutiny on the British armed vessel *Bounty*. In the former of these books, *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* (1998), Alexander's text frames 170 previously unpublished photograph's that had been taken by the expedition's photographer, Frank Hurley, bringing to life the struggle for survival endured by the Shackleton expedition during its many months trapped on the Antarctic ice. In the later book, *The Bounty: The True Story of the Mutiny on the Bounty* (2003), Alexander uses historical records, diaries, and eyewitness accounts to reassess popular thinking about why the master's mate, Fletcher Christian, led a mutiny against the *Bounty*'s commander, William Bligh, in 1789.

The eldest daughter of a British-born, Jewish mother, Caroline Alexander was born on March 13, 1956, in Gainesville, Florida. Her parents divorced while she was still a child, and her mother, Elizabeth Ann Kirby, who later earned a doctorate in art history, struggled to raise Alexander and her younger sister, Joanna, without any child support. Still, the girls were fortunate enough to spend their summers at a camp in Tennessee, where their mother taught swimming lessons, and Kirby arranged for the family to live overseas for two years, first in Florence, Italy, and then the Netherlands, where Alexander learned to speak French, German, and Italian. In 1976, at the age of 20, Alexander earned her bachelor's degree in classics from Florida State University, in Tallahassee, and then became one of the first women to be named a Rhodes Scholar, studying at the University of Oxford's Somerville College for three years. While pursuing her education, Alexander also competed as a world-class athlete in five sports—swimming, running, fencing, pistol shooting, and horseback riding. She served as an alternate for the American women's pentathlon team in the 1978 World Games.

After graduating from Oxford with degrees in philosophy and theology, in 1980, Alexander convinced the university's virology department to send her and two others to the Southeast Asian island of Borneo on an insect-collecting expedition, though she knew little about entomology. In 1982 she returned to the U.S. to train for the World Games, but her plans were interrupted by an invitation, offered at the behest of the president of the small, land-locked African nation of Malawi, to create a classics program at the University of Malawi, in the city of Zomba. After completing this project in 1985, Alexander once again returned to the U.S., this time to attend the graduate program in classics at Columbia University, in New York City, as the recipient of a prestigious Mellon Fellowship. When she showed one of her favorite professors, Laura Slatkin, an article she had written about her travels in Borneo, Slatkin put her in touch with a literary agent, who quickly sold the piece to the *New Yorker*. "It was a turning point," Alexander told Catharine Reeve for the *Chicago Tribune* (April 8, 1990), "because it showed me that people had faith in my ability to convey my experiences."

Alexander's agent then parlayed that success into a book contract for the travelogue *One Dry Season: In the Footsteps of Mary Kingsley*, which was published in 1990. The book describes Alexander's travels in Gabon, a former French colony in West Africa, where she traced the path of Mary Kingsley, a Victorian woman who, defying the social customs of the time, traveled to Africa, in 1895, to conduct research for a book that her father had failed to complete before his death. Alexander first learned of this intrepid adventurer in December 1986. Browsing through her local library, she discovered a copy of *Travels in West*

*Africa*, in which Kingsley had chronicled her explorations. Leafing through the 700-page tome, which was a best-seller when first published in 1897, Alexander noticed that the preface ended with the rather bold declaration, according to Catharine Reeve, that if the reader should travel to West Africa, "you will find things as I have said." Alexander told Reeve, "Even before I checked her book out of the library, let alone read it, I had made up my mind to take Miss Kingsley up on her offer."

A few months later Alexander put her graduate studies on hold and set off for Gabon. Though much had changed there in the last century, her book reveals that many aspects of life there had remained unaltered. "Weaving a narrative pattern of 'then and now,' Alexander evokes images of chugging river steamers packed with passengers, roads of red dust, pirogues paddled against the current, and more," Janet L. Stanley wrote for *Library Journal* (November 15, 1989). "As she travels in the footsteps of others, she reflects on the different faces of interpretive writing, selective recollection, and the disparity between fact and fiction. But ultimately this is Alexander's own story of discovery and can be read and enjoyed as such. She avoids the patronizing, exaggerated tone of much contemporary travel writing about Africa; she is sympathetic and gently self-effacing." Though Caroline Moorehead, writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* (January 26, 1990), felt that Mary Kingsley's "presence adds virtually nothing" to the book, she was fascinated with "the incidental characters, early travellers turned up during Alexander's diligent research, and whose stories—and the brief passages she quotes—are charming and lively." Moorehead concluded: "But Alexander is not only good on history. Her own travels are well told, with considerable powers of description and a true sense of adventure. If [the book] is at times a little humourless, it makes up for it in sympathy and perceptiveness. As a companion to an armchair traveller, she is resourceful, without prejudice and full of insights."

In 1991 Alexander was awarded her doctorate from Columbia University and began writing full-time. In her second book, *The Way to Xanadu* (1994), Alexander sought to find the real-life locations that correspond to the mythical landscape in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1816 poem "Kubla Khan," which immortalized—in the Western world, at least—Kublai Khan, the founder of the 13th-century Mongol Dynasty of China. In her travels the author explored the ruins of Shangdu, Kublai Khan's summer palace, and visited Ethiopia, Kashmir, and Florida—places where mystical ice caves and fountains were supposed to be found. "The literary sleuthing that lies behind [the author's] travel gives *The Way to Xanadu* an aura of madcap scholarship," Rand Richards Cooper wrote for the *New York Times Book Review* (June 5, 1994). "Extensive chains of citation, deduction and inference are required to

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deliver Ms. Alexander's destinations to her. Her identification of Florida as a source, for example, arises from a reference to 'fragrant groves' and 'perfumed' trees in the American naturalist William Bartram's 1791 account of his travels through the American Southeast. . . . If such moves seem a little dodgy, and if the travel narrative they produce . . . sometimes seems to bear little direct relation to Coleridge or his poem, it doesn't really matter. . . . It is this elevation of the imagination, and not any far-flung destination, that makes her slight and graceful book the truly romantic text it is." On the other hand, Robert Carver, in his review for the *New Statesman and Society* (December 17, 1993), was more critical: "[This is] a good idea, perhaps for a travel book, but it doesn't come off. . . . Alexander travels with supportive, old-fashioned boyfriend George, and in considerable luxury. She falls ill and doesn't really care for the rigours of a not very rigorous trip. The poverty in Africa refuses stubbornly to turn into poetry for her, and she wonders in print, rather plaintively, that perhaps she should be tampering with the material to make it sound harder and more romantic. Hers is a tourist jaunt out of litcrit-land and it doesn't make for either an original or a stimulating read."

With her third book, *Battle's End: A Seminole Football Team Revisited* (1995), Alexander looked at the impact of high-school sports and athletic scholarships on the quality of the education that athletes receive. The book's genesis lay in Alexander's experience as a writing tutor for college freshmen football players, a position she took shortly after returning to Tallahassee, Florida, in 1981. The relationship that she had forged with her students was strong enough that, over a decade later, she sought them out to see how their lives were progressing. Much of the book's text consists of interviews with the players, who recount their lives since their college days. "This is the book for all those outsiders—be they intellectuals, social reformers, liberals, or conservatives—who have ever deluded themselves into believing they understand what it can be like to be young, black, and male in the U.S. today," Wes Lukowsky wrote for *Booklist* (December 15, 1995). "Most of Alexander's young men defined themselves athletically; the classroom was where they were mocked and failed, and reading was something they learned to distrust and dismiss as uncool. . . . Alexander lets them present their stories without interference, and the result is an intimate look at the hopes, dreams, regrets, and plans of seven young men who were once college football players. There are no types here, no statistical standards—just individuals who've had to come such a long way to get to where so many people start." In the *New York Times Book Review* (January 14, 1996), Carolyn T. Hughes called the book "an interesting but flawed study," noting that Alexander "is a talented interviewer, but what she does not do—and what the book desperately

needs—is to draw some conclusions about the effects of big-time college athletics on the men's lives, and on society generally." Hughes concluded: "Every Saturday during the season, millions of Americans eagerly await the entrance of the players onto the gridiron. What becomes apparent after reading *Battle's End* is just how few care what happens to the athletes once the game is over."

While researching her next book, an investigation into the 1914–15 expedition by Sir Ernest Shackleton to the South Pole, Alexander discovered that the beloved cat aboard the ship *Endurance*, Mrs. Chippy, had to be left behind to die after the crew found themselves stuck in the ice for many months. A cat lover herself, the author decided to fashion a diary of the trip for Mrs. Chippy. *Mrs. Chippy's Last Expedition: The Remarkable Journal of Shackleton's Polar-Bound Cat* was published in 1997 to generally positive reviews. Claire Hutchings, writing for *Geographical* (January 1998), found that the book "offers a rather unique perspective of this much written about expedition. For example, Alexander includes comic details about the scarcity of mice aboard the ship and the dubious nature of Darwin's theories, in the cat's view, when despite months stuck in ice no-one seems to show signs of evolving into penguins! This tongue-in-cheek account of the expedition is accompanied by some wonderful black and white photographs taken by the official expedition photographer James Francis Hurley. A unique and beautifully presented book particularly for all cat-lovers and Shackleton admirers."

Alexander followed this book's publication with *The Endurance*, her immensely popular study of the Shackleton expedition, which is illustrated with some 170 previously unpublished photos. In it, she describes the famous story of how, in his effort to become the first man to traverse Antarctica, Shackleton and the crew of the *Endurance* found themselves trapped by ice floes that eventually destroyed their ship. Despite these disastrous events, the Shackleton story is now seen as a heroic tale of survival, one in which every member of the *Endurance*'s crew was saved. "The expedition has been described more than once. Ms. Alexander has sensibly, and ably, concentrated on the characters and interactions of the men . . . and used her text as a frame for previously unpublished pictures by the expedition's Australian photographer, Frank Hurley," Phoebe-Lou Adams wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1999). "The pictures are dazzling. There is no other word for the patterns of black rigging against snow, or for the angles and shadows Hurley recorded as he climbed to improbable places and clung to unlikely surfaces." In a review for the *New York Review of Books* (June 10, 1999), Jonathan Raban criticized the work: "Given the splendors of Hurley's photographs, it may seem niggardly to carp at the shortcomings of Caroline Alexander's

text, which is a workmanlike retelling of a story told many times before. The best-known version is Alfred Lansing's *Endurance* (1959); much the best-documented is to be found in Roland Huntford's splendid 1985 biography, *Shackleton*. In a somewhat condescending note of acknowledgement at the end of her book, Alexander belittles Lansing's as 'a rip-roaring narration,' which does it a calculated injustice. Alexander has taken pains to distance herself from Lansing; . . . and [she] has added a mass of new details, many of them from Huntford. Yet in its essential shape and tone, *The Endurance* seems more than faintly derivative of *Endurance*. What she has not done—and it is a huge missed opportunity—is to bring Frank Hurley fully into the foreground of the story." Hurley's photographs were also prominently displayed in the documentary *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* (2000), which was based on Alexander's book.

Alexander's most recent book is *The Bounty*, a revisionist look at the events that led up to the famous mutiny aboard the British transport ship. The book recounts how Fletcher Christian led a mutiny against the commander of the ship, William Bligh, and set Bligh and his loyalists adrift on a longboat in the South Pacific, before sailing away. Eventually, after two grueling months at sea, Bligh's party reached Timor. Christian and his cohorts established a colony on Pitcairn Island, where their descendants can still be found today; some mutineers later returned to Tahiti, where the *Bounty*'s voyage had begun, and three of those crew members were court-martialed and hanged. Alexander reevaluates the traditional accounts of Bligh's villainy and alleged abuse of his crew to deliver a more balanced judgment on the incident. As to the cause of the mutiny, Alexander had few qualms about placing blame. As she told Jessica Jernigan, in an interview posted on the Borders Web site: "If the *Bounty*'s mission was doomed from the start it was because Fletcher Christian was on board. . . . There are many reasons why Christian did break—family circumstances, his pride, Bligh's undoubtedly nagging, the memory of an easy life in Tahiti, his probable drinking on the night before the mutiny; but it is my belief that if he had not broken down there would have been no mutiny."

Verlyn Klinkenborg proclaimed in the *New York Times Book Review* (September 14, 2003): "Alexander's vigorous retelling . . . leads to lots of vigorous rethinking . . . [This] is a story of enormous complexity, one with ramifications that seem to spin off in every direction. . . . Alexander is more than equal to the task. With this and her previous book, *The Endurance*, she has made the wondrous genre of open-boat-voyage narratives still more wondrous. . . . A sea mist hangs over this age-old tale. Alexander dispels it, to the reader's fascination. But when all the facts are told and the fates of the cast are duly chronicled, the sea mist settles in again, as impenetrable and yet more

interesting than it has ever been." Frank McLynn, writing for the *New Statesman* (November 3, 2003), was far more critical in his assessment, proposing that "Alexander's work is poorly structured, with a Godardian problem about beginnings, middle and ends that dissipates narrative tension. To borrow a term from the movies (appropriately, in this case), one might say that it suffers from a very poor second act, when Alexander reproduces the courtmartial proceedings of those mutineers who had been recaptured . . . at unconscionable length. It seems her main thesis is that Bligh was guilty of no more than flashes of temper, that Fletcher Christian was the mentally unbalanced one. . . . Although she writes well and has done a lot of archival sleuthing, Alexander tells me nothing new. Let us hope that this talented author will find a subject that has not already been written into the ground and will produce something truly original in her next book."

Caroline Alexander has been a contributor to such noted periodicals as the *New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Smithsonian*, *Outside*, and *National Geographic*. She is a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society and a member of the American Philological Association, the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, and a number of environmental organizations. She lives in England.

—C.M.

**Suggested Reading:** *Atlantic Monthly* p106 Feb. 1999; *Boston Globe* (on-line) Nov. 13, 2003; *Chicago Tribune* N p1 Apr. 8, 1990; *Christian Science Monitor* p12 Mar. 23, 1990; *Geographical* p84 Jan. 1998; *New Statesman and Society* p71 Dec. 17, 1993; *New York Review of Books* p14 June 10, 1999; *New York Times Book Review* p3 June 5, 1994, p18 Jan. 14, 1996, p9 Sep. 14, 2003; *Times Literary Supplement* p97 Jan. 26, 1990

**Selected Books:** *One Dry Season: In the Footsteps of Mary Kingsley*, 1990; *The Way to Xanadu*, 1994; *Battle's End: A Seminole Football Team Revisited*, 1995; *Mrs. Chippy's Last Expedition: The Remarkable Journal of Shackleton's Polar-Bound Cat*, 1997; *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition*, 1998; *The Bounty: The True Story of the Mutiny on the Bounty*, 2003