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# Dance Of The Jakaranda



## Synopsis

"This funny, perceptive and ambitious work of historical fiction by a Kenyan poet and novelist explores his country's colonial past and its legacy through the stories of three men involved with the building of a railroad linking Lake Victoria and the Indian Ocean--what the Kikuyu called the 'Iron Snake' and the British called the 'Lunatic Express.'"--New York Times Book Review, Editors' Choice

"Kimani has done a game job managing the carpentry of this ambitious novel, bringing great skill to the task of deploying multiple story lines, huge leaps back and forth in time and the withholding and distribution of information...Once Kimani has his plotlines all set, his writing relaxes, and it's here that you can see his raw talent...I have never read a novel about [Kenya] that's so funny, so perceptive, so subversive and so sly."--New York Times Book Review

"In his American debut, Kimani illustrates the discordant history of East Indians in Kenya through a fabulously complicated set of intriguing characters and events...Highlighted by its exquisite voice, Kimani's novel is a standout debut."--Publishers Weekly

"Kimani's descriptive and inventive prose recounts personal stories of love and tragedy within a context of racial hierarchies and the fallout of colonial rule...Babu's story feels weighted by history in a way that will remind readers of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's work...Kimani's complex novel will leave readers questioning the meanings of citizenship and belonging during an era of significant social upheaval in Kenya's history."--Booklist

"African colonialism is confronted in this subtle, multilayered Kenyan tale...Lyrical and powerful...Kimani weaves together a bitter, hurtful past and hopeful present in this rich tale of Kenyan history and culture, the railroad, and the men and women whose lives it profoundly affected...This is a thoughtful story about a country's imperialist past."--Kirkus Reviews

"The characters are human, teaching us that even someone who does wrong is not all bad, and Kimani writes with such vivid detail that one can easily visualize the vast scenery. Reminiscent of Iman Verjee's *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall*, this novel will appeal to readers of historical and literary fiction."--Library Journal

"A multi-racial nation-building tale that begins during the construction of the railway from Mombasa to Nairobi. There are three men at its heart: two white, a British administrator known as 'Master' and an Anglican minister; one brown, an Indian technician who sires a male child, a birth that will reverberate down through the years."--Toronto Star

"A fascinating part of Kenya's history, real and imagined, is revealed and reclaimed by one of its own."--Minneapolis Star Tribune

Set in the shadow of Kenya's independence from Great Britain, *Dance of the Jakaranda* reimagines the special circumstances that brought black, brown and white men together to lay the railroad that heralded the birth of the nation. The novel traces the lives and loves of three men--preacher Richard Turnbull, the colonial administrator Ian McDonald, and Indian technician Babu Salim--whose lives intersect

when they are implicated in the controversial birth of a child. Years later, when Babu's grandson Rajan--who ekes out a living by singing Babu's epic tales of the railway's construction--accidentally kisses a mysterious stranger in a dark nightclub, the encounter provides the spark to illuminate the three men's shared, murky past. With its riveting multiracial, multicultural cast and diverse literary allusions, *Dance of the Jakaranda* could well be a story of globalization. Yet the novel is firmly anchored in the African oral storytelling tradition, its language a dreamy, exalted, and earthy mix that creates new thresholds of identity, providing a fresh metaphor for race in contemporary Africa.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Dance of the Jakaranda, the new novel by Peter Kimani, is a layered and moving exploration of the history of Kenya, juxtaposing a story of conflict during the nation’s colonial period with a narrative set in its early days of independence. It’s a novel in which the central characters constantly surprise the readers, and Kimani’s explorations of history encompass multiple sides of art and infrastructure.”—Vol. 1 Brooklyn “Destined to become one of the greats...This is not hyperbole: it’s a masterpiece.”—The Gazette “But the novel has way more strengths than I can describe here, including the beauty of lyrical narration that combines irony, flashback, humour, allusions and inter-textual references, all of which are expertly manipulated to give the reader a gem of a story populated by composite characters, a story that, though revisiting old themes and times, does so with the freshness that one would expect of established literary geniuses.”—Daily Nation “The author has built here not only, on these pages, not only a railroad, but the singular triumph of a highly diverting novel. Besides weaving an excellent

plot-line, he offers the reader a classic, understated writing style that haunts much of this book, turns it into a minor masterpiece."--RALPH Magazine, Starred review"Dance of the Jakaranda is colorful and ironic...A fascinating story told in an unforgettable voice."--The Guardian (Trinidad & Tobago)"Peter Kimani, an acclaimed writer and poet, has brilliantly constructed this novel's plot...[His] lyrical prose, such as portraying the train as 'a massive snakelike creature,' and his breathtaking descriptions of 'God's country' bring the beauty of the land before our eyes."--Historical Novels Review"A rich tableau of layers and textures" --The book has some brilliant moments of vivid and evocative writing."--Huffington Post"Through lyrical, seductive prose, Peter Kimani weaves an impressively intricate tapestry of events and characters that give much-needed names and faces to an important facet of Kenya's colonial history."--Black Books Quotes"A compelling story conveying a powerful social and cultural critique along with a marvelous portrait of the beauties and wonders of Kenya, all punctuated with tragedy."--New York Journal of Books"An epic account of 20th century Kenya."--Africa Is a Country"In this clever and mesmerizing story, the author takes the reader on a journey to another time and place, where twists and turns provide a truly entertaining ride."--SusannesBooklist"Kimani steps into the minds and hearts of all his characters, regardless of the colour of their skin and decisions they have made, be they good or ill."--A New Day"I loved the storyteller's voice and the gradual unravelling of the secrets of past generations, which had long shadows that reached into the present and affected the young couple at the heart of the story. The historical matter is deftly woven in."--The Girdle of Melian"Dance of the Jakaranda is a rare gem: a new story, a new voice, a new way of seeing the world. This is what a brilliant novel looks like. Peter Kimani is a rare talent, an important new literary voice in Kenya, in Africa, and the world."--Mat Johnson, author of Loving Day"In this racially charged dance of power, the railroad into the interior of the country becomes a journey into the hearts of men and women. It is a dance of love and hate and mixed motives that drive human actions and alter the course of history. Kimani's writing has the clarity of analytic prose and the lyrical tenderness of poetry."--Ngugi wa Thiong'o, author of Birth of a Dream Weaver

Peter Kimani is a leading African writer of his generation. Born in 1971 in Kenya, he started his career as a journalist and has published several works of fiction and poetry. He was one of only three international poets commissioned by National Public Radio to compose and present a poem to mark Barack Obama's inauguration in January 2009. Kimani earned his doctorate in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program in 2014, and is a faculty member at Aga Khan University's Graduate School of Media and Communications in

Nairobi. Dance of the Jakaranda is his third novel.

Post colonial literature in Africa is rich and troubling, as it is in Asia. This book cannot stand among the best, and its author cannot compare with the likes of Moses Isegawa or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The story is ragged and the characters wooden. Most upsetting is the stereotypes of Kenyan women as defined by their sexuality and fecundity when they are fabled for being such powerful contributors to rural economy and culture. With its potted history and lack of subtlety, I came to conclude that this was a lazy book, caught in a stylized time warp.

I like the book because it brings the reader into a historical setting, a view of several cultures that made up the area of Kenya before its independence. The characters are believable in their strengths and weaknesses. I read each page with anticipation to what was going to happen next.

Boring and gratuitous.

I heard Mr Kimani speak in New York. A talented and articulate man. Reading his well written book was eye-opening.

One of the best books I have read in a long time! Funny and beautifully written.

A very vacuous story. Would not recommend

DANCE OF THE JAKARANDA by Peter Kimani. I received this *Advance reading copy* from Akashic Books in exchange for an unbiased, honest review. The book consists of a Prologue, 23 Chapters and an Epilogue. I was happy to read about the very distinguished author, Peter Kimani. He is a very important African writer; born in Kenya; the author of several works of fiction and poetry. DANCE OF THE JAKARANDA is his third novel. The story is set in a Rift Valley location. The land (in modern times) underwent several political changes - the East Africa protectorate - then Kenia Colony - then Kenya in June 1963. Geographic locations include the Rift Valley, Lake Victoria, Port Victoria, Mombasa, Nakuru, Lake Nakuru and many local villages. I mention these locations and the immense *sense of place* of this novel because I know little of Kenya. I spent much time with an atlas and now feel better acquainted with this part of the world. Three main characters dominate this story

- preacher, Richard Turnbull; colonial administrator, Ian McDonald (Master); and Indian railway worker, Babu Salim. Several events dominate this story - the construction of the railroad from Mombasa to Port Victoria and Master's building of his Monument to Love which morphed into the Jakaranda Hotel. Indeed, the railroad was compared to a gigantic snake making its way throughout the land. It is littered throughout the story, also, providing context for its plot. Another event - damu zinavutana (a phenomena in Nakuru lore) - was the coincidental meeting of strangers who later discover that they are somewhat related. This story was fascinating for its sense of place, its use of language, and the immersion into the time period, this place and these cultures. It is very troubling to read. One reads about the colonial belief that, "In that age God and the white man were one and the same"; the sheer brutality of the colonial government; the lack of respect and disregard for human life; the slavery; the indentured servitude; the political chaos; violence; lies; wanton cultural destruction - one needs to put the book down from time to time in order to try to absorb all this and reflect on the human race. I am lucky to have read this book and would highly recommend it.

A well told and crafted historical novel with a dose of humor. This novel bounces around in time, using a few narrative techniques which makes this a pleasant and enjoyable dance. Essentially the novel is rooted in the lives of three main characters, Ian McDonald the colonial master administrator, Richard Turnbull, the Christian missionary preacher and Babu the Indian surveyor. Each of their stories unfold from 1900 to 1963 in Kenya as their lives intersect as all three are in Kenya to play a role in the building of the rail line in Kenya in 1897- 1900. The chronicles are uniquely weaved together until all the secrets are revealed by the end of the novel. What is especially clever is not knowing there are certain mysteries needing revelation that are paramount to this smart tale. By exploring the journeys of these three, the reader will be exposed to a bit of Kenya history, the attitudes of colonial masters, the thoughts of how the natives of Kenya viewed colonialism and the delight that independence brought to Kenya and the effect on those who had been in Kenya before independence like the Indians. He uses certain characters to act as griots, filling in parts of the story. Babu in conversations with his grandson fleshes out much of his own story, with some truths left unexplored to the end. It's all a very interesting and at times exciting dance and how the lives of these three men intersect in this different kind of prose is well worth the investment.

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