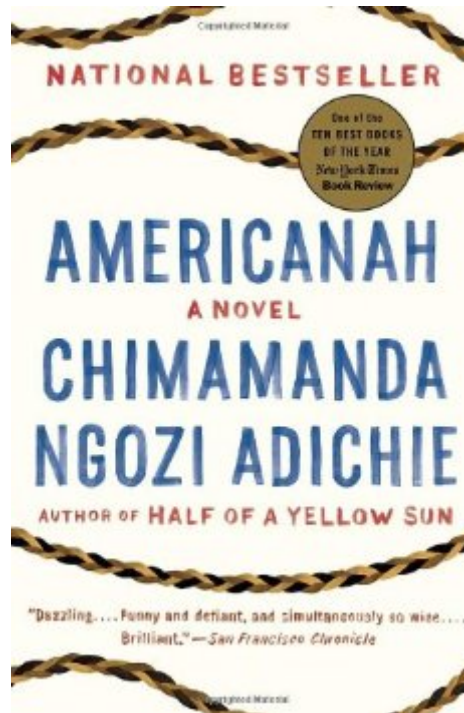


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Americanah



Customer Reviews

Americanah is a wonderful epic saga of love, hair, blogs, racism in America, and life in Nigeria. It takes place over a period of about 15 years and is primarily about a Nigerian woman named Ifemelu and her first love, Obinze. The word Americanah refers to a person who returns to Nigeria after time abroad. The main part of the story takes place in a hair salon in Trenton, New Jersey. Ifemelu is on a fellowship at Princeton and the nearest place to get weaves is in Trenton. As she is getting her hair done she goes back in time and the reader gets filled in with her life story. Ifemelu grew up in poverty in Lagos. She managed to go to university there and won a scholarship to Wellesley, a college in Philadelphia. There, she struggles with money and finds it very difficult to get a job. She knows little about the culture and "she hungered to understand everything about America, to wear a new, knowing skin right away." When she does work, she sends money back home to her parents. Ifemelu's primary job is as a nanny. She describes the dynamics of her employer's marriage as 'she loves him and he loves himself'. She is introduced to her employer's cousin Curt and Ifemelu and they have a relationship for quite a while. His being white and rich cause some difficulties for them. Ifemelu has cut off all contact with Obinze despite the fact that they had planned to be together. She had made a choice to do something that left her shamed and abased and she is unable to tell Obinze about it. So, rather than tell him, she severs their contact. He is distraught and does not know what to do. He continues to write to her for months but there is no answer from Ifemelu. Meanwhile, Obinze goes to London where he lives underground after his six month visa expires. "He lived in London indeed but invisibly, his existence like an erased pencil sketch." He works construction and continues to do this until he is deported back to Nigeria. Ifemelu remains in the United States for 13 years and has a series of relationships with different men. Of significance besides Curt, who is white, is Blaine who is African American and a professor at Yale. There is a long-term relationship that Ifemelu breaks off in order to return to Lagos. Ifemelu has started a blog called "Raceteenth: Understanding America for the Non-American Black." She writes anonymously about varied topics of racism that she encounters in the United States and the differences between being African American and a non-American black person. Her blog is very successful and brings her status and money as people make financial contributions to keep the blog going. She also does speaking engagements about topics she covers in her blog. "The blog had unveiled itself and shed its milk teeth; by turns, it surprised her, pleased her, left her behind. Its readers increased by the thousands from all over the world, so quickly that she resisted checking the stats, reluctant to know how many new people had clicked to read her that day, because it frightened her. And it exhilarated her." The book has many characters in it, each of whom we come to know and connect with.

However, it is primarily about Ifemelu and Obinze, their lives and love. I found the book fascinating and very readable. It does not ever let go of the messages that the author seeks to provide the reader. Racism is a constant theme in the book as is life in America for black Americans and non-American blacks. I found the idea of blogging as a way to share knowledge very intriguing. Actual blogs are a part of the book. Adichie is a wonderful writer. Her short stories, all of which I've read, have knocked me out. I plan on reading her other novels. I can see why this brilliant woman has received a MacArthur Genius Award. I highly recommend this book.

I am probably biased towards this novel, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, not only because Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which I read as a very young girl, awoke in me the possibility of good writing and beautiful prose by a Nigerian like me, but because of the familiarity of the book. In Nigeria, we are brought up on foreign movies, sitcoms and TV shows, foreign books and foreign news, we know how English should be spoken, and many of us who bother to read a lot, are very familiar with the colloquialisms of the west. This is perhaps why, we do not recognize how much we miss our own particularly Nigerian way of expression, in the literature we read. It is perhaps why, when we read a phrase that is essentially Nigerian, in a novel like *Americanah*, "Tina-Tina, how now?" "Why are you looking like a mumu?" "How will you cope/how are you coping?" all familiar Nigerian modes of speech, we are infinitely grateful. It's like the word *Americanah*, such a Nigerian word, used to describe someone who had lived abroad for so long, they no longer understand the nuances of being Nigerian. They use American swearwords, or complain that the fries at KFC Onikan are limp, even though you see nothing wrong with them. This is when you turn to someone who understands and say, (No mind am, na *Americanah*), Don't mind him, he is an *Americanah*. Adichie's latest follows Ifemelu, a bright, sharp and observant girl, from her early years in 1990's Nigeria, to a life in America, where after the first rude shocks of culture change in a new world, where 'fat' is a bad word and not merely a statement of fact, where colour is such a big issue that it can rule people's lives, and where everything is different, she slowly and surely starts to become an *Americanah*. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu observes, and we are informed by her observations, she converses and we see her character, and she remembers, and in her memories we see a rich story that begins in Lagos, journeys through the cities of America, and gains a body that is beautiful to savour. It is through Ifemelu's observations, we experience what *Americanah* is about. Hair, specifically Black/African hair. Why do black women hide their hair? Would Beyonce ever allow the world to see her hair the way it really is, or would Michelle Obama? These are the questions Ifemelu asks in her blog, where after having lived in the United States for a long

time, she broaches issues of race, hair and life in America from the eyes of a 'Non-American Black'. We experience race, Kimberley, the white woman who uses beautiful as a word to describe 'black', because for whichever reason, black is a word that should be said as little as possible. Kurt, to whom Ifemelu's race means nothing, and Blaine, the Black American Yale professor, whose influence, in my opinion, would be the biggest in turning Ifemelu's observations from the disinterested and amused observation of a 'Non-American Black' or 'NAB', who calmly tells Kimberly, "You know, you can just say 'black.' Not every black person is beautiful." to those of an 'American Black' or 'AB', who would say in her blog. "If the "slavery was so long ago" thing comes up, have your white friend say that lots of white folks are still inheriting money that their families made a hundred years ago. So if that legacy lives, why not the legacy of slavery?" The old Ifemelu would have told the descendants of the slaves to 'get over it'. We also experience love, Adichie herself describes *Americanah* as a love story, and this is true. There is love in almost every book, but in *Americanah*, it is not incidental, it is a central part of the story. Before America, and race and hair became issues, there was Obinze, the love of Ifemelu's teenage life. Ifemelu, the daughter of a civil servant who lost his job because he would not bow to the excessive respect that Lagos Yoruba's employ and call his boss 'Mummy', and uses English in such a way as to provide a hilarious sort of comic relief, is sharp and confident, then Obinze, the only son of a university professor, with his love for American books and his quiet belief in himself, is self-assured and mature. They fall in love soon after they meet as secondary school students in Lagos, and when Ifemelu tells her aunt and friend, Uju, about him, saying she has met the love of her life, there is a hilarious moment when Aunt Uju advises her to "let him kiss and touch but not to let him put it inside." While most of the story is seen through Ifemelu's eyes and memories, we also get to see some of Obinze, we follow him to London, where he lives as an illegal immigrant, after failing to find a job in Nigeria, or to fulfill his dream of going to America, (he later visits America, when he becomes rich, and isn't impressed, he lost interest when he realized that he could buy his way in.) He is arrested on the eve of his sham wedding, and repatriated. In all this Obinze never loses a certain 'solidity', that he seems to effortlessly possess. In a democratic Nigeria, where a new middle class is rising, and the money that used to be the preserve of the top army generals starts to filter down, Obinze gets lucky in the way that only happens in Nigeria, where there really is too much money, and overnight he is a very rich man. When Ifemelu starts to hunger for home, Obinze, with whom she has lost touch, is already a husband and father. "Meanwhile o, he has serious money now. See what you missed!" her friend, Ranyinudo tells her, on a call from Nigeria. (How Nigerian to say something like that!) The central question becomes, will they get back together? To some, this

is a weakness of the story, the descent into the fantasy of a happily ever after for the heroine and hero, but it is not such a bad thing in itself, it makes enjoyable, and hopeful reading. In summary, I loved the story. I loved the familiarity of it, Ifemelu's mother's ridiculous religiousness, her father's ludicrous use of English, Aunt Uju, Ginika, Kayode, Emenike, who is perhaps one of the more interesting characters, as he strives to shed the life he was born with, to become what he wishes to be, and all the other different kinds of people that make up the rich tapestry that is Nigerian life. Ifemelu is an interesting character, observant, watchful, sure of herself, even as a teenager, she is confident in a way I wouldn't have understood at that age. Obinze, knows himself in such a way that he doesn't need to follow any crowd, or have anybody validate him. However, I did feel that the ending was rather rushed, as if the author had other things to do, and was hastily putting the final scenes together. The main grouse I had with the book was the fact that I saw some elements from Adichie's previous works. When Barack Obama wins the election and her cousin Dike calls her to say that his president is black like him, I remember an interview long ago where Adichie says that her nephew had said the exact same thing after the elections. It makes me feel cheated, this, the similarity of her relationship with Curt to the relationship of the characters in her short story, The Thing Around Your Neck; when Obinze describes his house in Enugu, and I see the house in Birdsong, the scene of another adulterous affair in another of her old short stories. How autobiographical is her work then? I ask myself. I begin to feel suspicious, perhaps all the characters are really her and the people she knows, perhaps Pat Peoples is really Matthew Quick, and Nick Hornby's characters are really just himself? I noticed that apart from Dike, her little cousin, and Obinze, and perhaps Obinze's mother, Ifemelu does not seem very emotionally involved with the people that shape her life, sometimes she seems like a watcher, an observer, and not a character in the story. Also, because this novel is really many observations and opinions, sometimes it does feel contrived, like a character or event has been introduced, solely because they are a means to present an issue Adichie wants to discuss. Lastly, I did not find the blog interesting, unlike the prose of the novel, the writing is not fluid, or very descriptive, and seems to jump from one issue to another, trying to cram many thoughts into one jumbled package. This may be because I am not an NAB, and those issues mean little to me, perhaps the AB's would read it differently. Regardless, Americanah is a wonderful read, sometimes laugh out loud funny, sometimes sad, but always interesting.

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