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ARMAH Ayi Kwei. *Osiris Rising: A Novel of Africa Past. Present and Future*. Popenguine, Senegal: Per Ankh, 1995. \$21 (\$15 + \$6 air mail)



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■ ARMAH AYI KWEI. *OSIRIS RISING: A NOVEL OF AFRICA PAST. PRESENT AND FUTURE*. POPENGUINE, SENEGAL: PER ANKH, 1995. \$21 (\$15 + \$6 AIR MAIL).

Ayi Kwei Armah has had a problematical relationship with his publishers. Unlike other African novelists of his generation, he launched his career by placing his earliest novels (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* [1968], *Fragments* [1970], *Why Are We So Blest ?* [1972]) with prestigious American publishing houses (Houghton Mifflin, Doubleday) before allowing them to be inducted into the swelling army of school texts that Heinemann Educational Books was assembling into an African Writers Series and disseminating throughout the African continent. When his American publishers abandoned him, he turned next to the East African Publishing House in Nairobi, preferring to give an African publisher first rights to *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1978) rather than to surrender them to the clutches of a multinational company that had its neocolonial base of operations in London ; however, as a practical matter, HEB was permitted to issue new editions of these books in the African Writers Series in 1979, when EAPH, notorious for never paying royalties, suddenly went out of business. In the years since, Armah, as a matter of principle, has refused to publish any new novels with Heinemann or to entrust them to African or American publishers. He has continued writing, but for more than fifteen years he has withheld his works from publication.

In October last year he broke his long silence by bringing out a new novel, *Osiris Rising*, through Per Ankh, « an African printing and publishing company founded and managed by friends committed to the emergence of a quality African book industry. » Unlike other publishers, the « policy at Per Ankh is to sell our work direct to you, by mail order. » Anyone wishing to purchase a copy of *Osiris Rising* must send U.S. \$21 (\$15 + \$6 air mail) to Per Ankh, B.P. 2, Popenguine, Senegal, which also happens to be Armah's personal postal address. This looks very much like a desktop publishing venture, with the author in total control of manufacturing and marketing his own intellectual wares.

The blurb on the back of this elegantly produced book states that « *Osiris Rising*, Armah's sixth novel, takes its narrative structure from Africa's oldest source, the Isis-Osiris myth cycle. Its content has the urgent relevance of tomorrow's news. The protagonist, Ast, an African American scholar, travels to Africa seeking lifework and love. She finds both. But in the moment of discovery, she also finds that this is only seed time in Africa. Before future harvests and love's consummation, the continent's creative ones must discover ways, old and new, to end the millennial rule of destroyers. »

One can see Armah's thumbprints here : the mythic narrative structure, the visionary impulse, the yearning for racial rootedness, the quest for

fulfillment, the agrarian imagery, the contest between « the continent's creative ones » and the « destroyers ». In a sense this novel offers a reworking of themes that have been present in many of Armah's previous works, but there are new ingredients in the mix too, particularly the framing device borrowed from ancient Egypt.

Like Isis, Ast falls in love with a god-like man, Asar (Osiris), a teacher who is trying to restore moral order and fertility to a land poisoned by past and current agents of destruction. But one of the most vicious of these agents, Seth (Osiris' murderous brother Set [Setekh]), in his role as Deputy Director of Security, kills Asar for planting seeds of revolution. The novel ends with a fusillade of gunfire that explodes Asar's body into « fourteen starry fragments. »

But in the myth this is only the beginning of the story. What we have yet to see is how Isis searches for these fragments, reassembles her husband's dismembered body, and restores him to life. His resurrection completes the agricultural cycle, bringing a rich harvest to once infertile land. Armah will no doubt soon publish a sequel to *Osiris Rising* in which the spirit of the fertility god triumphs over the deadly sterility of the modern nation-state. The myth needs a Hollywood ending.

In his fiction Armah has always been a good hater. His villains are marvellous malefactors etched in verbal acid. In this new Manichean melodrama Seth certainly takes the prize for fiendish infamy, being an impotent would-be rapist as well as an efficient gestapo-like technocrat. But there are comical targets of satire too, especially African Americans who attempt to exploit their African heritage for financial or social self-aggrandisement. One of these is a minor character who very much resembles Alex Haley ; another, a civil rights leader called Sheldon Tubman, renames himself Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano in the mistaken belief that he is descended from African royalty. Contrasted with such misguided characters, Ast and Asar came off as paragons of wholesomeness, wisdom and purity. As in Armah's other novels, the world is divided between good guys and bad guys, the morally quick and the morally dead.

Armah's style continues to be limpid and flexible. He is able to set a scene deftly, providing just enough graphic details to give us the distinctive flavor of the place and moment. And his ear is sharp: even when his characters are talking nonsense, their dialogue is crisp and convincingly colloquial. Armah's ideas sometimes can be distasteful, but he expresses them with such grace and lucidity that one cannot help admiring his eloquence. One hopes that a wordsmith so abundantly gifted will not sink into another long silence. May Osiris rise again!