

Africa Writ Large

Ainehi Egoro is sharing a continent's worth of literature through social media — with the intent to delight.

by LOUISA KAMPS

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Once you start clicking through *Brittle Paper*, the sprawling digital magazine Ainehi Egoro created to chronicle African literature and literary culture, it's hard to stop. One link takes you to a blurb covering the Oxford English Dictionary's recent inclusion of 29 Nigerian words, the next to a hefty profile of a globally influential British-Zimbabwean fiction editor who's opening doors for many writers from Africa and the African diaspora. There's a short, sweet story about a Congolese-French novelist's affinity for dapper fashion. One more link takes you to an eclectic list of 50 notable books written in 2019 by African poets, novelists, and essayists that reads—yes!—like a tip sheet from your coolest cosmopolitan friend.

Egoro, a Nigerian-born UW-Madison assistant professor of English, started *Brittle Paper* in 2010 as a personal blog but later redesigned her site to become a digital hub where scholars and critics could write about the work of African authors in a purposefully broad and engaging way. *Brittle Paper* covers the history and tradition of African literature, and it does not shy from difficult topics—to mark the recent 50th anniversary of Nigeria's Biafran War, the site posted a list of 50 books addressing the war's causes and implications. But Egoro has also made sure *Brittle Paper* is full of texture and vivid contrasts. A primary aim of the site, she says, is to spotlight African fiction, memoirs, graphic novels, queer writing, and poetry collections in “a loving way, for readers who just want to know, is this book fun?”

Egoro works with three other editors to produce *Brittle Paper* and its smart, lively social media feeds. Together they count clicks, study popular fashion and lifestyle blogs and text daily to make sure they've hit on the right mix of long and short pieces, provocative display type, and playful updates on literary life to keep readers coming back for more.

“I've wanted to imagine an African literature that is centered on readers and readers' desires, as opposed to always teaching the reader, instructing the reader,” Egoro says. “And I think that we are helping to shift the vector of mainstream African literature away from a pedagogical model to one that is based on readers' tastes. Literature is changing in ways that are beautiful and interesting, and at the end of the day,” she says, “we just want readers to care about reading and connect with books in a way that's meaningful for them.”

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