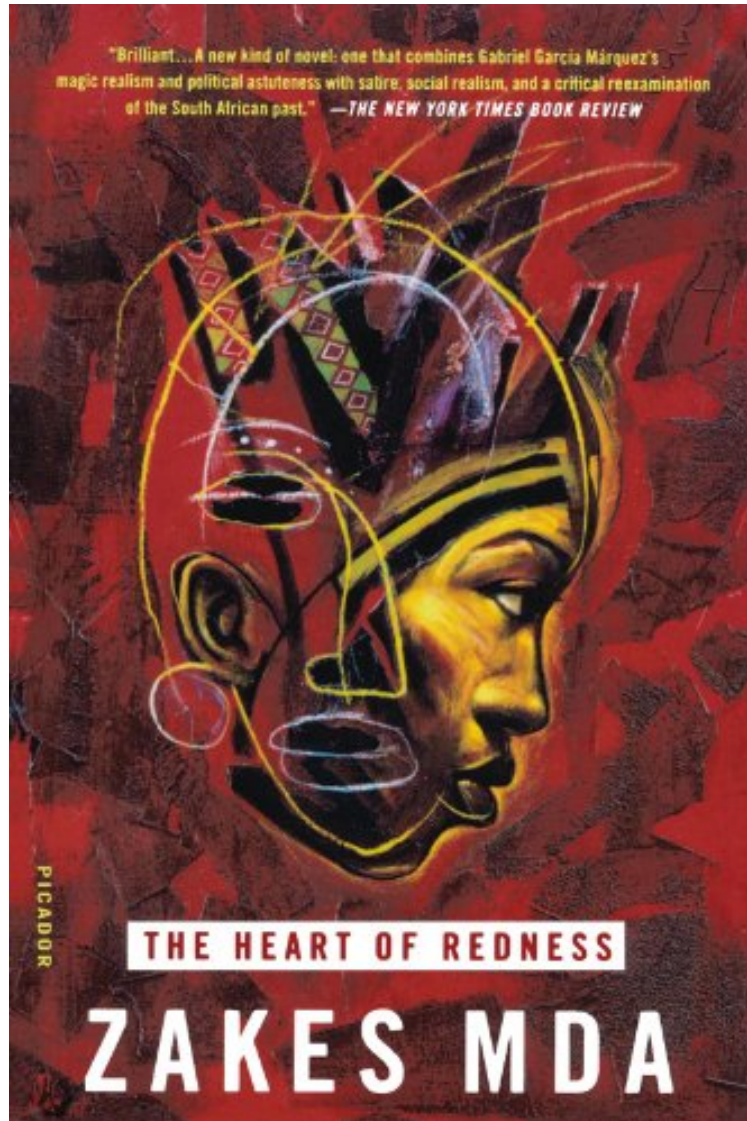


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The Heart of Redness: A Novel

Zakes Mda

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Zakes Mda : The Heart of Redness: A Novel before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Heart of Redness: A Novel:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Things Fell Apart By Michael Jones To Bhonco, son of Ximiya, of the amaXhosa people of South Africa, redness connotes the backwardness of his ancestors. It refers to the red ochre "that women smear on their bodies and with which they also dye their isikhakha skirts". He strives to lead his family out of the primitive past, out of the darkness of the redness, toward the rest of civilization. This he believes, can be

advanced through the approval of plans for a new casino in his home village of Qolora-by-Sea; where tourists may flock, bringing sophistication and money and jobs. In his 2002 novel, *The Heart of Redness* (the title being an allusion to Conrad's classic novella) Zakes Mda, a South African, novelist, poet and playwright, not only recounts the true story of Nongqawuse, a young prophetess, and her supporters, the Cult of the Believers, but he also imagines the effect they had on modern day citizens of Qolora, her legacy to the amaXhosa. Bhonco belongs to the Cult of the Unbelievers, he follows the tenets of Twin-Twin, the original Unbeliever, who lived during the time of the great Xhosa cattle slaughter of 1856/1857 (see Jeff Peires' book *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* which Mda cites as the prime resource for this work). His distant cousin, Zim and his daughter, who live nearby, are Believers. They follow the philosophy of their ancestor Twin (Twin and Twin-Twin were brothers, son of the beheaded Xikixa) who were faithful to the prophecies: kill all your animals, cattle sheep, goats, and the great ancestors will rise from the ocean bringing fresh livestock and blessings for a fortuitous future. The two, Zim and Bhonco, as were their ancestors, are at odds; to join the modern or to respect the old ways, that is the question. Mda never really tips his hand, as he excavates this old debate. He instead wisely inserts an anti-coagulant into their festering wound, the worldly Camagu, an South African ex-pat who has returned to his homeland after thirty years from, among other places, America. Camagu blunders into Qolora-by-Sea on the scent of a woman he knows only by the common Xhosa name of Noma Russia, but soon he becomes taken with another, inexorably entangling himself with the diametrical elders. Like Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe before him, Mda, explores common themes of African literature like cultural divide, colonialism, and gender roles. The amaXhosa are patriarchal, however they greatly value women, hence the allegiances to the young prophetesses; yet we do get a sense that behind them, their uncle, Mhlkaza, pulls their strings. Zim seems lost without his wife, NoEnglish, dead this past year, and Bhonco depends heavily on his mate, NoPetticoat. Both have daughters, Qukezwa and Xoliswa respectively, who are also opposed, both with their eyes on the stranger, Camagu. The author describes the two eloquently thus: "She is so beautiful. Xoliswa Ximiya. So staid and reliable. Qukezwa is not burdened with beauty. She is therefore able to be free-spirited." And then there is the white man, merchant John Dalton, who provides a bit of irony, as he supports the preservation of the village perhaps in atonement for the infamous deeds of his legendary ancestor of the same name. Mda allows his characters to learn and grow, and we get a sense, dynamically, of their growth. Camagu, in conversation with Believer Zim and the skeptical Dalton, has this to say about the power of belief: "There is nothing foolish about belief... It is the same sincerity of belief that has been seen throughout history and continues to be seen today where those who believe actually see miracles. The same sincerity of belief that causes thousands to commit mass suicide by drinking poison in Jonestown, Guyana, because the world is coming to an end . . . or that leads men, women, and children to die willingly in flames with their prophet, David Koresh, in Waco, Texas." Over the ten years since its publication, *The Heart of Redness* has gained near classic status, being included in the popular literary reference, *1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die* compiled by Dr. Peter Boxall (that is how yours truly learned of its existence). Besides its historical ken, the novel is funny, romantic and hopeful. Mda's style is innately African, if there is such a thing; the use of understatement and subtlety seems key to achieving this. It is these qualities of writing which help to sustain the novel's powerful and very unsubtle message into the heart of its own redness.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great book
By Lauren F
Read this book for an Global Environmental Literature class. It took a couple of chapters for me to get involved with the plot, but once I did I tore through it. The author does an interesting things by switching between past and current narratives. Strong female characters in this book as well.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. historical fiction at its best
By Alan J. Jacobs
Zakes Mda is a master teller of historical fiction. The history that he recounts is one of which I was totally unaware: a series of battles between the Xhosa people of the Eastern Cape in South Africa and the British. (The British won the war.) The Xhosas were done in by the prophecies of the daughters of a chief, who had visions of Xhosa ancestors returning to defeat the British. In order to summon these ancestors, all Xhosa had to slaughter their cattle. The ancestors never came, and the believers among the Xhosa starved, after killing off many of the unbelievers. Believers and Unbelievers became a permanent division among the Xhosa. With this as a background, Mda follows a modern South African who travels to Xhosa land in search of a beautiful woman who he met at a bar in Jo-burg. He becomes wrapped up in the local struggles between Believers and Unbelievers, and between those who want the development of a modern resort, and those who don't. Mda also novelizes the struggle in the 1800s between the factions, represented by two brothers: Twin, and Twin-Twin. Descendants of those two brothers are the modern-day Believers and Unbelievers. It's all told believably, but with a touch of magic. Other than a rather flat ending (perhaps my ebook cut off the end?) it was a thoroughly enjoyable trip to a different time and place with an articulate and passionate guide.

A startling novel by the leading writer of the new South Africa
In *The Heart of Redness* -- shortlisted for the prestigious Commonwealth Writers Prize -- Zakes Mda sets a story of South African village life against a notorious episode from the country's past. The result is a novel of great scope and deep human feeling, of passion and reconciliation. As the novel opens Camagu, who left for America during apartheid, has returned to Johannesburg. Disillusioned by the problems of the new democracy, he follows his "famous lust" to Qolorha on the remote Eastern

Cape. There in the nineteenth century a teenage prophetess named Nonqawuse commanded the Xhosa people to kill their cattle and burn their crops, promising that once they did so the spirits of their ancestors would rise and drive the occupying English into the ocean. The failed prophecy split the Xhosa into Believers and Unbelievers, dividing brother from brother, wife from husband, with devastating consequences. One hundred fifty years later, the two groups' descendants are at odds over plans to build a vast casino and tourist resort in the village, and Camagu is soon drawn into their heritage and their future -- and into a bizarre love triangle as well. *The Heart of Redness* is a seamless weave of history, myth, and realist fiction. It is, arguably, the first great novel of the new South Africa -- a triumph of imaginative and historical writing.

From Publishers Weekly In Mda's richly suggestive novel, a Westernized African, Camagu, becomes embroiled in a village dispute that has its roots in the 19th century. The war between the amaXhosa and the British in South Africa (known to Westerners as the Zulu Wars) was interrupted by a strange, messianic interlude in which the amaXhosa followed the self-destructive commands of the prophet Nongqawuse and were split between followers of Nongqawuse (Believers) and their opponents (Unbelievers). In the village of Qolorha-by-Sea in the late 20th century, the Believers still flourish. They put the onus for the distressing failure of Nongqawuse's visions on the Unbelievers' unbelief. The chief Believer is Zim; his rival, the chief Unbeliever, is Bhonco. The white store owner, Dalton, whose ancestor killed Zim and Bhonco's forefather, Xikixa, is on the Believers' side in the village's current controversy over whether or not to allow a casino in the village. The Believers oppose the changes they foresee coming to the village's traditions. The Unbelievers want economic development. Camagu originally comes to Qolorha looking for a woman whose memory haunts him. He ends up being associated with the cold, beautiful Xoliswa Ximiya, Bhonco's daughter, whose scorn for tradition eventually drives her from the village. Secretly, however, Camagu lusts for Quekzwa, the squat but sexy daughter of Zim. Mda's sympathies are with the Believers, but his eminent fairness forbids mere didacticism, and his joy in the back and forth of village politics beautifully communicates itself to the reader through poetic language enlivened by humor and irony. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From Booklist Writing from the heart of the new South Africa, Mda tells his country's stories through beautifully realized characters whose search for love and connection takes you up close to the black experience, past and present. In *Heart of Redness*, protagonist Camagu (like the author) had left South Africa during the apartheid years, but now he's back. Camagu has trouble finding his place in the new system until he lands in a coastal village in the eastern Cape, where a "black empowerment" company wants to develop a tourist heaven with casinos and theme parks. The villagers are split between those who welcome "progress" and those who fear it. With the present conflict, Mda weaves in the infamous history of this place, where the savage white conquerors came with "civilization" and a Xhosa prophetess told the people to resist by destroying their cattle and crops. Then, as now, the community was split, and the questions remain. The constant weaving together of past and present slows the narrative, but Mda does a great job of subverting the heart-of-darkness stereotypes, and he does it without romanticizing the "primitive." Today's villagers want electricity, running water, literacy. But they also want to conserve their Xhosa culture and the natural beauty of their place, not as tourist fodder, but as a dynamic contemporary community. Can Camagu help find a way? The parallels with the Native American experience will grab readers, as will the personal search for home. Hazel Rochman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved "Brilliant...A new kind of novel: one that combines Gabriel García Márquez's magic realism and political astuteness with satire, social realism and a critical reexamination of the South African past." ?The New York Times Book "Quiet, subtle, and powerful...Mda's enormous skills as a storyteller are everywhere in evidence, making the book impossible to put down." ?The Washington Post "A major step in the new South African novel." ?The Village Voice "At once legend and historical document...Mda's novel is the next Things Fall Apart....This is a major new novelist." ?The San Diego Union-Tribune