Nobel Laureate Launches 1997-98 Patten Lectures

Wole Soyinka, world-renowned playwright and poet from Nigeria who is considered by many to be Africa’s finest writer, spent two days on the Bloomington campus as the first distinguished speaker in the 1997-98 IU Patten Foundation Lecture series. His prolific works span five decades and he has published in all the major literary forms of drama, poetry, the novel, the biography, and the essay. Winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature for his stirring plays and autobiographies mirroring African and Yoruba cultural perspectives, Soyinka also holds honorary doctorates from many institutions, including Cambridge University, Leeds University, Harvard University, Yale University, and Morehouse College.

An outspoken critic of Nigeria’s military regimes, Soyinka was twice imprisoned in the 1960s and wrote movingly of these experiences. He has taught at the major Nigerian universities in Ibadan, Lagos, and Ile, and been a visiting professor at a number of other universities outside Nigeria. In 1994, he was forced into exile after his passport was confiscated by the ruling military government. He currently serves as the Woodruff Professor of Arts at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, lecturing on African literature, attending conferences, and directing his plays worldwide.

Speaking to a capacity-filled audience on the first of his two Patten presentations, Soyinka spoke forcefully on the theme of “The Fictioning of Africa.” Initially making extensive use of 19th century European travel literature about Africa, Soyinka charted the impressions of Africans by European explorers. These published accounts exaggerated cultural differences and, over time, became justification for colonialism, misdirected foreign policy, and misshapen fictional images. In sum, they said more about the needs of Europeans than the realities of Africans.

In his second appearance, a reading of selected unpublished poems, Soyinka spoke briefly introductory remarks about each one. His broad humanity was evident in the range of topics, including fanaticism—“the terminal plague of the earth,” as he described it; love and friendship; youth; a whimsical jab at the Western superstition of “Friday the 13th”—the day he was born on; a tribute to South Africa’s Nelson Mandela; and a moving memorial to the late Nigerian activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa. Soyinka finishing with reading a dialogue from his well-known play, Death and the King’s Horseman.

The Patten Foundation Committee worked closely with IUB’s Afro-American Studies department chair John McCluskey and faculty member A.B. Assensoh to bring about Soyinka’s visit. Among other sponsors were the African Studies Program, Near Eastern Languages & Cultures, Comparative Literature, and the Wells Scholars Program.

Selected Major Works of Wole Soyinka


