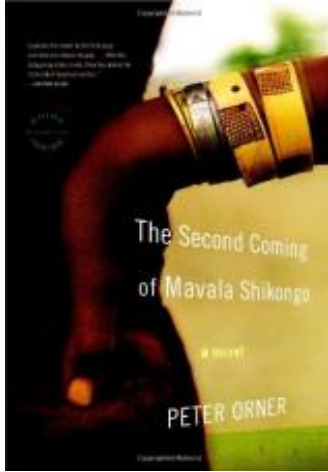

The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo: A Novel

by Peter Orner



About the Book

When Mavala Shikongo deserted them, the teachers at the boys' school in Goas weren't surprised. How could they be? She was too beautiful, too powerful, and too mysterious for their tiny, remote, and arid world. They knew only one essential fact about their departed colleague: she was a combat veteran of Namibia's brutal war for independence.

When Mavala returns to Goas with a baby son, all are awed by her boldness. The teachers try hard, once again, not to fall in love with her. They fail, immediately and miserably, especially the American volunteer, Larry Kaplanski.

Discussion Guide

1. Larry Kaplanski introduces you to a community of Namibians in a remote region of the country. Were you comfortable with this? Did you think the gulf between cultures was narrowed by Kaplanski's (and Peter Orner's) powers of empathy? What other books about Africa by outsiders have you read, and how does **The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo** differ from them?
2. Although Kaplanski is the principal narrator of the book, the shift often focuses to the points of views of other characters. As the *San Francisco Chronicle* put it, the novel becomes "a kind of living village." Assess the success or failure of the novel's shifting points of view.
3. **The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo** has been called an unusually structured novel. Do you think the novel's disparate pieces come together successfully? Does the economy of Peter Orner's prose influence your opinion?

4. How is Antoinette, Obadiah's wife and the school's dorm mother, different in the eyes of the male teachers from Festus's wife, Dikeledi, or even Mavala herself? Do they see a caretaker as superior to a lover? How, in the end, is a world without its Antoinettes imagined?
5. How does Theofilus's beating the donkey that won't take him to his wife—who lives far away, on another farm—mirror the lonely frustration of his more well-educated colleagues? Did you forgive him his atypical burst of violence?
6. The local butcher and neighboring farmer are both of German, or Boer, extraction. How does their attitude toward the residents of Goas speak to a still-simmering racial divide? Consider that Namibia was a nation that endured decades of apartheid.
7. Were you surprised when Mavala made an overture to Kaplanski during morning meeting? Or did you think her boldness in character for a former warrior?
8. Mavala and Kaplanski conduct their affair on the graves of Boer settlers. How does this underline the history of the region and its previous racial divide? Does the location of their meetings signal a doomed relationship from the start, or do you think hope remains, in spite of the book's ultimate conclusion?
9. How does the school's hierarchy remind you of the hierarchies of groups you belong to? Does the powerful principal merit his position over the teachers? Note the scene on page 140, where the principal says of a drunk Obadiah, "This is the Head Teacher with whom I am to build a new nation out of the ashes of war?" Is the principal the sort of man to lead a newly independent Namibia?
10. Goas is a place that becomes an unlikely haven for characters in the novel, including three children who are fleeing violence in their home country of Angola (chapter 90). What is it about Goas that makes it such a strangely welcoming place?
11. Do you think spending significant time alone in an entirely unfamiliar place and culture would have a major, lasting effect on the way you think about your place in the world? What impact do you think Kaplanski's experiences in Namibia will have on his future?

Author Bio

Born in Chicago, Peter Orner is the author of seven acclaimed books, including *MAGGIE BROWN & OTHERS*; *LOVE AND SHAME AND LOVE*; *ESTHER STORIES*, a finalist for the Pen/Hemingway Award; and *AM I ALONG HERE?*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review* and *Best American Stories*, and been awarded four Pushcart Prizes. A former Guggenheim fellow and recipient of the Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Orner is chair of the English and Creative Writing Department at Dartmouth College. He lives with his family in Vermont, where he's also a volunteer firefighter.

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