

Alain Mabanckou was born in 1966 in Congo. An award-winning novelist, poet and essayist, Mabanckou currently lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches literature at UCLA. His six novels *African Psycho*, *Memoirs of a Porcupine*, *Broken Glass*, *Black Bazaar*, *Tomorrow I'll Be Twenty* – a fictionalised retelling of Mabanckou's childhood in Congo – and his most recent, *Black Moses*, are all published by Serpent's Tail. Among his many honours are the Prix Renaudot for *Memoirs of a Porcupine*, a Prix Goncourt shortlisting for *Black Moses*, and the Académie Française's Grand prix de littérature, awarded in recognition of his entire literary career. His memoir *The Lights of Pointe-Noire* won the 2016 French Voices Award and was described by Salman Rushdie as 'a beautiful book'. He is a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur and an officer of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, was a finalist for the 2015 Man Booker International Prize and has featured on *Vanity Fair's* list of France's fifty most influential people.

Praise for *African Psycho*

'A morbid parody of the serial-killer genre that owes as much to Albert Camus's *The Outsider* as to Bret Easton Ellis ... insisting on laughter in the midst of desperation, [Mabanckou] sugars the pill of criticism with humour that veers from the gently ironic to the bawdy or macabre' *Economist*

'This is *Taxi Driver* for Africa's blank generation ... a deftly ironic Grand Guignol, a pulp fiction vision of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that somehow manages to be both frightening and self-mocking at the same time' *Time Out*, New York

'A macabre but comical take on a would-be serial killer' *Vanity Fair*

‘A smart satire on the deserving targets of corrupt officialdom, complacent media and blank-eyed consumerism’ *New Internationalist*

‘Mabanckou manages to write playfully about an alarming subject’ *Financial Times*

‘Energetic, terrifically powerful writing’ Harriett Gilbert, BBC Radio 4’s *A Good Read*

Praise for Alain Mabanckou

‘Alain Mabanckou addresses the reader with exuberant inventiveness in novels that are brilliantly imaginative in their forms of storytelling. His voice is vividly colloquial, mischievous and often outrageous as he explores, from multiple angles, the country where he grew up, drawing on its political conflicts and compromises, disappointments and hopes. He acts the jester, but with serious intent and lacerating effect’ Man Booker International Prize judges’ citation

‘A dizzying combination of erudition, bawdy humour and linguistic effervescence’ *Financial Times*

‘A hugely engaging storyteller whose humour, mischief and sheer bravura only throw the melancholy of his forlorn migrant heroes into even bolder relief ... Mabanckou conjures a world where ragged modernisation coincides with tentacular kin networks and traditional lore’ *Independent*

‘An inventive and playful writer’ *Herald*

‘Mabanckou’s rhythmic and lyrical lines draw us into his characters and communities at a tempo that mirrors the speed of speech’ *Australian*

AFRICAN PSYCHO

ALAIN MABANCKOU

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Besides, am I truly a murderer? I have killed a human being, but it seems to me I haven't done it myself...

—Hermann Ungar, *Boys & Murderers*

My Idol and Great Master
Angoualima

1.

I have decided to kill Germaine on December 29. I have been thinking about this for weeks—whatever one may say about it, killing someone requires both psychological and logistical preparedness. I believe I have now reached the necessary state of mind, even if I have yet to choose the means by which I will do the deed. It is now a question of detail. I'd rather give myself a bit of latitude on this practical point, and in so doing add a measure of improvisation to my project.

I am not looking for perfection, no—far be it from me. As a matter of fact, I do not like to undertake anything without due consideration, and a murder is not going to change the way I go about doing things...

Reading news items in our town's dailies, I find that no gesture is as simple as that of bringing someone's life to an end. All you need to do is procure a weapon, whatever it may be, set a trap for the future victim and, finally, proceed. The police and the courts will then get on with their job, trying to figure out the murderer's motives. These keepers of the law will even go so far as to credit a scoundrel with genius when in fact his deed was so absolutely logical that it needed no such speculation. But the poor bastards have to work, don't they? This is what they get paid for, and to some extent it is thanks to people like us that they earn a living. I wonder what they will say about me once I have committed my crime. The worst would be that it goes unnoticed. Of course I am not about to consider this humiliating possibility. Why then would I have spent days in deep reflection, during which my brain got all tangled up, trying

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to choose the right weapon for this upcoming crime—so much so that I practically found myself on the verge of a nervous breakdown?

Ideally, I would enjoy as much media coverage as my idol, Angoualima, the most famous of our country's assassins. From time to time, to give thanks for his genius, to keep him informed of what I am doing, or even just for the pleasure of talking to him, I make my way to the cemetery of the Dead-Who-Are-Not-Allowed-To-Sleep and kneel in front of his grave. And there, as if by magic, I swear, the Great Master of crime appears before me, as charismatic as in his glory days. We converse in the privacy of this sinister locale, the haunt of crows and other birds of bad omen...

I refrain from dreaming.

Angoualima had intuition, crime and highway robbery fit him like a glove. Can you imagine someone who was born with one extra finger on each hand? Not the type of additional little fingers you notice on some individuals, which surgery can fix with success. Those were real fingers, as necessary as the other ten, and he could really move them around. He would use them to scratch his body's hard-to-reach places, no doubt, and to satisfy his criminal impulses as well. I myself do not have such additional fingers, I know. I am not going to make a big deal out of it.

In fact our view, which we find comforting, is that the assassin should possess something more than those things possessed by your ordinary human being. On this subject, I

will soon reveal the reasons why, to this day, I am disgusted by the speeches delivered by our city's public prosecutors. Taking advantage of the fact that, in contrast to the other, "seated" magistrates, they are perched up in one corner of the room, where the public necessarily notices them, they seem to believe that they are entitled to lecture the accused. This goes to their heads, and they launch into rhetorical flourishes that make them look like the most intelligent people in court. You really have to see these people, their robes, and the way they swish their ample sleeves around, a move they must surely practice in front of the mirror, expecting their wives' approving gazes.

In the time when I was still hanging around our city's courts, I found our prosecutors had a pretty fucking high opinion of themselves. They thought they were celebrities, showing up last in the courtroom with the excuse that they had forgotten a file that was important for the continuation of the case of the day. Then they would assume serious airs and wait until the presiding judge called on them to speak, to start performing one of their trademark coquettish numbers for us...

Nothing about me would be of any interest to those who believe one is born a criminal. Such theories are a lot of nonsense, I say! And what else, now? To think that people spend their lives studying, analyzing all this from up close! Don't they have anything else to do? When criminals, real ones, start teaching their subject themselves, then I will begin to believe such things. Most of the time, though, we're bored to tears by eggheads with no criminal practice of their own, reciting things they have learned in books written by people who are liars, as they are themselves!

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Let me make things clear: I do not wish to become bigger than Angoulalima or graft little fingers onto my hands. I want to be appreciated in proportion to the result of my criminal gesture. Being unable to match the Great Master's feats, I would at least like to be considered his spiritual heir. To achieve this, I know I have some more work to do: killing Germaine on December 29—that is, two days from today—is only one step toward my coronation...

2.

I still cannot understand why my last deed, which took place only three months ago, wasn't covered by the national press or the press of the country over there. Only four insignificant lines in *The Street Is Dying*, a small neighborhood weekly, and the lines devoted to my crime were buried between ads for Monganga soap and No-Confidence shoes. As I have kept the clipping, I can't help laughing when I read it again:

A nurse at Adolphe-Cissé Hospital was assaulted by a sex maniac upon her return home from work. A complaint was filed at the police station of the He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot neighborhood.

I assure you, I spent the whole day after this deed listening to Radio Right Bank in the hope that it would convey the facts in detail to make up for this short news item, which, even though I wasn't named in it, had hurt my pride and come as a real snub to me—I have always suffered from the

fact that my actions keep being credited to some other of the town's shady characters.

But they said nothing! This was the day I understood the meaning of radio silence. I became aware that my gesture was not worthy of a criminal of Angoualima's ilk, he who would leave his mark by sending his victims' private parts to the national press and to the press of the country over there by registered mail.

I'm telling you: Angoualima, my idol, was something else. How could I not think about him? I make no secret of the fact that his disappearance upset me a great deal at the time, although it did help the police who had been looking for him for years. It just wasn't possible that the Great Master would die like this, as if he didn't have any personality, and that he would leave me an orphan. Seeing the man who used to put the city to fire and sword now immobile, his body left to the winds blowing in from the sea, in the center of a circle he had drawn himself—who would have believed it? I was abandoned. I no longer had reason to live. I cried. I resented the authorities and the inhabitants of He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot. People here and there expressed relief, but I cried foul. Surely, my idol had been pushed to the limit. By way of consolation, I told myself that this death was an opportunity for me. Having never come into contact with the Great Master when he was alive, I now had the opportunity to pay him a visit, at his gravesite. His spirit would talk to me...

The entire city knows that before committing suicide, my idol, Angoualima, had sent the national press and the press of the country over there an audio tape on which he spent 120

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minutes repeating, “I shit on society,” the very words that the neighborhood’s most popular band, the Brothers The-Same-People-Always-Get-To-Eat-In-This-Shitty-Country, later used in their hit song.

It’s true his end came as a surprise to everyone. No one could have thought of it. Here was my idol, thumbing his nose one last time. He’d really shat on society, as he said. I now understand what he was doing: above all, he wanted to avoid entering legend on his knees, like a boxer, long at the top of his game, who’s humiliated by some unknown challenger just as his career is waning.

In this sense, then, the Great Master had known how to leave the ring before having to face one fight too many. That’s how I choose to interpret his venerable gesture. I’m not interested in what was discussed later...

Still, it’s weird: every time one of my deeds ends in fiasco, something—I don’t know what exactly—compels me to think about Angoulima, my idol, and, in the first hours of the day, to make for his grave in the cemetery of The-Dead-Who-Are-Not-Allowed-To-Sleep. There I talk to him, listen to him take me to task, call me an imbecile, an idiot, or a pathetic character. I agree, abandon myself to the fascination he exerts over me, and take these insults as a sign of the affection that only he shows me. Now if only I could convince myself that it is not in my interest to compare myself to him or desperately seek his approval as a master of crime, I might be able to start working with a free spirit. To each his own manner and personality. I certainly have tried to pursue this course. It’s not as simple as it seems.

Why take Angoualima as a model and not another of our town's bandits? I finally found an explanation. Actually, back when I was a mere teenager with skeletal legs, drifting through the sticky streets of the He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot neighbor-hood and playing rag-ball with other kids my age, I had already heard people talk about Angoualima and recognized myself in each of his gestures, which the whole country decried. I felt admiration for him. In a certain way he preceded me in the type of existence I dreamed of for myself. To fend off despair, I persuaded myself that I resembled him, that his destiny and mine had the same arc, and that little by little I would eventually climb each step until my head, shaped like a rectangular brick, deserved a crown of laurels.

I did resemble him. Not in any physical sense, but in that he also had cultivated a taste for solitude and that he hadn't been recognized by his parents either—they had abandoned him at a great crossroads of life where the poor child had no idea what path to take...

Hearing grownups talk about Angoualima's life made me realize I had not known my own parents. Just like my idol, I had fled most of the families in which the government forcefully placed me. I was called a "picked-up child," like the kids with whom I played rag-ball behind the train station of He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot. I remember the red soil, broken glass and garbage the inhabitants came to dump around the field. We would be in the middle of this refuse, laughing and carefree, shirtless, running like crazy until nightfall after a ball made of rags.

We were called "picked-up children" because at the time, following an unwanted pregnancy, a great number of mothers would wait until they had delivered to skip out of the maternity ward and leave the task of caring for their

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progeny to the State.

I have always imagined the woman who brought me into the world running in a loincloth saturated with amniotic fluid. I don't know why I hang on to this morbid image, but if I could kill all the women on Earth, I would begin with my mother—if only someone would show her to me, even now. I would pull out her heart of stone, cook it in my shop's furnace and eat it with sweet potatoes, licking my fingers, the rest of her body rotting away in front of me...

Just like Angoulima, I loathed the thought of living with these host families who, in spite of their philanthropic impulse, viewed a “picked-up child” as they would an animal found in the street, giving it milk until its owners come get it. I would always escape from these fortresses, and God knows many welcomed me. As a matter of fact, it was during this period that I executed my first dangerous deed, this one more with the intention of defending myself than anything else, for I had my back against the wall...

I can still picture myself on that day.

I was living in the center of town, with a family of very cultivated civil servants who boasted they had chosen me after a rigorous selection process involving a hundred or so “picked-up children” because, being the one who always ran away, I obviously needed to be taken care of more than anyone else.

For one year I stayed with these well-mannered people. They would ambush me to test the level of my intelligence. Then they noted with sighs of relief that I hadn't forgotten the concepts I had learned a few days earlier. They wanted to inculcate everything in me, and in no time at all: How to behave at the table, how to respond to grownups, how to

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sneeze, burp or yawn, how to keep my urine stream from ringing loudly against the porcelain while I peed, how to hold my farts, at what time I was to go to bed, how to read in silence and without running my fingers under the words. They made me wear cumbersome clothes made out of old wrinkle-free nylon with silk lining, when it was more than forty degrees Celsius in the shade! The best tailor in the area would make my clothes—and what clothes! The buttons, big as coins, went up to my neck. I suffocated and sweated heavily under the sun. In their eyes, I had apparently become presentable. I no longer looked like one of those street kids with holes in their pants who stank like mangy dogs. I was distinguished and clean, a child who was lucky to get an education. Was I happy, fundamentally? Was I at ease, dressed in clothes poorly adapted to my nature as a boisterous kid?

All this would have been okay if they hadn't shaved this rectangular head of mine completely, making me prey to the jeers of the other children, who would spend all day shouting, "Baldy, baldy!"

Tears in my eyes, I ran. In my hand I held a rock, determined to throw it at the first of them to show up.

My adoptive family taught me tolerance. I was to offer the other cheek to the person who had just slapped me because this was how you did things and there was no debating God's will, especially when it was written in black and white in the Holy Book.

I was told that I would become a responsible man, a cultivated man, a fine man, because ignorance plunged human beings further into darkness whereas every concept learned brought them gradually closer to the light. I was then studious, or rather pretended to be. On certain

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evenings around six, with other kids, I would go to catechism, where a sister made it her business to save us from the error of our ways. Her face bore the scars of her tribe. The sternness lurking behind her gaze kept me from looking her straight in the eye. God inspired fear in me, and the paths that led to Him seemed to me tortuous indeed. I think it was worse than at school. This sister claimed she was “chasing” away our sins and opening us to the real life, the eternal life, for among God’s children there were no distinctions—small, tall, fat, thin, black, white, yellow, red: God couldn’t care less, she said. Yet every month we had to endure a thorough exam, first oral, then written. Down to the last detail, the sister with the scarred face would check whether we were absorbing God’s Word. What surprised me was that she held a long whip and did not hesitate to smack us when our memory failed us repeatedly...

The People’s School was located a few hundred meters from my adoptive parents’ residence. They would drop me in front of the gate and watch me walk away with a school bag I held with the tips of my fingers. We lined up in front of the classroom and the teacher then called our names to take attendance. With the other kids making fun of my rectangular head, the teacher deemed it preferable for me to sit in the last row. Otherwise, those sitting behind me would throw paper balls that landed atop my shaved scalp...

School? I was elsewhere, even if I basically knew that with application I would be able to distinguish myself from the other students. I pretended I didn’t understand anything for the mere pleasure of seeing our teacher linger over me and

look at my rectangular head with indulgence. Surely he told himself that it was just an empty shell and that, for all his efforts, he couldn't make it absorb anything that wasn't there before. Me, I laughed about it on the way home—I was able to solve all these multiplications, divisions and fractions from memory, without using my fingers or little sticks made out of reed like the other students did...

I was meant to leave this good family as well, but this time around, I will always remember, it was in the most unexpected and tragic manner. At least as far as my “adoptive parents” were concerned...

I had just turned eleven. Given my unattractive appearance, you might think me three or four years older, no more. This family had an only son who was three years older than I and attended not the People's School but a private school where the children of European aid cadres would go. Yet the rogue would spend his time outside with the big kids from the working-class districts and use me as a guinea pig for experiments he picked up from the street. Once his parents were gone, and when I refused to indulge his spoiled-child whims, he would whip me to amuse himself. Despite his age, he still wet his bed frequently, and he raised his voice in front of his parents. Whenever they cited me as an example, this only son would sulk all day and resist eating and going to school. To secure a gift his parents refused to buy him, he threatened not to wash for a week and defecate in his bed. The father would capitulate and beg him on his knees...

So it was that one day he grabbed my shirt collar, pulled me into the bedroom we shared, and told me while waving a stick in the air:

“Take off your pants. We're going to do like daddies and

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mommies! You're mommy and I'm daddy."

I had failed to notice that he had hidden a fake beard under one of our bunk beds. He put on the beard to look like his father and frowned his eyebrows to intimidate me.

"Hurry up before my daddy and my mommy come back! You'll see, it's good and we'll do it every day!"

He was erect like a horse under his pants and suspenders. I could not escape: he was standing in front of the door and beating the floor with his stick like bailiffs at court announcing the arrival of a judge and the beginning of a hearing.

I was trapped. The bedroom now seemed narrow and dark despite a feeble glimmer from an old bulb above our heads. I had to do something to get out of this situation. I don't know how exactly, but an ingenious idea came to me, a way I could swing things back in my favor. I had to play along, I told myself.

"You don't know how to do it!" I said, trying to taunt him.

"What? What are you saying? You crazy or what?"

"No, you don't know how to do it, that's not the way it's done."

"I do it with the big kids outside!" he replied angrily. "I'm tired of always being the mommy, today I'll be the daddy, take off your pants, quick!"

Hands in my pockets, I replied calmly:

"Usually when daddies and mommies do this, the daddies must always close their eyes when the mommies take off their clothes. And then you have to turn off the light because it's not good to see when you do that..."

"How do you know these things, huh? You do this too?" he asked, surprised and disarmed by what I had said.

"That's how my daddy and my mommy used to do it, I swear," I said while raising my right hand.