



One Great Book: Volume 1, Episode 3
Purple Hibiscus by Chimimandah Ngozie Adichie

[Show Notes](#)

Purple Hibiscus

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume 1, Book 3: Purple Hibiscus

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to One Great Book, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it.

[MUSIC]

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[01:08]

Readers, I'm a little bit embarrassed to tell you about the road that led me to becoming a Chimimandah Ngozie Adichie fanatic. It started the way a promising new relationship often does, with a friend saying, *read this, I think you'll love it*. But the "this" in question was *Americanah*, and the title didn't grab me immediately. Yes, this is embarrassing to admit.

But after weeks or perhaps—I shudder to think—even months of waffling, my friend nudged me to download the audio version. I started listening as a "test", and seven minutes later I was hooked—I remember walking miles and miles that day, miles I didn't intend to walk, just so I could keep listening. And now if I could have a dollar for every time I've urged one of you to read *Americanah*, I could buy all of you your own copy, and not just the paperback, but a pretty hardcover edition. After that experience I went on to quickly read *everything* that Adichie wrote.

The last book I came to was *Purple Hibiscus*, the debut from Chimamandah, published in 2003, a full ten years before *Americanah*. She was just 26 at the time. If *you* loved *Americanah* or *Half of a Yellow Sun*, or her nonfiction like *We Should All be Feminists*, you're in good company. But fewer have read *Purple Hibiscus*. That's a shame, and something I'd like to remedy, because *Purple Hibiscus* is *One. Great. Book.*

[MUSIC]

Despite her youth, this debut was lauded as something special—which is interesting, because for a long time, she struggled to find a publisher. She said that first her short stories were rejected, and then she wrote what she called "a large and terrible novel" that was rejected multiple times, and then she wrote *Purple Hibiscus*, and upon reading that, an agent said she would take a chance on her.



[02:58]

These days that seems laughable, because we know how that story ends—with a massively successful literary career.

But for now, let's go back to where that first novel begins.

The story opens with the words “Things started to fall apart...” If you know anything about Nigerian literature, particularly about the work of Chinua Achibe [CHIN-wa a-CHE-beh], you know this means something: it places *Purple Hibiscus* firmly in the tradition of classic Nigerian literature.

The story opens on Palm Sunday, where things are in a bad way in the home of Kamillii, a fifteen year old girl in a privileged family in Enugu, Nigeria. In the first line of the story, her father is throwing things. Chimamanda sets the scene, showing us how this family operates: the family is just home from church: Papa rages, Mama tries to placate him, brother Jaja provoked him, while Kamillii remains silent, trying not to make things any worse, trying to just disappear. As we get oriented, we realize that this angry man—the man doing such violence in his own home, to his own family— is a Catholic priest, a man who is honored and respected in the larger community. This chasm between this family's private and public lives will come to permeate the novel.

But for now, Chimamanda gives us one quick glimpse around the room, in the here and now of the story— just a few pages worth—and then she takes us back in time to *before* this fateful day, where the trouble we're experiencing the fruits of on the first pages, truly began.

As Chimamanda introduces us to the world of Kamillii and her family, she begins to probe the chasm at the heart of the story—the one between the family's private life and the life they oh-so-carefully present to the public. I called it a chasm, but it may be more accurate to call it a wall—and as the story unfolds, we see the first crack appear in that wall, and it's shortly joined by others, and they grow and grow until things that have been kept carefully hidden for decades can no longer remain so.



[04:50]

Reading this book for the first time was an interesting experience. As I read, and would note a particularly good turn of phrase, or a scene that was especially well done, I'd think, Ah, Chimimanda, these are the early seeds of greatness! Because this debut is *quite* good.

But as I kept reading I came to appreciate how she not just *holds* but *demands* your attention, how she keeps ratcheting up the tension, how in this family's *everyday* ordinary moments and quotidian dialogue she slowly, incrementally pulls you to the edge of your chair.

If I had to point to one specific moment when she won my over, I know what I'd choose. It happens on p 193 in my paperback version, the 2012 edition from Algonquin. Kamili's father hollers for her, he wants to talk to his daughter, he doesn't say why, but he wants her to come upstairs to the bathroom. She's puzzled, and as the reader, so am I. But she knows enough to be afraid, and I'm afraid for her, but how could I not be, because Chimimanda has so skillfully drawn you into the home and hearts of her very human characters. *Human* meaning deeply flawed.

If you've never read anything by Chimamanda, *Purple Hibiscus* is an excellent starting point. If you're working your way back from her more recent works, keep working your way back to this one. If you're in need of a good book club novel, the layer upon layer of meanings to unpack make this a good one. And if you'd like a good companion story to accompany *Purple Hibiscus*, find yourself a copy of Barbara Kingsolver's 1998 book *The Poisonwood Bible*, for its portrayal of a well-intentioned but seriously misguided man, whose practices harm both his family and his community.

In short, if you're looking for an evocative coming-of-age story, steeped thoroughly in its place and time, from one of our greatest contemporary living writers, *Purple Hibiscus* may be the next great book you're looking for.

Readers, visit modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook to learn more about *Purple Hibiscus* and all of the great books in this volume.



[06:50]

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And make sure you check out our sister show WSIRN, that's our long format show dedicated to answering the question that plagues every reader, "WSIRN?"



Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."
Happy reading, everyone.