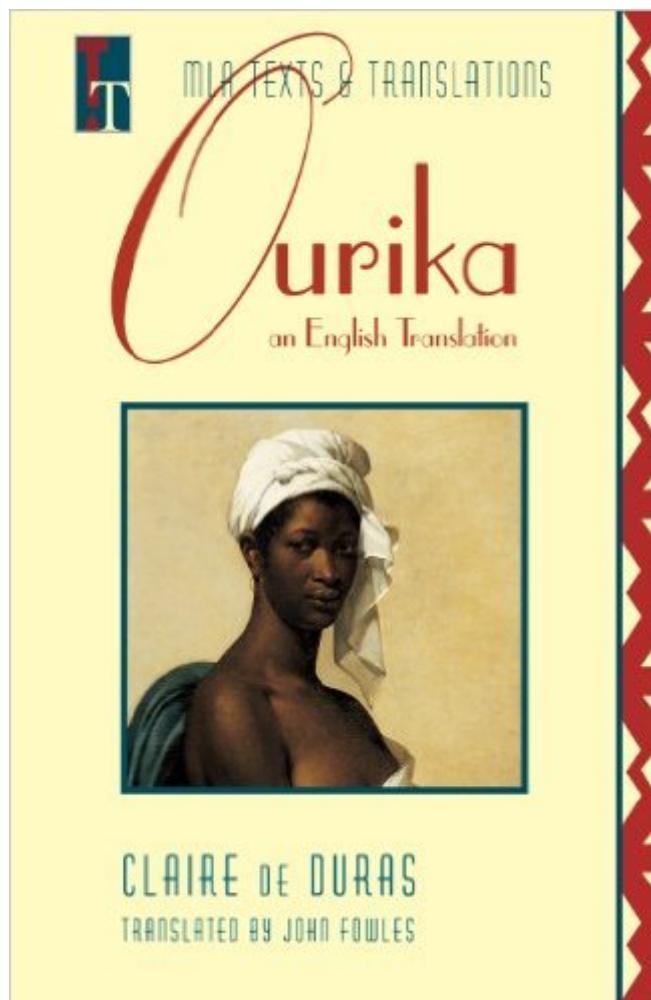


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Ourika: An English Translation (MLA Texts And Translations)



Synopsis

John Fowles presents a remarkable translation of a nineteenth-century work that provided the seed for his acclaimed novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and that will astonish and haunt modern readers. Based on a true story, Claire de Duras's *Ourika* relates the experiences of a Senegalese girl who is rescued from slavery and raised by an aristocratic French family during the time of the French Revolution. Brought up in a household of learning and privilege, she is unaware of her difference until she overhears a conversation that suddenly makes her conscious of her race--and of the prejudice it arouses. From this point on, *Ourika* lives her life not as a French woman but as a black woman who feels "cut off from the entire human race." As the Reign of Terror threatens her and her adoptive family, *Ourika* struggles with her unusual position as an educated African woman in eighteenth-century Europe. A best-seller in the 1820s, *Ourika* captured the attention of Duras's peers, including Stendhal, and became the subject of four contemporary plays. The work represents a number of firsts: the first novel set in Europe to have a black heroine; the first French literary work narrated by a black female protagonist; and, as Fowles points out in the foreword to his translation, "the first serious attempt by a white novelist to enter a black mind."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Lillian Lewis, the reviewer, has not read this book if she can call it "delightful." Nor is *Ourika*'s happiness, actually ever "restored." This is a devastating tale about a young woman who hopes to be part of her mainstream culture, only to find that her black skin and Senegalese heritage will

forever bar her from the only culture she's ever been a part of--aristocratic France. Duras writes a compelling novella, full of anguish and the unfairness of her contemporary French society (and one that resonates today worldwide). It is an extraordinary tale, but it is absolutely not "delightful."

I read "Ourika" for a college literature analysis class. That being said, I divided my feelings on the book into two respects: academic and leisure. Academically, this book was groundbreaking, as it presented, for the first time in French literature, a clear woman protagonist of African descent. Women in literature at this point in time were often constrained by one (or more) of three factors: convent, marriage, or death. That is, these societal factors were used to punish a woman protagonist in any book so that she would not be viewed as free-spirited and able to roam as she would please in a male-dominated literary society. Ourika, without giving away spoilers, represents a new main protagonist not only, then, regarding her race but also her sex. This book by de Duras, originally oral, is laced with symbolism and with a clear picture of revolutionary French aristocracy as de Duras saw it. Leisurely, I did not enjoy this book to the fullest, as I felt that the narrative, at points, was somewhat contrived and nonsensical, not representative of a true portrait of real society at the time. It does, however, deserve credit for its examination of racism.

This fiction novel provides a tale of the difficulty of being a learned black woman during a time when slavery was rampant and where women were being oppressed. It also provides real historical events, such as; Robespierre's reign of terror.

While the seeds of the French Revolution were maturing, a French aristocrat rescued a little black child in Senegal from a slave ship and brought her back to France. She was raised in an aristocratic home as one of the family. After the Restoration of the monarchy, Claire de Duras told the story in her brilliant literary salon. It caused a sensation - and the friends of the duchess urged her to write it down. The resulting novella, Ourika, was privately published in 1823. By 1824, it was a best seller. Ourika's tragedy arises out of her good fortune. By the time she reaches young womanhood, she is well read, accomplished, beloved by her "family" and totally at home in her exclusive circle. Then one day she overhears a conversation that strips away all her illusions. She realizes that as a black woman in a racist country, she will always be alone. She can never marry and have children. The novel goes on to show Ourika's attempts to deal with her predicament. Claire de Duras enters the mind of her black character in a way that had never been done before. Ourika is also the first example of a black heroine in a European setting. Duras perfectly captures her sense of

alienation. There are three prefaces in this book, two by scholars, one by the translator, John Fowles. All are illuminating in different ways. They reveal the complex historical background that gives layers of significance to an apparently straightforward narrative. But I especially liked John Fowles' view of the novel as "the case history of an outsider." Ourika can be seen as Camus' eternal stranger, as well as the victim of nineteenth-century racism.

Without reading this essential work, it would be very hard to understand Fowles' intuitivity regarding "The French Lieutenant's Woman." More than that, Fowles' foreword is highly influential. Like a confession... I would like to say that fulfills its mission to make us happy. I got this book within 4 days from the U.S.A to Turkey very very fast.

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