From One Reader to Another
An invitation to read internationally

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of its Writers in Translation programme, English PEN is teaming up with The Reading Agency and Free Word to invite book groups to read and discuss titles from the World Bookshelf, a unique online showcase of the most exciting contemporary literature available in English translation.

There are over 100 books on the World Bookshelf but here is a suggested reading list to get you started:

- **The Yacoubian Building** by Alaa Al Aswany (Egypt, Arabic)
- **Dreams from the Endz** by Faïza Guène (France, French)
- **Arab Jazz** by Karim Miské (France, French)
- **Compartment No.6** by Rosa Liksom (Finland, Finnish)
- **The Lady from Tel Aviv** by Rabai al-Madhoun (Palestine, Arabic)
- **Vango: Between Sky and Earth** by Timothée de Fombelle (France, French)
- **The Devil’s Workshop** by Jachym Topol (Czech Republic, Czech)
- **In the Sea There Are Crocodiles** (for younger readers) by Fabio Geda (Italy, Italian)
- **Bronze and Sunflower** (for younger readers) by Cao Wenxuan (China, Mandarin)
- **How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone** by Saša Stanišić (Bosnia-Herzegovina, German)
- **The Lights of Pointe-Noire** by Alain Mabanckou (Congo, French)
- **The Goddess Chronicle** by Natsuo Kirino (Japan, Japanese)
- **Allah Is Not Obliged** by Ahmadou Kourouma (Ivory Coast, French)
- **The Iraqi Christ** by Hassan Blasim (Iraq, Arabic)
- **Morning Sea** by Margaret Mazzantini (Italy, Italian)
- **Sworn Virgin** by Elvira Dones (Albania, Italian)
- **A Perfect Crime** by A Yi (China, Mandarin)
- **The End of Days** by Jenny Erpenbeck (Germany, German)
- **The Sound of Things Falling** by Juan Gabriel Vásquez (Colombia, Spanish)
- **The Whispering City** by Sara Moliner (Spain, Spanish)

Share your thoughts about these books by leaving a comment on the website or by getting in touch on Twitter: @englishpen, @readingagency, @FreeWordCentre
**Allah Is Not Obliged** by Ahmadou Kourouma

When Birahima’s mother dies, he leaves his native village in the Ivory Coast, accompanied by the sorcerer Yacouba, to search for his aunt Mahan. Crossing the border into Liberia, they are seized by a rebel force and press-ganged into military service. Birahima, aged ten, is given a Kalashnikov, scant rations of food, and plenty of dope. Fighting in a chaotic civil war alongside many other child soldiers, he sees death, torture, amputation and madness, but somehow manages to retain his own sanity...

Told in the remarkably realised voice of a ten-year-old boy, Birahima's story is tinged with both humour and disdain. His story brings us closer to comprehending the rivalries, power structures and customs that fuel Africa's bitter wars.

**About the author**

Ahmadou Kourouma was born in the Ivory Coast in 1927. Hailed as one of Africa’s leading Francophone writers, he died in 2003.

**About the translator**

Born in Sligo, Ireland, in 1962, Frank Wynne has worked in journalism and as a magazine publisher. His translations have been published by Weidenfeld, Fourth Estate, Penguin and Heinemann.

**For discussion**

1. The conceit of *Allah Is Not Obliged* is that Birahima, the child-soldier narrator, has written the book using the help of a Larousse, a Petit Robert, a Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa and a Harrap’s, picked up during his travels. What do you think of the way Birahima constantly defines himself – the use of glossary as a narrative device?

2. One critic praised the novel for its ‘completely complete absence of sentimentalism and exoticism’. Do you agree? How does the novel play with and subvert stereotypical tropes of writing about Africa, and the ‘African novel’?

3. The book interrogates brutal and heavy themes – corruption, violence, death – but through the prism of Birahima’s voice Kourouma also inserts satire and laughs. How do humour and horror complement and/or heighten one another?

4. ‘God says thou shalt not kill too much, or at least thou shalt kill less.’ (p56) Discuss the novel’s treatment of religion.

5. ‘You might be a grown-up, or old, you might be Arab, or Chinese, or white, or Russian – or even American – if you talk bad French, it’s called parler petit nègre – little nigger talking – so that makes you a little nigger too. That’s the rules of French for you.’ (p1) Language is part of the politics of the novel, and Kourouma peppers the text with pidgin, Malinké and French. What difficulties and tensions do you think translator Frank Wynne faced when translating a postcolonial text into English?