

Hello, and welcome. I'm June Simms with VOA Learning English.

Today on As It Is, we tell how cinema has returned to the Hamra neighborhood of Beirut.

And we hear about an Ivorian writer whose increasingly popular comic book series has now been made into a movie.

Writer Captures Flavor of Life in Ivory Coast

A series of French comic books set in the West African country of Ivory Coast has gained the attention of many readers in Africa and overseas. A film based on the books was released in French movie houses in July and will soon be shown in the Ivorian capital of Abidjan. VOA's Lisa Bryant recently spoke with creator Marguerite Abouet in Paris. Christopher Cruise brings you her report.

We are back in the 1970s, in the Ivorian city of Abidjan, following the lives of Aya, Bintu, Fanta, Ignace and other colorful characters. They all live in the ethnically-mixed neighborhood of Yopougon.

These cartoon characters are the stars of a series of comic books and now a new film, called "Aya de Yopougon." The Yopougon is where Aya's author, Marguerite Abouet, lived as a little girl.

“I deliberately chose Muslim and Christian names for my characters, because I had the chance of living in Yopougon, and in Ivory Coast. Abidjan was the crossroads of West Africa at the time. Everything passed through the country. And my neighbors could be a Muslim who had married a Baoulé [one of Ivory Coast’s many ethnic groups], and so in a single household you could have very different names.”

Marguerite Abouet worked with French illustrator Clement Oubrerie, to help bring the Aya books and movie to life. They tell the story of life in Yopougon: the loves, heartaches, hopes, dreams and the difficulties. The books touch on sensitive issues like homosexuality, betrayal and physical abuse.

The Aya series has become a best-seller both in Ivory Coast and in France. In some ways, the real story is Ms. Abouet herself: the little girl from Yopougon who made it big in Paris.

During holidays in Ivory Coast, Ms. Abouet would return to the family’s village.

“During vacations we would go to the village where our grandparents lived, with all of our cousins. We had no electricity or running water. Our grandfather was our television. Every evening he’d gather us all around a big fire and tell us stories.”

Ms. Abouet took those stories with her when she moved to France. They became material for her writing.

Thierry Laroche is an editor for the French publishing house Gallimard Jeunesse. He says there is reason the Aya series has been so popular.

“It was completely original, completely exotic. We were able to discover the insider’s Africa. And it wasn’t talking about negative things, war or sickness. It doesn’t mean hiding these problems, but talking about Africans and how they live.”

The Aya comic books have gained fans in both Africa and France. Thirty-four-year-old Edia Aikessi, who bought a ticket to see the Aya movie in Paris, grew up in Abidjan. She says the books bring back her memories of the city, the expressions, the dishes people eat and all the smells. She says it is really like being in Abidjan.”

Years of conflict have severely hurt Ivory Coast and the Yopougon of Marguerite Abouet’s childhood. But the writer praises the strength of Ivorians who lived through those dark times, especially the mothers. The Aya movie was made in honor of them. I’m Christopher Cruise.

And I’m June Simms. You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

Lebanon's Arts District Brings Back the Silver Screen

The Hamra neighborhood of Beirut was once the intellectual capital of the Lebanon. In the 1950s and 1960s, Arab writers and artists from across the Middle East traveled to the area. There they could watch the latest American movies in more than 20 neighborhood theaters. But, the 15-year Lebanese civil war, that began in 1975, led many writers and artists to flee the area. And many of the movie houses closed down. By the end of the war in 1990, even the small theaters had closed.

But, now theater life has returned to Hamra with the opening of the first neighborhood movie theater in the district in about 10 years. The Prime on Bliss Street is just across the street from the American University of Beirut. The theater has large, modern screens and the latest, high-quality sound equipment.

The theater's manager, Jean Elhelou, says moviegoers like the surround-sound and big screens that capture the special effects of the major action films.

"Customers are now are different from the customers from the past, because in the past there were no technologies. The people in the past were coming to watch a movie, to watch and listen to the story. There were no technologies in the movies. But right now we have a lot of technologies."

But one thing has not changed -- the types of movies that are being shown. The films at the Prime are mainly American or European instead of Arab films. But, Jean Elhelou says this is what the moviegoers want.

“The Lebanese people love to know everything about the European and the American style and they want to live like the European guys or the USA guys so that’s why they are addicted to see people how they are acting outside Lebanon and they want to act like them.”

Local people say they used to go to the Hamra theaters during the civil war to forget their troubles. This latest generation of moviegoers may now do the same.

That’s As It Is for today. I’m June Simms. Thanks for joining us.

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Have a great evening!