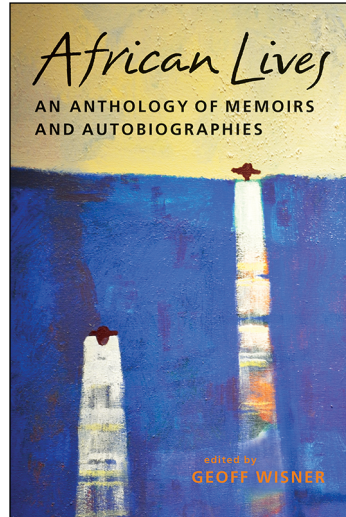


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**African Lives:
An Anthology of Memoirs
and Autobiographies**

edited by
Geoff Wisner

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Introduction

In 1962, London publisher Heinemann launched its African Writers Series with the one African book that everyone seems to know, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In the years that followed, orange-emblazoned Heinemann paperbacks brought attention to many African writers throughout the English-speaking world.

More recently, writers from Africa have broken free of what Wole Soyinka once called the "orange ghetto." (In 2009 the mantle of the series passed from Heinemann to Penguin, another publisher known for the color orange.) African novelists win major awards, and each year seems to bring a new collection of short stories from Africa—yet there has never been a collection of the continent's extraordinary true-life narratives. Why?

One reason may be that fiction enjoys greater prestige than nonfiction. In 2009, a panel at the PEN World Voices Festival asked the question, "Is nonfiction literature?" Panelist Philip Gourevitch noted that although Nobel Prize winners such as V. S. Naipaul have sometimes written extraordinary nonfiction, no one has yet won the prize for literature on the strength of his or her nonfiction. (He was forgetting Winston Churchill, a special case.) Nonfiction, said Gourevitch, seems to be wedged into the cracks of the literary scene. Like photography before the mid-twentieth century, it is not yet taken seriously as an art form.

So tempting is the prestige of fiction that some African memoirs have appeared in the guise of novels, including Camara Laye's *The Dark Child* and Yasmina Khadra's *The Writer*. (A chapter from *The Writer* has been translated from the French for this anthology.) *A Life Full of Holes*, a Moroccan memoir told to Paul Bowles by Driss ben Hamed Charhadi, a pseudonym for Larbi Layachi, continues to appear as a novel, though

Bowles in his own autobiography admits that its publisher labeled it a novel so that it would be eligible for a prize.

Despite all that the African Writers Series has done to advance the awareness of African writing, it has also furthered the impression that the memoirs of Africans are something other than literature. The series contains only a few works of nonfiction, and these were apparently chosen for their political and sociological interest. They include the memoirs of ex-slave Olaudah Equiano and of the first generation of African heads of state: Kenneth Kaunda, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nelson Mandela.

Though politicians are seldom known for their prose style, the men and women who ended white rule in Africa have extraordinary stories to tell, and they often tell them with surprising sensitivity. One of these is Maurice Nyagumbo, a guerrilla leader and friend of Robert Mugabe, who became a Zimbabwean government minister. In 1989 he committed suicide, swallowing rat poison after he was implicated in a scandal over the misallocation of cars. The following year, I saw his grave at Heroes Acres, outside Harare, where prominent veterans of the liberation struggle are buried. Unlike other cronies of Mugabe, Nyagumbo apparently had a conscience. Back home, I found Nyagumbo's memoir, *With the People*, on a shelf deep in the stacks of Harvard's Widener Library and was struck by its freshness and honesty. His memories of himself as a frightened young boy, left out in a field to scare away baboons, lingered in my memory—perhaps because one sunny afternoon in rural Zimbabwe I was asked to wait at the edge of a hot field and throw stones at any baboons that might come to raid the sunflowers. The baboons never arrived.

Many of Africa's leading writers have published extraordinary memoirs in recent years—and some have published series of memoirs. *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* is the latest in several installments of the life story of Wole Soyinka. Others include *The Man Died*, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, *İsarà: A Voyage Around "Essay,"* and *Ibadan: The Penkeleemes Years*. J. M. Coetzee has won acclaim for the semiautobiographical books that began with *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* and continued with *Youth* and *Summertime*. Years after the publication of his prison diary, *Detained*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explored his childhood memories in *Dreams in a Time of War*.

These books are the latest examples of a tradition that began centuries ago. In *African Lives*, I reach back as far as Ibn Battuta, the fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler. Arriving in India, Ibn Battuta is given two thousand dinars by the emperor's vizier, who tells him, "This is to enable you to get your clothes washed." His embarrassment can still be felt. I could have gone back even farther, to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine,

where the future saint describes his guilt about stealing pears as a boy in what is today Algeria.

As these examples show, a memoir does not always appear under that designation. A first-person travel book may be more revealing of the author than of the place, and more worthy of the name memoir, than a book identified as “memoir” on the cover. Most of the selections in *African Lives* come from full-length memoirs and autobiographies, but in an effort to include more distinctive or significant voices, I have stretched the definition of memoir to encompass an interview with Ousmane Sembène, a speech by Patrice Lumumba, and court testimony by Steve Biko. I have also included some autobiographical essays by exceptional writers who are too young to be recalling their lives in full: Chris Abani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Laila Lalami, Jamal Mahjoub, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, and others.

I have made room for hard-to-find gems by leaving out works that are more readily available, with some regret. Their omission from this book should not prevent anyone from reading the memoirs of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, or *The Dark Child* by Camara Laye, a classic account of childhood suffused with piercing nostalgia for a traditional world that is slipping away. Nor should readers overlook Olaudah Equiano’s classic memoir *The Interesting Narrative*, Assia Djebar’s haunting *Algerian White*, Nega Mezlekia’s harrowing *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly*, or Zakes Mda’s funny and rambunctious *Sometimes There Is a Void*. Wangari Maathai’s *Unbowed* and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s *This Child Will Be Great* are essential volumes in the story of African women’s empowerment. The journey described by Tété-Michel Kpomassie in *An African in Greenland* is one that few novelists could have imagined.

So many dramatic life stories have emerged from the struggle against apartheid that they would make an absorbing anthology of their own. The compelling story, clean prose, and calm intelligence of Nelson Mandela’s *No Easy Walk to Freedom* make it one of the best political memoirs I know. Others worth seeking out include *Island in Chains* by Indres Naidoo, *My Traitor’s Heart* by Rian Malan, and *Country of My Skull* by Antjie Krog.

The best African memoirs, like the best memoirs from anywhere in the world, are literature, but they are a kind of literature that is complicated by social and political dimensions. If the costs of speaking plainly were not so severe in many parts of Africa, more memoirs might have been written and published, and there might be fewer novels in which real tyrants and real countries are veiled with invented names.

More than African fiction, African memoirs demand that we come to terms with what individual Africans really think. These memoirs question

our assumptions. They demand that we consider the truth of what we are being told. And in some cases, they pose questions of authenticity that do not arise so sharply in the world of fiction.

For obvious reasons, many African memoirs are stories of struggle and suffering, and many of these are “as told to” books. Because it is impossible to know how much these books owe to their coauthors, I have omitted them from this collection, with a few exceptions.

Nearly every writer included in *African Lives* was born and raised on the continent. The selections are arranged to follow the map of Africa as you would read a page in a book: top to bottom and left to right, beginning with North Africa and continuing through West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa. Within each region, the selections are in alphabetical order by country. Within each country, they are arranged chronologically, according to the date of the events described.

By a happy accident, *African Lives* begins in childhood, with Mohammed Dib’s memories of growing up in Algeria. It ends in maturity and exile, on a note of leave-taking, as Chenjerai Hove writes to his mother in Zimbabwe from his new home in Norway. Between these two voices, I hope you will find many more to challenge, inspire, and enlighten you.