



One Writer's Beginnings: Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Review by Geoff Wisner — Published on March 29, 2010

Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Pantheon, 256 pages, 24.95.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, born in Kenya in 1938, is one of the best-known writers of sub-Saharan Africa. He is also the most prominent advocate of the position that African writers should write in their indigenous languages—a position he adopted when he was well into his career.

In 2006, Ngũgĩ published *Wizard of the Crow*, his first novel in more than twenty years. Weighing in at almost 800 pages, this was an extended political satire set in the mythical African state of Aburiria. With the help of aides who have had their eyes and ears surgically enlarged to spy out enemies of the regime, a dictator known only as the Ruler sets out to construct the world's tallest building. Though widely praised, the novel attracted double-edged adjectives: sprawling, daunting, fantastical, surreal, scatological, didactic. (All of these, in fact, appeared in a review by the Sierra Leone author Aminatta Forna, though she wound up by calling the book “probably the crowning glory of Ngũgĩ's life's work.”)

With *Dreams in a Time of War*, Ngũgĩ returns to a quieter and more intimate vein, much more similar in tone to early, English-language novels like *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*.

The book begins on an April day in 1954. Ngũgĩ is sixteen years old. He has had a bowl of porridge for breakfast, then run six miles to school, where he would typically spend the lunch hour reading a book under a tree to distract himself because he has nothing to eat for lunch. Today he is reading an abridged copy of *Oliver Twist*, with a drawing of young Oliver, bowl in hand, asking “Please sir, can I have some more?”

After school, at a crossroads near the local shoe factory, Ngũgĩ and other boys listen to some men telling stories about another man who was arrested near the Indian shops. Handcuffed and loaded in the back of a truck, the man managed to break away and zigzag through the shops, dodging bullets, before reaching a ridge of land and disappearing into a tea plantation. Only when he reaches home does Ngũgĩ learn that the hero of this exciting story is his own big brother Wallace.

In only six pages, the major themes of this memoir are sounded: the boy's poverty, his love of books, his fascination with performance and the art of storytelling, the eruption of politics and violence into his life, his awakening sympathy for the oppressed, and his admiration for his brother.

Following this scene, Ngũgĩ goes back in time, describing the world of his parents and his earliest memories. In simple, pure language, Ngũgĩ relates his earliest years with a kind of tender concern for his childhood self. A few pages about the games he played with other boys are reminiscent of Camara Laye's classic memoir *Black Child*:

Like children everywhere, I imagined airplanes. I would take a single dry blade of corn, an inch long and half an inch wide, and bore a hole in the middle through which I put a thin Y-shaped twig for steering. As I held the long end of the stick and ran against the wind the blade turned round and round, and the harder I ran the faster it spun. My brother made his own airplane the same way. We became pilots racing each other, making intricate aerial formations and maneuvers.

Quietly and unobtrusively, the author draws out the influences that will shape his literary work and his political views in the years to come. His sympathy for the weak and vulnerable comes early. He describes an eye infection that required a trip to Nairobi with his mother for surgery, and two half-sisters who were struck by lightning one day, one losing the ability to speak and the other becoming blind and lame. Crossing a field of pyrethrum (a local cash crop, whose flowers are used as a natural insecticide), Ngũgĩ is knocked down by a dog, which bites him above the ankle, "a bite that left a scar and lifelong fear of dogs." (Twice more in this book he notes accidents that left scars on his body.) Experiencing how it feels to be hunted, he remembers a frightened hare that he and his friends had tried to catch and vows to leave the hares alone.

Ngũgĩ does not begin school until the age of nine, but he quickly excels and begins skipping grades. Already a lover of stories, his first primers in the Gikuyu language show him that books have their own magic. "I realize that even written words can carry the music I loved in stories, particularly the choric melody." He finds a copy of the Old Testament and is enthralled by the stories of Cain and Abel, of David and King Saul, and of Daniel in the lions' den. Traditional storytelling, book learning, and Christianity come together in a school recital, and he discovers how much he craves the chance to perform.

One event I always recall with heartache. I was in grade one when Teacher Joana selected me to join a performance group that would recite from memory the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew and another passage from Mark at the end-of-year assembly for students and parents. I committed the whole passages to memory. They were poetic. They were music. I looked forward to it. I dreamed about it. But on the day of performance I left home a little late. . . . The failure to perform left a hole in me, the need for a second chance to redeem myself to myself. For the duration of my stay in the school I always hoped that such a chance would present itself.

Ngũgĩ lives on the borderline of the traditional and the modern, dividing his time between his grandfather's traditional household, the assertively Christian home of a prominent local minister, and the home of his father, a farmer who considers himself a modern man. He is uniquely well positioned to observe how the political turmoil to come will play itself out in rural Kenya.

Unfortunately, Ngũgĩ's efforts to convey the nuances of the Kenyan liberation struggle come as unwelcome digressions from his personal story, and some of the explanations he puts in the mouths of characters are indigestible. The joy of working for liberation comes through best when Ngũgĩ writes about his beloved brother Wallace—"Good Wallace," as he is known.

Wallace's dedication to school rivals Ngũgĩ's own: "He had interesting study habits, especially before a test: He would work all night, with an open paraffin lantern, feet in a basin of cold water to keep him awake, but I suspect that the lack of sleep was not very conducive to good performance." Wallace is equally dedicated to the struggle

for independence, and Ngũgĩ conceives the idea that he might meet the great Jomo Kenyatta at his brother's woodworking shop.

I enjoyed these days of waiting for Kenyatta at my brother's workshop. I came to love the smell of wood, unvarnished or varnished. I liked shuffling through the wood shavings and the sawdust on the floor. I came to appreciate the muscular and imaginative demands of woodworking. I noted how meticulous my brother was with everything: designs and finishes. He would work on something, and just when I was sure he was done I would see him go at it over and over again till it achieved the refinement he wanted. Whatever he made was unique.

As the book goes on, Ngũgĩ's family suffers a devastating economic blow, and Ngũgĩ himself is exiled from his father's home. He learns to stand up to authority, and he witnesses the ugliness of a colonial regime clinging onto power.

By the end of the story, you understand the love of language and performance that drove Ngũgĩ to become a novelist and playwright. You see how he gained the deep understanding of rural life, political struggle, and the pains of modernization that can make his rural characters seem like Russian peasants, and bring echoes of Turgenev and Dostoyevsky to his early novels. You understand where the solemn biblical cadences of those books came from, and the respect for tradition and empathy for the downtrodden that continues to mark his work.

Geoff Wisner is the author of *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa*. He is currently editing an anthology of African memoirs.

