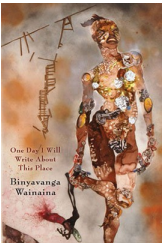


# One Day I Will Write About This Place □ by Binyavanga Wainaina

Review by Geoff Wisner — Published on September 6, 2011

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## REVIEWED:

**One Day I Will Write About This Place by Binyavanga Wainaina. Graywolf Press, 256 pages, 24.00.**

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The Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina is having a mixed-up career. A more typical author might publish a few novels, then found a literary magazine, win a prestigious award, publish his memoirs, and finally release a pungent essay describing how other authors should do their work.

Wainaina won the prestigious award first. In 2002, he was awarded the Caine Prize for African Writing for a piece called “Discovering Home.” Then he founded the magazine *Kwani?* (“so what?” in KiSwahili), which released its first issue in 2003. Next came the blistering essay “How to Write About Africa,” published in *Granta* in 2005. Now his first book has been published: not a novel, but a memoir called *One Day I Will Write About This Place*.

A mixed-up career, as it happens, is just what we should have expected. Though Wainaina was raised as a Gikuyu—like his famous countryman Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o—his mother’s people came originally from Rwanda and later resettled in Uganda. Binyavanga was named after a nickname of his grandfather’s, “which has something to do with mixing things up.”

Being Binyavanga is to me also exotic—an imaginary Ugandan of some kind resides in me, one who lets me withhold myself from claiming, or being admitted into, without hesitation, an unquestioning Gikuyu belonging.

Language and identity are at the center of this memoir. As its title suggests, it is a book about a writer finding his voice, and the struggle to define that voice was a central part of writing the book itself, which explains why it took a long time to complete. As Wainaina told Rob Spillman in *BOMB* magazine,

Seven years, man. Five, six years of many, many collapses. I wanted to try to write a riskier book. I felt like I’d been writing a lot of safe short stories for a while, and I wanted to go a bit crazy and take

some risks with form and language. I was feeling a little cramped with all these new expectations—you know, to write a big Africa book that fulfills the Postcolonial Condition and so on. . . . Finding a language for the imagination of childhood occupied me a lot. I wrote a lot that just wasn't working and it took me a long time to find the heart of the book, which ended up being more about playing with language than about Kenya.

The language of childhood is one of the book's most impressive accomplishments. Many authors of memoir describe their childhood selves from a distance, in the voice of an adult, as if the child were someone else. Others simplify their language in an attempt to simulate a child's voice—a method that risks oversimplifying and sentimentalizing the experience of childhood.

Wainaina does something different. He creates a language that mimics the mental workings of a smart, creative child who has not yet learned to censor himself, and whose brain is constantly generating unlikely ideas and comparisons. Like the unmediated impressions of a baby, described by William James as a “blooming, buzzing confusion,” the result is baffling and sometimes dazzling. Here he is at seven years old, waking up in the back of the family car after a day in the country.

My skin is hot, and Mum's soft knuckles nibble my forehead. I can feel ten thousand hot prickling crickets chorusing outside. I want to tear my clothes off and let my skin be naked in the crackling night. “Shhh,” she whispers, “shhh, shhh,” and a pink-tasting syrup rolls down my tongue, and Baba's strong arms are under my knees. I am pushed into the ironed sheets that are folded back over the blanket like a flap. Mum pulls them over my head. I am a letter, I think, a hot burning letter, and I can see a big stickysyrup-dripping tongue, about to lick and seal me in.

To judge from the number of pages he devotes to it, age twenty-four was a critical time for Wainaina. Living in South Africa, seemingly unable to finish college, he returns to his home in Kenya, then travels to Uganda to attend his grandparents' sixtieth wedding anniversary. This journey was the subject of his Caine Prize essay “Discovering Home,” and it is instructive to see how he reworks that material to create the centerpiece of his new memoir.

“Discovering Home” began entertainingly but tangentially with a going-away party in Cape Town.

There is always that point at a party when people are too drunk to be having fun; where strange smelly people are asleep on your bed; when the good booze runs out and there is only Sedgwick's Brown Sherry and a carton of sweet white wine; when you realize that all your flat-mates have gone and all this is your responsibility; when the DJ is slumped over the stereo and some *strange* person is playing “I'm a Barbie girl, in a Barbie Wo-o-orld” over and over again.

Wainaina cuts this for the book, beginning instead with several pages that offer an acute, impressionistic take on South Africa in the first postapartheid years.

If you look out of the window in the dry countryside of the rural homelands, you see not crops, not human life; you see discarded plastic, as far as your eye can see, Transkei daisies they are called, like the millions of drifting people who work and consume shiny products. In this bus are men in overalls, with scarred faces, bleary eyes, and lips burned to pink splotches, from liquor.

In reworking “Discovering Home,” Wainaina makes his narrative deeper, more personal, more nuanced, and more

relevant to his impressions at the time. As one example, he leaves out this aside, which reads like an outtake from “How to Write About Africa.”

Whenever I read something by some White writer who stopped by Kenya, I am astounded by the amount of game that appears for breakfast at their patios and the snakes that drop into the baths and the lions that terrorise their calves. *I have seen one snake in my life.* I don’t know anybody who has ever been bitten by one.

Wainaina also deletes some adolescent paragraphs about the appeal of Baganda women. “Baganda women see their hips as great ball bearings, rolling, supple things moving in lubricated circles . . .” One sign that his motive isn’t prudishness is that a little earlier he adds a few words that underline the sexual tension in his conversation with a Masai girl. “Her breasts are sharp and bounce around under a T-shirt, quite indifferent to their effect.”

Other people, including the author’s family, take on more detail and dimension than they had in “Discovering Home.” We see Wainaina not only through his own eyes but through those of people who are concerned about him. Following a paragraph from “Discovering Home” that begins, “Mum looks tired and her eyes are sleepier than usual,” Wainaina digs deeper.

We sit, in the dining room, and talk from breakfast to lunch. Every so often she will grab my hand and check my nails. She will lick a spot off my forehead and smooth my eyebrows. She stands to clear the table. She is swiveling her radar, like she used to when we were children, half-asleep, shuffling softly in her caftan, and walking around, after feeling disturbed by something intangible. We wander and chat, and things gather to some invisible assessment inside her, and she turns, sharp and certain, and says, “You smoke.”

Most importantly, Wainaina introduces concepts to this central narrative that become leitmotifs for the book as a whole. One is the word *kimay*, which he invents as a child to describe the sounds of the languages he hears but cannot speak: “Ki-kiyu, Ki-Kamba, Ki-Ganda, Ki-sii, Gujarati . . .” The language of his people, Gikuyu, he realizes later, has become *kimay* as well, “a phantom limb.” Talking with the Masai girl, he struggles with language, realizing they cannot speak of intimate matters in streetwise Sheng without false bravado, and cannot speak of them in English at all.

The author’s homecoming marks an important point in his journey toward becoming a writer. “All this time, without writing one word, I have been reading novels, and watching people, and writing what I see in my head, finding shapes for reality by making them into a book.” And by the end of his visit, at a church service where his relatives surround him, these impulses come together in the promise to himself that gives its name to the book: “One day I will write about this place.”

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

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