



You Must Set Forth at Dawn

Wole Soyinka

Download now

Read Online ➞

You Must Set Forth at Dawn

Wole Soyinka

You Must Set Forth at Dawn Wole Soyinka

The first African to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, as well as a political activist of prodigious energies, Wole Soyinka now follows his modern classic *Ake: The Years of Childhood* with an equally important chronicle of his turbulent life as an adult in (and in exile from) his beloved, beleaguered homeland.

In the tough, humane, and lyrical language that has typified his plays and novels, Soyinka captures the indomitable spirit of Nigeria itself by bringing to life the friends and family who bolstered and inspired him, and by describing the pioneering theater works that defied censure and tradition. Soyinka not only recounts his exile and the terrible reign of General Sani Abacha, but shares vivid memories and playful anecdotes—including his improbable friendship with a prominent Nigerian businessman and the time he smuggled a frozen wildcat into America so that his students could experience a proper Nigerian barbecue. More than a major figure in the world of literature, Wole Soyinka is a courageous voice for human rights, democracy, and freedom. *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* is an intimate chronicle of his thrilling public life, a meditation on justice and tyranny, and a mesmerizing testament to a ravaged yet hopeful land.

From the Hardcover edition.

You Must Set Forth at Dawn Details

Date : Published March 13th 2007 by Random House Trade Paperbacks (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780375755149

Author : Wole Soyinka

Format : Paperback 528 pages

Genre : Cultural, Africa, Nonfiction, Western Africa, Nigeria, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Literature, African Literature

 [Download You Must Set Forth at Dawn ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online You Must Set Forth at Dawn ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online You Must Set Forth at Dawn Wole Soyinka

From Reader Review You Must Set Forth at Dawn for online ebook

Amy says

Wole Soyinka is a Nobel Prize winner in Literature. Much of the book is about Nigerian political history and the author's part in it, but the part I enjoyed the most involved his cross cultural experiences in the USA. On roadkill: "The Chicago experience remained my introduction to the wastrel habit of American drivers after they have been victims of assault by rampaging game. A little more education, and such drivers would know that there was only one explanation for such 'accidents' -- they are a gift from Ogun and should be honored as such, atop a funeral pyre to the accompanying music of popping corks and roasting peppers." p. 289

Kasabiiti Ntambirweki says

Every African school needs to teach us more about our Pan-African heroes! What a man!

Jeff Brailey says

I knew of Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. The highly respected and prodigious poet, playwright, novelist and essayist was in self-exile when I first came to Nigeria in 1995. It wasn't until the despotic dictator, Sani Abacha, who put a price on the professor's head, died, and the nation was restored to the democracy it barely had an opportunity to foster since the colonial state became a sovereign country in 1960, that Soyinka dared set foot in his homeland again.

The controversial scholar became a symbol of freedom to Nigerians living too long under the oppressive rule of tyrant after dictatorial tyrant. Just as the man was a symbol, so became his trademark white afro and beard, to the man himself. Soyinka steadfastly refused to cut the thing that made him most visible to his detractors – his hair.

Yet, in order to travel during his exile, the professor resorted to wearing different disguises to fool Abacha's henchmen who were constantly on a global search to secure Soyinka's permanent silence. He had several different personas he replaced himself with. Using elaborate costumes and make up, he was, at different times a diamond merchant from Sierra Leone, a heavy rasta character and a turbaned Malian.

I met Wole Soyinka in a most serendipitous way. In late June, 2006, I was flying on Air France's daily flight from Paris to Lagos. Sitting in front of me was a distinguished looking African gentleman. He had a big white Afro and, at least from behind, reminded me of the pictures I had seen of Soyinka. Then, as I turned the page of the June 26, 2006 international edition of Time that I was reading, I saw a photo of the man himself. He and the gentleman sitting in front of me were the same person.

Folding my magazine so his story was on the outside, I approached him and asked, "Would you please sign my magazine. My wife will never believe I met Wole Soyinka if you don't."

Mr. Soyinka smiled, waved away my offer of a pen, took the magazine and autographed the top of the page with the pen in his pocket. As he handed me the Time back, I told him it was an honor and he replied, "Nice

meeting you,” or words to that effect. A brief meeting with one of the world’s greatest living writers, but it had a profound effect. To my shame, I don’t recall ever reading any of Soyinka’s works. But the man exuded an invisible essence that made me feel he’s lived experiences I never will nor would ever want to. He also looked like a sage, someone with wisdom far greater than any I will ever boast.

When I arrived home in July, I showed my prized Time to my wife, who is a journalist and writer. A few days later I tried to locate Soyinka’s newest book, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, a memoir that covers much of the author’s adult life. I finally had to have Barnes & Noble order it.

Wole Soyinka has penned one of the most extraordinary memoirs I ever read. In his writings, a giant of a man is revealed, one who, in his 70s, could yet change Nigeria for the better.

Twenty-one years ago, Wole Soyinka became Africa’s first Nobel Laureate. That honor was celebrated by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in a literary fiesta at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, on August 25 and 26, 2006. This international colloquium, designed to celebrate Soyinka’s Nobel Prize, also examined trends in Africa’s contemporary literary exploits.

The Nobel Prize has brought much honor and respect not only to the recipient but to the country he was born in. Nigerians, at one time, seriously wanted him to run for the highest office in the land, the presidency. He has always refused to run for election for any office. Soyinka does wield a lot of weight both inside and outside politics and government and his opinions are highly sought.

D says

Eye-opening account of life in Nigeria.

"To all the fallen in our common cause,
and to the surviving, scars and all, clamorous or hidden.

.....

To all my stoically resigned children.

.....

And to my wife, Adefolake, who, during the
season of a deadly dictatorship, demoted me
from the designation of Visiting Professor to that
of Visiting Spouse, but was still left with only an
Invisible Spouse as I was swallowed by
my study even during visiting hours."

IBA -- For Those Who Went Before.

.....

Outside myself at moments like this, heading home, I hesitate a moment to check if it is truly a living me. Perhaps I am just a disembodied self usurping my body, strapped into a business-class seat in the plane, being borne to my designated burial ground -- the cactus patch on the grounds of my home in Abeokuta, a mere hour's escape by road from the raucous heart of Lagos.

.....

It must be, of course, the coincidence of the airline that triggers such a somber recollection, in the main --

that final homecoming for Femi was also on a Lufthansa flight.

.....

I most confidently expected him to outlive the rest of us and would often say so. That was careless; I should have remembered the Nigerian killer factor. Simply defined, it is the stressful bane of the mere act of critical thought within a society where power and control remain the playthings of imbeciles, psychopaths, and predators.

.....

One month after the death of Sani Abacha, in the presence of a delegation of US officials -- Thomas Pickering, a former ambassador to Nigeria; Susan Rice, President Bill Clinton's Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; and others -- Abiola was served the cup of tea that has now attained legendary status in the nation, for he suffered a seizure minutes after that cup, collapsed, and died.

Had polygamy survived? Maybe it could produce objective criteria for evaluation a social philosophy that contrasted so profoundly with serial polygamy, as practiced in the 'progressive' Western world.

.....

How would one summarize Fela? Merely as a populist would be inadequate. Radical he certainly was, and often simplistically so. Lean as a runner bean, a head that sometimes struck me as a death mask that came to life only onstage or in an argument -- more accurately described as a serial peroration, since he was incapable of a sustained exchange of viewpoints, especially in politics. Only Fela would wax a record according heroic virtues to such an incompatible trio as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sekou Toure of Guinea, and oh yes, indeed -- Idi Amin Dad, the terror of Uganda. It was sufficient for my cousin that, at one time or the other, they had all challenged, defied, or ridiculed an imperial power -- any voice raised in denunciation of the murders by Idi Amin or the torture cages of Sekou Toure was the voice of a Western stooge, CIA agent, or imperialist lackey. There were no grays in Fela's politics of black and white.

.....

The simplest way to put this, therefore, is perhaps that death, in those early days, had a sense of proportion -- death knew its place.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers...

.....

Traveller, you must set forth

At dawn

I promise marvels of the holy hour...

.....

"To keep Nigeria one / Justice must be done."

.....

I continued to sweat out that lethal question: *What would I have done?*

.....

Such dehumanization of the populace did not take place only at checkpoints that were formally manned, but these were the most public places, and their audiences were guaranteed to cover the entire gamut of civil life. Day by day, civil society endured, witnessed, and passed on the message. The uncertainty with which a traveler set out in the morning, deprived of the authority of office and security of the home, was a constant, debilitating companion. It preyed on innocence itself, instilling an irrational fear because of the irrationality of the lords of existence to whom an unintended slur, a gesture adjudged to be lacking in the respect that was due to the wielders of guns and horsewhips, could result in instant, public humiliation or worse.

And it spread and spread, and the culture was imbibed by a prostrate society, one governor and petty administrator striving to outdo the next in sadism. Secretariats were guaranteed regular captive spectators as

these were turned into stadia of blood sports masquerading as 'discipline.' And of course, to ensure that the lessons there were driven home, literally, state television and other media would be summoned in advance to capture and disseminate the images -- the spruced-up, ticktock, no-nonsense administrator, enforcing public discipline in set-up scenarios.

.....

It was rather like going to sleep in a familiar room, yet waking up each morning in the wrong neighborhood, a feeling that was undoubtedly aggravated by recollection of those months in solitary, difficult as they sometimes proved, in which one constituted the entirety of his world, undisturbed. I had not thought that the prison regimen could ever lay claim to leaving the inmate with more dignity than victims of the *dis'pline* in which civil society daily acquiesced.

.....

Interlude to a Friendship

.....

Looking back, it strikes me with some astonishment that, until his death in 1987, one constant, a large presence in the 'extracurricular' undertakings of my adult existence, was Olufemi Babington Johnson. Just who was this being?

.....

Femi's generosity was not limited to tributes to a friend.

.....

Or could he also have taken umbrage at my response when, accused of having 'sold out' to the military, I retorted, quite truthfully, that not even the entire Nigerian nation, with all its wealth, could afford me?

.....

Even in late 2002, the once-democratic constant, Ivory Coast, underwent the once-unthinkable -- a military coup!

.....

It boils down, ultimately, to one's personal confidence in determining the length of spoon with which one dines with the devil and one's ability to keep a firm hold on it. This involves deriving no advantages, no gains, no recompense in the process -- if anything, expending oneself both materially and mentally for the attainment of a fixed and limited goal, retaining one's independence of action. Most delicious of all is the ability to walk away from the dinner table, flinging a coin onto it as a tip for the host.

.....

Dining with the devil remains undeniably a mined board -- prone to misunderstanding, betrayal, public skepticism, getting the fingers nicely toasted, mud all over one's face, and so on.

.....

Nigerians had been brutalized -- deliberately -- by the new culture of public executions, dubbed, with gallows humor, "The Bar Beach Show," after a television show then current. Children were conspicuously present. Eighteenth-century England could not have boasted a more macabre occasion for public roistering.

JP Bekederemo-Clark, poet and playwright, Chinua Achebe, and I, often dubbed the 'elder statesmen' of Nigerian contemporary literature -- would make a publicized personal appeal to Babangida and the Ruling Council for the lives of the accused, based principally on the plea that the nation had had enough of killings and all future action should be directed a national healing.

.....

[It worked :)]

.....

George Bernard Shaw is reputed to have said, "I find it easy to forgive the man who invented a devilish instrument like dynamite, but how can one ever forgive the diabolical mind that invented the Nobel Prize in Literature?"

.....

I was persuaded that competitions in the world of creativity are meant for the young or the early adult, not for the mature, self-cognizant being.

.....

Sacrifice, preferably as a voluntary act, is part of communion.

Nathaniel says

Few figures in literary history have taken charge of their national development so bravely, so successfully and with such integrity. Wole Soyinka routinely risks his liberty and his life to oppose the decades-long tapestry of injustice in his home country of Nigeria. He does this while producing a well-respected body of dramatic works, moving and original poetry and seriously dense, generally autobiographical prose. Marvellously, amidst cruelly devised suffering and casualties, he moves away from cynicism and bitterness towards humor and celebration.

Various reviewers have faulted Soyinka's sometimes challenging syntax and vocabulary, the slow start of the book and his focus on Nigerian politics to the exclusion of detail-sharing about his own personal life. Let's take these criticisms in reverse order: Certainly, after 500 pages, I know much more about Sani Abacha, Babangida and Obasanjo than I do about Soyinka's various children who appear very rarely without warning for a paragraph or two and I don't know a single thing about any of the women that he sleeps with, nearly elopes with, falls in love with or marries. Wole Soyinka doesn't sell out a single one of his friends, colleagues, lovers or family members to make his narrative spicier or more accessible. Given the exceptional public stature that he enjoys in Nigeria, his silence about other living, younger Nigerians seems appropriate, loving and forgivable. Indeed, judging by the treatment that the majority of Nigerians receive in his memoir, you'd rather not show up on his radar. Thankfully, the intense drama both of his personal struggles and of his (inter)national ones does not need recourse to romance or interpersonal sentimentality.

"You Must Set Forth at Dawn" does get off to a bit of a halting start. I certainly made a few attempts (over nearly a year) before I got hooked and I didn't get swept away in world-ignoring fascination until the second half. If you aren't totally out-classed by Soyinka's learning and his form of self-expression; if your complaint is that he's moving too slowly or seems to be a bit disorganized (and not that you don't understand him), do yourself a big favor and stick with this book. I suspect that some of the narrative molasses derives from a sort of traditional structure that Soyinka confers upon his work, hinted at most obviously in the titles of the memoir's "parts." I don't really care how this structure works or what ceremony of invocation, praise, burial or commemoration might underlay it. But I do suspect that something of the kind is active and that its activity does not accelerate matters.

I would be inclined to a bit more critical of pacing and artifice; but I think that it has something to do with how Soyinka makes his memoir simultaneously a testimony to one of his closest friends. Soyinka's love and appreciation for Femi is touching and humanizing. Indeed the prominence of this unlikely friendship throughout the memoir is a wonderful tool for making Soyinka approachable. Femi, is jovial, practical and seemingly free from Soyinka's intensely cerebral characteristics and rage. The consistent strand of memorializing Femi throughout the narrative is selfless and beautiful; a wonderful example of how to share narrative space and celebrate friendship. But, I concede, "You Must Set Forth at Dawn" starts slow and stays slow for a little while. Proceed. In all likelihood you will read the last 200 pages in one sitting.

I believe there is also something convoluting Soyinka's syntax that is persistent enough throughout his prose writings that I have often wondered if it is not a grammatical influence of Yoruba. Soyinka's sentences sometimes (once every fifty pages or so) seem out of order; their punctuation at first suggesting a way of reading that will not even result in a complete sentence or thought. It doesn't happen too often; but it happens now and then—often in some of his double-barrelled, flights of lyricism. When it comes down to it, Soyinka is good enough at writing, intentional enough, deliberate enough and passionate enough about his communication that I think he deserves the extra effort and attention that some of his passages demand.

Yes, he overwrites. The dramatist and radio personality is evident, happy to be heard and glad to reaffirm his wisdom and authority. Ever since Soyinka first stepped into prose with "The Interpreters" he's shown that he clearly enjoys the freedom from poetry's exactitude and relatively minimalist precision that prose offers, but that he's brought along an intensely poetic insistence on freighting any pronouncement that he really believes in with as much weight, beauty or significance as it can bear—and sometimes more. And he really believes in the vast majority of his pronouncements. He is not an uncertain or indirect writer. It's fire and steel, something wryly, earthily hilarious, a bit of ozone and oxygen deprivation and then more fire and steel. Though, against that intimidating characterization it must be emphasized, that Soyinka's infectious and inspiring confidence tempers his assertiveness with an ever-present affirmation of life, of celebration. His love of wine, his willingness to smuggle a frozen civet cat via airplane into Europe for a banquet designed exclusively to cheer up some crestfallen countrymen, his glee at caper and intrigue, his distrust of those who cannot let loose and be wonderfully free, everything of this color and lightness suffuses the book and is one of the things that makes Soyinka exceptional. His is not a head held high out of stubbornness or self-righteousness, bitterness or simple will power. He is masterfully rooted, sure of the world and even of his nation, confident, it seems, that there will be more and more to celebrate and committed to playing his part in bringing about that preferable reality.

Some examples of Soyinka laying it on thick and lovely:

"The military had become enthroned as the new elite, and the level of fawning and jockeying to be merely noticed and smiled upon by any pretender in uniform already spoke of a nation that was loudly pleading to be crushed underfoot. The army was only too willing to oblige, the message ground into public consciousness—of young and old, big man and nonentity—that there was a new overlordship sprung to life in full formation, that the ragged boot of the lowest corporal rested permanently on that rung of the ladder where the hands of the civil engineer, the business tycoon, the university professor, the crowned head, and even the cleric competed for a hold that might eventually haul up the rest of the body one more step."

"There would come that moment when the mind revolted. I would look around, listen to the conversation around me—a pretentious note, perhaps, a preposterous proposition, an artificial ardor, a comfortable liberalism or armchair radicalism—and the wine would turn flat on my tongue, my mind would go blank, leaving only the rebuke: What are you still doing in this place?"

"It is only natural that a bond should exist among 'inferior' beings, a silent but palpable hostility toward overweening superbeings. It has to be this current of sympathy that transmits itself to the potential victim, and the greater the danger, the stronger the current. It is not so much that they speak directly to you, it is a language in their body, eloquent, effortlessly communicated to others with whom they share the bond of this imposed 'inferior' status. Since they know what is happening or what is about to happen, they emit a silent wave of despair or anguish, a deep resentment, and a sense of impotence. It flashes past you, and your antenna picks it up—I think that is all there is to it."

As Soyinka matures and grows stronger, as he becomes more resourced and focused, I had this wonderful

feeling that my narrator was rolling up his sleeves with the intent to kick ass and the vicarious thrill was exhilarating. I had never properly studied the complicated history of Nigeria; but learning it on the shoulders of a man who battled to preserve the best of his culture and to excise the various cancers that it (and many other nations) suffer was easily the best way that I have ever learned the history of anything. Unfortunately, I don't know where in the world to look for another figure like Soyinka, for anyone else that could pull me into the struggles of his country and make me believe in the thrilling wonderful privilege of celebrating a constant fight against injustice.

deb says

You Must Set Forth at Dawn: a crappy book. I admit... I read only the first 5 pages. But damnit! I read those 5 pages over and over and still never understood what the author was saying.

Wait wait wait wait... I just saw that I was the only a-hole who rated this one star. AND the author is a Nobel Prize winner for literature. Huh. Something to ponder.

Matt says

Wole Soyinka's memoirs have left me in an indifferent state. For the most part I felt his statements as too lengthy and wordy, his prose academically and intellectually. The facts from the history of Nigeria, as far as the author was directly involved, are certainly reproduced correctly, but I've never found a real connection to what was happening. Sometimes a little wit flashes through and you can feel the joy in telling stories, and at these points, I also noticed that this author can write, but those parts were way too few.

What also bothered me was the fact that his family got too little attention. His two wives and his children are rarely mentioned and mostly only in passing and I wonder why that is. I had the impression that the author is more interested in presenting himself. Although that's the ultimate reason to write a memoir, I think a little more modesty would have done the book certainly well. I'm sorry to say this, especially because I can subscribe to his political opinions almost 100%, and I am glad that this oppressed country Nigeria, where there was one dictatorship after another, has produced a highly successful and committed writer.

After all, this book has brought Nigeria a little closer to me and I can now see news from that country with different eyes.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

Marcy says

War and Peace by Tolstoy read like a primer compared to this book. After 50 pages of tiny font, I decided, (which I rarely do), not to waste my time reading any more...Wole Soyinka was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in Literature. I had to read every two or three sentences again to get the gist of the material. It is

a memoir of the writer. I admire Wole Soyinka as a man, as a fighter of justice, and never-ending ambition for the people of the countries of Africa to be independent from colonization and racial prejudice. I would have really liked to know and understand his story. I just did not have the stamina or growth mindset to continue reading a memoir that did not have to be so difficult to read. I rarely feel illiterate when it comes to reading and understanding novels. This was one of those frustrating experiences. I fully understand a child who does not like to read because books are just too hard to read. I want to just move on and read a plethora of books I have in store at my home that will bring me the love of reading I have developed over the many years I have been living.

Tayo says

Today at a friend's place, I found a signed copy of this book, I almost took it...lol! I love Wole Soyinka so much and can't wait to get the book. I'm reading it right after my friend because its a signed copy. Soyinka is a great man.

Rowena says

“Traveller, you must set forth
At dawn
I promise marvels of the holy hour...”

- Wole Soyinka

I knew a little bit about Soyinka, about the problems he'd encountered politically in Nigeria, which led to his exile. However, I had NO idea how crazy his experiences had actually been! Talk about intrigue! I'm actually quite surprised he survived all he experienced. And despite all his ordeals, he still managed to stay upbeat and witty.

The writing is very academic and challenging but it is well worth the perseverance. At times the language is lyrical and poetic. It's clear that Soyinka is a playwright; his writing style is very dramatic and engaging.

This is a great book for anyone interested in Nigerian history, which is quite turbulent, especially the Biafran war.

Alex says

"Some of us - poets - are not exactly poets. We live sometimes - beyond the word."

Wole Soyinka is a Nigerian Nobel Prize-winning playwright and poet, and that's just the beginning. The Guardian describes him as "the conscience of the nation." He spent almost two years in solitary confinement as a political prisoner in the 60s. He once seized a radio station by armed force to broadcast a rebel transmission. He's been asked twice to run for President. (He refuses, because it would require compromise.) Soyinka isn't an artist with activist tendencies; he's an activist with artistic tendencies. The quote above is a

warning. He's speaking to a man who casually mistook him for a poet, and as such, a victim of political persecution. Wole Soyinka is nobody's victim.

The hair is awesome but it's caused problems for Soyinka, who's found it hard to disguise himself when he's needed to go underground

So you won't find much in this memoir, about his creative process. You'll find almost nothing about his family. What you have instead is a sprawling history of modern Nigeria, and his place within it, which is substantial.

Some of his stories are terrific. Wole Soyinka once flew to Brazil in order to steal a Nigerian relic back from a private collector. Pulled it off, too! He jokes that maybe the plot of "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" was ripped off from his own life. I don't remember the plot of Temple of Doom, that movie sucks, but this story is awesome.

Here's the piece, Ori Olokun

These great stories are scattered, and the connecting tissue isn't great. There are a lot of names and events; I couldn't keep them straight. He indulges in some score-settling and some humble bragging along the way. It took me a long time to read *You Must Proceed at Dawn*; it doesn't particularly have a plot, so I wasn't fully engaged. Ake: The Years of Childhood is his most famous book, and maybe an easier read; I couldn't get my hands on it. I've also heard good things about his prison journal, The Man Died.

Soyinka's muse is Ogun, the "creative-combative deity," the "Yoruba god of the restless road and creative solitude, the call of the lyric and the battle cry." It's been suggested that he is possessed by Ogun's spirit; why else has he continually put himself in harm's way?

I googled Ogun and found this, wtf

Well, because he lives beyond the word. This book isn't great, but he is; I'm glad I got to know him a little.

Lanre Ogundimu says

I expected a master piece from a mastermind in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, and I was not disappointed. Indeed, I got value for the money and time I spent on this engaging memoir by Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka.

The author has been one of the prominent actors in the political and socio-economic journey of Nigeria. He was a leading player in the western Nigeria uprising of 1964-65 in which he hijacked a radio station in Ibadan. He was active in the Nigerian civil war, for which he was imprisoned. And he was a thorn in the flesh of several military and democratic rulers in Nigeria.

However, the book is not only about Soyinka's political battles and rascality particularly in Nigeria and Africa, but also about his core beliefs, such as justice, freedom, honor, and merit. And he is passionate about

true friendship, as illustrated by his profuse dedication and homage to a late friend, Olufemi Babington Johnson (OBJ).

Soyinka is intellectually mischievous and intelligently deviant. The book is filled with riveting episodes and anecdotes about his student days in England; acquaintance with literary giants, including British philosopher Bertrand Russell; falling in love with a dancer in Havana, Cuba; clandestine diplomatic shuttles around the world; dinners with world leaders in many countries, including with Nelson Mandela and Francois Mitterrand in Paris; an encounter with President Bill Clinton; and a quiet lunch in Israel with Shimon Peres, when he was no longer Israeli Prime Minister.

However, as I read the book, these words continue to ring in my head: Whose spy is Wole Soyinka? Which foreign governments are his paymasters? His connection with security agents is mystifying. Often, he is ahead of people who are after his life, thanks to his informants in government and security agencies. Sometimes, he is so comfortable strolling on the streets of major world capitals, and at other times, he is undercover because members of a roving death squad are after him all over Europe and America.

How did Soyinka know of a secret telephone in the wardrobe of Olusegun Obasanjo, then Officer Commanding Western Zone of the Nigerian Army in the 1960s? Obasanjo, who later became Nigeria's military head of state, and a democratic president, never knew the telephone existed in his own bedroom until Soyinka called him on the telephone box. That shows the level of Soyinka's influence even in the military intelligence corps.

But as I immersed myself in the book and followed some daring sagas and daredevil acts by the author, the answer unfurled. Soyinka is nobody's 'spook.'

Whether he is on a fact-finding and exploratory visit to Bekuta, a slave settlement in Jamaica inhabited by descendants of the Egbas who might have migrated from Abeokuta in Ogun State, western part of Nigeria; or in Bahia, Brazil to retrieve a stolen artifact; Soyinka exhibited a kamikaze mind-set difficult to comprehend superficially. But as I reflected deeply, I understood that he follows and holds tenaciously to any cause he truly cherishes. I call that, passion.

My best chapter in the book is, Olori-Kunkun and Ori-Olokun. The chapter is vintage Soyinka. For me, this encapsulates his nature. Ori-Olokun is a "long-lost" bronze head of a principal Yoruba deity stolen from a courtyard in Ife, the cradle of Yoruba civilization. Soyinka traced the relic to Bahia in Brazil, with the intention of stealing it from the home of a private art collector and returning it to its due place in Africa. But a surprise awaited him.

The book has vivid plots, characters and dialogues. And I wonder if Soyinka wrote in a diary many of the events and people he described profoundly in the book. But that is not so, because he explained in the acknowledgement section that he didn't keep such a diary.

I was so sucked into the scenery which came alive as he ran from Oyo State in Nigeria to the Republic of Benin through the bush on the way to exile. As I read this divine escape, I was transported to the thick forest, dodging the branches of trees which lashed and lacerated the author as he sat precariously on a motorbike on a moonless night.

I was able to follow the entire book without being lost in some sections which have winding details and numerous digressions. Soyinka used digression copiously to create suspense, to espouse his beliefs or engage in reflective thinking. I am not sure if this style will not put off some impatient readers.

Despite this, I truly enjoyed the book. Not only once, but twice, I read it.

Amaka Lily says

So, this is a wonderful book written by my countryman, Wole Soyinka, the brilliant, lyrical, and the first African to receive the Nobel prize in Literature.

This book is essentially a history of Nigeria. It was amazing to know that Wole Soyinka has been part of the changes Nigeria has experienced, pretty much from the beginning. He includes maps of Nigeria, from when it was made up of regions, then states, then even more states. It also details how he escaped death from the hands of our ex dictator, Abacha, among other interesting info.

It is a wonderful read.

The only issue is language. I am a native English speaker, but I had to refer to the dictionary multiple times to understand what he was saying. It slowed my reading. This is something Wole Soyinka is known for. He does not write in simple English that's easily accessible to the common man. He writes on a very advanced level and I think that it could deter others from reading.

Overall, great book and actually Reference material for the history of Nigeria.

James F says

Soyinka has written several autobiographical works, beginning with *Aké* about his childhood, which I read earlier this year. This book begins after he has finished his formal education and is beginning his career. There are two aspects of Soyinka, as a poet and playwright (the way he probably best known to the general public outside Nigeria, especially since winning the Nobel Prize in Literature) and as a political activist against the various military dictatorships. This is almost entirely about the political Soyinka, with virtually nothing about his plays.

I had recently read his *Open Sore of A Continent*, a political polemic which contained much recent Nigerian history. This is less polemical, more focused on his own activities, but has even more history, going back to the first years after Nigerian independence and covering the period of the Civil War as well as the later years. It was very interesting; everything I had read previously about Nigeria was written by members of the Igbo ethnic group in the East of the country (the group which formed the core of the Biafran secession) while Soyinka belongs to the largest group, the Yoruba, in the West of the country, so his perspective is somewhat different, although both are in opposition to the ruling Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups from the North, who have a more conservative, semi-feudal social structure and are mainly Moslem.

Soyinka has been a leader in the struggles against the various military dictatorships; there is little here about his period in prison, probably because he wrote a separate book about that, but there is much about his activities in exile. The problem is that his politics seem to be mainly a question of supporting and maneuvering with various politicians. His analysis never really gets beyond eliminating the role of the

military in government and the domination of the North, and having a formal democracy with free elections and equality of the three regions. Certainly this is a necessary first step, but by itself it would hardly solve the problems of an underdeveloped country such as Nigeria. In respect of political analysis, the book is somewhat of a disappointment.

The writing is very vivid, but the narration is somewhat confusing because it skips around in time. One theme which runs through the whole book is his friendship with Femi Johnson.

Marcelle says

Full disclosure: I didn't finish this book.

Soyinka's writing has beautifully rich metaphors, and he provides an informative view of life in a post-colonial world. I enjoyed much of this memoir.

However, at times he meanders with lots of little anecdotes - short stories about famous authors, poets, playwrights, political activists, etc. After several of those tangents, I decided to stop the book. I don't think these little stories add to the book, and I'd prefer more descriptions of life in the new Nigeria and how he managed, and thrived, amidst the turmoil.
