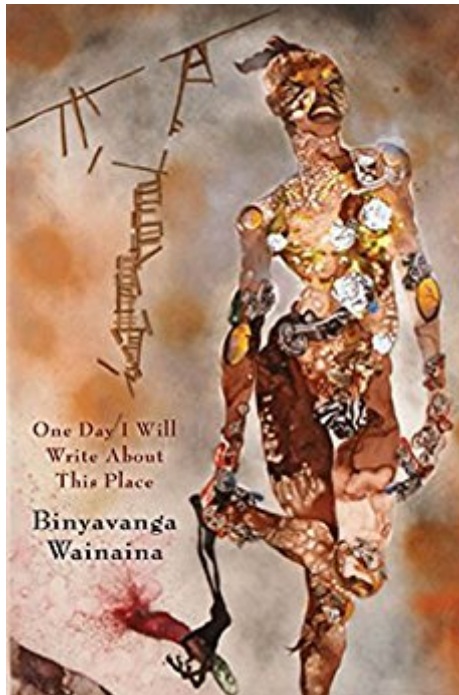




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One Day I Will Write About This Place: A Memoir



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book**A New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice**A Publishers Weekly Top Ten Book of the YearBinyavanga Wainaina tumbled through his middle-class Kenyan childhood out of kilter with the world around him. This world came to him as a chaos of loud and colorful sounds: the hair dryers at his mother's beauty parlor, black mamba bicycle bells, mechanics in Nairobi, the music of Michael Jackson – all punctuated by the infectious laughter of his brother and sister, Jimmy and Ciru. He could fall in with their patterns, but it would take him a while to carve out his own. In this vivid and compelling debut memoir, Wainaina takes us through his school days, his mother's religious period, his failed attempt to study in South Africa as a computer programmer, a moving family reunion in Uganda, and his travels around Kenya. The landscape in front of him always claims his main attention, but he also evokes the shifting political scene that unsettles his views on family, tribe, and nationhood. Throughout, reading is his refuge and his solace. And when, in 2002, a writing prize comes through, the door is opened for him to pursue the career that perhaps had been beckoning all along. A series of fascinating international reporting assignments follow. Finally he circles back to a Kenya in the throes of postelection violence and finds he is not the only one questioning the old certainties. Resolutely avoiding stereotype and cliché, Wainaina paints every scene in *One Day I Will Write About This Place* with a highly distinctive and hugely memorable brush.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I've looked forward to this book for a long time. Having read Binyavanga's writing and having heard him speak, I eagerly waited to see what a "full" book from him would look like. I haven't been disappointed. Binyavanga writes a heartfelt account of a middle class, book-loving Kenyan boy's growing up, from the 70s through to the 90s, a riotous period. In beautiful poignant language that evoked for me memories of my own childhood in West Africa, he explores issues of class, religion, politics, family and community, subtly and in an engaging manner. His travels take him to South Africa and Uganda, broadening our view; his chronicles enriched by his perceptive eye; I had worried that I would find this book too highbrow, but it is written in a deceptively simple language whose beauty had me catching my breath more than once, such as when he writes of "Congo music with wayward voices, thick as hot honey..." 6 years ago, Wainaina published the sharp satirical Granta piece, "How to Write About Africa" In his book, he presents a picture of an African boy growing up in its rich and varied complexity. Any criticisms? Sometimes he goes off on an almost other-worldly riff but even then, his writing is so evocative that I couldn't hold it against him. Wainaina has kept his promise.

Stung by the raw violence that clears wide swathes of the population every election season, Kenyans are waiting with bated breath for the next Kenyan General Election in 2012. Writers came together in the past to become the institutional memory of our tattered electoral process, and one of these Kenyan writer/editors, Binyavanga Wainaina has stepped in front of the drawn lines to tell his side of the story. In his book currently flying off the shelves and e-readers we meet, a Kenyan writer understanding Kenyanness. Selling swiftly as one of Oprah's 2011 Summer Reads and ranked 9th most popular memoir on at this posting, this book is billed as a telling of the stories of 'tribal unrest and Western influences on his homeland'. More than that, however, the story he tells, sometimes in rapid-fire fits and starts, becomes a loud voice portraying what many do know about him - writer, traveler and thinker; and what we do not really know very much about - son, student and comrade in culinary exploits and more. Opening this book, I found out many of the things that I know to be Kenyan were tattooed on its pages. The searing hatred by tribal lines that erupts every other year,

the delicate fabric of polite society in Kenya that he translates as the society that says "Who runs things. Who can. Who Can't, and Why not". Many times I could feel the tension running through, indicated in the consistent question Wainaina receives about what is his tribe, really, and why he has such a seemingly strange first name. And before that is answered, it also names the things that we value the most, land, and success - sadly two of the most elusive things for any Kenyan especially today. In a tale that meanders through Binyavanga's early years, and his coming of writing age, we start to understand why his unending thirst for books led him forward. It is scary that his book writing could have become another tome on Africa edited by development experts for appropriateness. How apt that while we heave a sigh as his life-story starts to take form, we cringe as we understand how writing about Africa, while wearing your African dress and your multilingual manner is so fraught with interference. Such is the path that Wainaina beats through his life, a life he continues to examine and put to paper. One of the most striking things about this book is that it does not follow the 'formulaic' way to write a memoir. There are no full-stops in the development of his thoughts. The characters are as vast and come dangerously close to being illegible. As I read it, I remembered only too well that when you start to write about those who have made a mark in your life in Africa, you have a rich cast of characters to represent. The author paints detailed portraits of his life, succeeding in extracting our stories and our own Kenyan roots in his wake. A riveting read from cover to cover.

When I think about describing this book the phrase, *utterly delicious*, comes to mind. Initially I had a hard time getting into the book. Wainaina has a unique way with language. While the story is linear, the prose is borderline stream of consciousness. Once I gathered in the rhythm of the language, the harmony emerged. Certain passages were pure umami tantalizing the brain much like a morel does the tongue. The Kenya described therein is an olio of languages. *"There are many understood ways to address someone: sometime you shift quickly into English; often you speak in a mock Kiswahili, in an ironical tone, simply to indicate that you are not dogmatic about language, that you are quite happy to shift around and find the bandwidth of the person to whom you are speaking."* The book is like this too. It weaves in little snippets of African languages that give you a feel of time and place. Many words seem to be a mash-up of English and a tribal language. This is a memoir. It is a coming-of-age story. It is a story of a troubled young man finding his way as writer, initially against his family's wishes. It is a story of Kenya after the British left and turmoil that ensued. It is a story of a land trying to overcome its tribal traditions, and

failing in many ways. It is a tale of a nation attempting to come into the 20th century Western world and not really succeeding with that either. Perhaps my picture of Africa comes from old movies, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and news clips from South Africa. Wainaina paints a much more nuanced picture that comes across as a kaleidoscope of images. I found myself underlining passages as I read. Either because the language was so rich, the imagery so beautiful, or it encapsulated a thought I found meaningful.

“After school, I spend a term at Kenyatta University, doing an education degree and majoring in French and literature in English. I am terrified I will end up becoming a schoolteacher. A fate worse than country music.”

• And another: “Everyone is doing the dombolo, a Congolese dance in which your hips (and only your hips) are supposed to move like a ball bearing made of mercury. To do it right, you wiggle your pelvis from side to side while your upper body remains as casual as if you were lunching with Nelson Mandela.”

• Some introspective moments: “I am afraid. If I write, and fail at it, I cannot see what else I will do. Maybe I will write and people will roll their eyes, because I will talk about thirst, and thirst is something people know already, and what I see is only bad shapes that mean nothing.”

• “Cloud travel is well and good when you have mastered the landings. I never have. I must live, not dream of living.”

• “He sounds tired. I wonder if I will ever manage to survive having children.”

• Like a book of poetry this is a book to put down for a while and then pick up and reread.

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