

Driesch # 9: One Day I Will Write About This Place

Review by Hans Durrer:

Binyavanga Wainaina: One Day I Will Write About This Place. Graywolf Press, Minneapolis 2011

“Harried reader, I save you precious time: skip this review and head directly to the bookstore for Binyavanga Wainaina’s stand-up-and-cheer coming-of-age memoir, “One Day I Will Write About This Place.” Although written by an East African and set in East and Southern Africa, Wainaina’s book is not just for Afrophiles or lovers of post-colonial literature. This is a book for anyone who still finds the nourishment of a well-written tale preferable to the empty-calorie jolt of a celebrity confessional or Swedish mystery.”, Alexandra Fuller wrote in the New York Times. Needless to say, this made me start reading this book with quite some expectations. Were they met? They weren’t. Still, this is a good book and definitely worth reading.

Because of its language, its humor, its freshness, its insights. I will come to that in a minute but let me first explain why my expectations were not met. I find detailed accounts of what happened, say, twenty or thirty years ago simply not credible (and also not very interesting). Moreover, I do not warm to made-up stories in “a memoir” – and to write one at the age of 40 a bit premature. On the other hand, I could have known that before starting the book (it is called a memoir, after all), so why complain?

After quite some pages into the book, I started to wonder whether others experienced a similar mix of boredom and fascination (I’ll come to it in a second) and learned in the Economist that “a lot of the book consists of previously published essays and travelogues”. That might partly explain why I did not feel drawn into this tome about the author’s Kenyan school days, his mother’s religious period, his failed attempts to study commerce in South Africa and his travels around Kenya.

Nevertheless, I came across lots of fabulous descriptions and insights. Here are some examples:

“Sometimes we like Moi because he fumbles, like all of us. He isn’t booming like Kenyatta, or polished and slick like Charles Njonjo. His English stumbles; his Kiswahili is broken and sincere. We have no idea what man and mind he is in his home language, Tugen. That is a closed world to the rest of the country outside his people. We are not curious about that world. We make a lot of jokes about him.”

“It is good to be home. There are potholes everywhere. Even the city center, once slick and international looking, is full of grime. People avoid each other's eyes ... Some people look at my budding dreadlocks and hurry away. I spell trouble: too loud looking and visible. A street kid gives me a rasta salute, and I grin back at him as he disappears between people's legs, a bottle of glue in his mouth, his feet bare and bleeding.”

“If there is a courtesy every Kenyan practises, it is that we don't question each other's contradictions; we all have them, and destroying someone's face is sacrilege. If South Africans seek to fill the holes in their reality through building a strong political foundation, we spend a lot of time pretending our contradictions do not exist.”

When travelling around Kenya, he comes across “a sign on one of the dusty roads that branches off from the highway, a beautifully drawn picture of a skinny red bird and notice with an arrow: Gruyere.” Since Gruyère is the name of a Swiss town and a famous cheese, I wondered what this was all about. Binyavanga Wainaina was equally curious and decided to investigate. After a twenty minutes drive on a dusty road, he reaches a tiny village center. “Three shops on each side, and in the middle a large quadrangle of beaten-down dust on which three giant wood carvings of giraffes sit, witing for transport to the curio markets in Nairobi. There doesn't seem to be anybody about. We get out of the car and enter Gruyere, which turns out to be a pub.” The owner is Swiss, his wife is Kamba. “We chat, and when I ask her what brought her husband to Mwingi, she laughs. 'You know Europeans always have strange ideas. He is a mKamba now; he doesn't want anything to do with Europe.’”

Binyavanga Wainaina

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