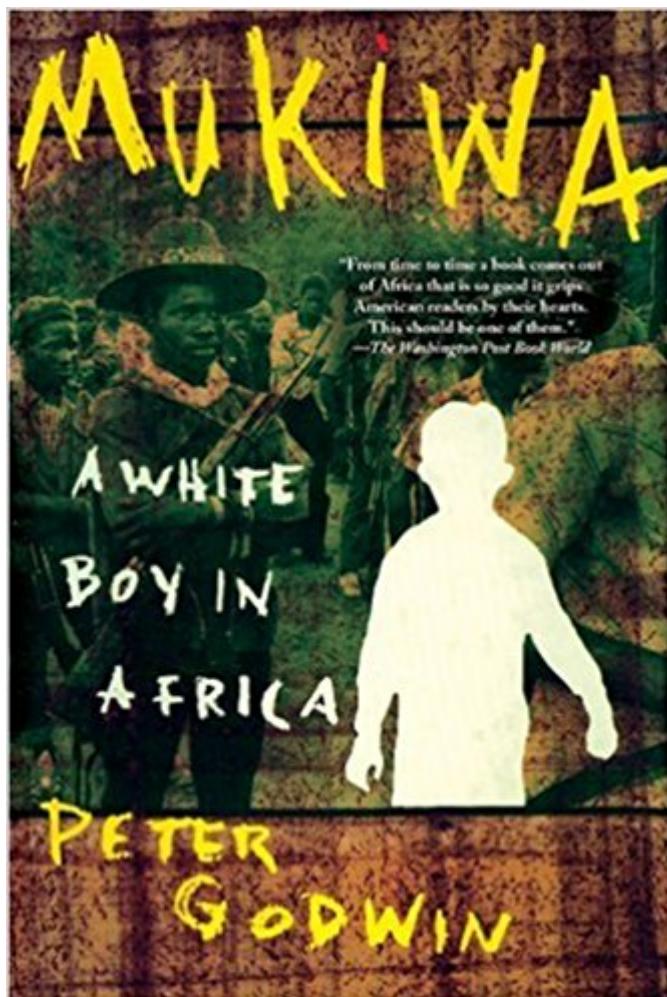


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Mukiwa: A White Boy In Africa



Synopsis

Mukiwa opens with Peter Godwin, six years old, describing the murder of his neighbor by African guerillas, in 1964, pre-war Rhodesia. Godwin's parents are liberal whites, his mother a government-employed doctor, his father an engineer. Through his innocent, young eyes, the story of the beginning of the end of white rule in Africa unfolds. The memoir follows Godwin's personal journey from the eve of war in Rhodesia to his experience fighting in the civil war that he detests to his adventures as a journalist in the new state of Zimbabwe, covering the bloody return to Black rule. With each transition Godwin's voice develops, from that of a boy to a young man to an adult returning to his homeland. This tale of the savage struggle between blacks and whites as the British Colonial period comes to an end is set against the vividly painted background of the mysterious world of South Africa.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa*, Peter Godwin, a journalist for the London Sunday Times, recalls his privileged childhood growing up in white-ruled Rhodesia, his unwitting participation in the savage status quo and his later efforts to support a black-ruled Zimbabwe. After being drafted by the army to suppress black unrest, he escaped to England and attended university. Upon his return, he found a country rife with ethnic conflict, anger and shame, yet risked his life to expose numerous injustices before he was forced to flee the country. Later, as a journalist, he witnessed not only the government's massacres of ethnic minorities but the gradual settlement into peace. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

With humor, portent and melancholy, Godwin (Rhodesians Never Die) recreates his 1960s youth in white Rhodesia. The son of relatively liberal whites, Godwin, through family servants, gained a sense of black African culture, language and religion. His mother, a doctor, helped African women with contraception; Godwin, in one of his wistful flash-forwards, observes that after the country became Zimbabwe, the government saw family planning as racist-but women in this still patriarchal society mutinied. He describes his strange private school—"racial enlightenment within a system of extreme conservatism"—and how he learned, in a job at his father's mine, that he fit in neither with racially unquestioning whites nor with restive blacks. As a policeman sworn to defend his renegade homeland against black guerrillas seeking independence, Godwin found himself pained by guerrilla cruelties to civilians, but shamed by his own role in arresting local leaders. Godwin soon concluded that a black victory was inevitable, and escaped the deepening war for studies in England, trailed by bad dreams. When he returned three years later as a lawyer and journalist, he experienced some peace—a black soldier he met absolved him offhandedly. However, his efforts to uncover the new government's human rights abuses led him to be declared an enemy of the state. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

And that is the effort to create a modestly functioning black government anywhere. (Godwin goes on to write a couple more books about that very topic, among them—*The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe*. They are just expansions on African savagery/ brutality/ corruption/ governing incompetence) This book is three in one: 1. Childhood and years in boarding school. 2. Years being trained and in the military. 3. Years after the country goes over to black rule and Godwin becomes an exile. The first thing is that this author needs a glossary for all the many non English (Afrikaans/ Matabele/ Shona) words in the book. Kaya. Situpa. Gammont. Veldskoen. There were also quite a few English words that American speakers of English do not recognize. Exeat. Bream. Gonk. 1. Godwin's writing and way with words were very good. Lots of memorable turns of phrase. ("...everything about her was ugly..... Her orthopedic shoes, her fat ankles, the gnarled blue varicose veins that coiled their way up the backs of her legs, her vast boat of a bum and its counterbalancing massive bosom, the wart on her chin with black hairs growing out of it, and her little rheumy, light blue, piggy eyes that stared out from behind thick glasses.") 2. The book was a marvel of memory. How could anyone remember so much after so many decades had passed? What I would like to know is this: After someone has seen the fate of so many other African countries, why invest so much energy to care about Zimbabwe? It was, if memory serves me

correctly, the last country to be independent on the African continent (1980). Several other countries had already become independent and collapsed by then. Why should this have been any different? Godwin would have been 23 years old by the time that Robert Mugabe was installed as Prime Minister. He could have left the country (for good) and built a new life elsewhere. (Godwin is now 60 years old and is still getting mileage out of books written about a country that he has been gone from for probably more than half of his life.) He was a smart guy (degrees from Oxford and Cambridge). He must have been useful to someone somewhere in a first world country. Why go back to get into African morass? Even though the author's life experience is interesting and well written, I am trying to think about what I can take from this book. 1. The white population of Zimbabwe is such a small fraction of humanity. With whom can you talk about it? 2. When Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, it was destroyed. But that had already happened a few times before. So how didn't we see that coming? How was that something that we couldn't predict? 3. The whites trying to hold onto the governance structures that they had built against the prodigious black talent for destroying said structures were going on a fool's errand. But who didn't know that? (I live right up the street from Detroit.) It's interesting to see the same thing happening halfway around the world all over again, but not really unexpected. 4. It is not unknown that people become enemies in one generation and friends in the next. (The United States and Vietnam are mortal enemies in one war, but conduct drills together against China later.) In this case, Godwin fights Matabele under Ian Smith but then (a few years later) defends them against treason charges as he becomes part of the government that is headed by a terrorist that he was fighting against (Mugabe). 5. Ok. So some Africans finish up with a colonial power / civil war and then one week later start up killing each other. (Gukurahundi.) Not all that new to me. (Rwanda. Sudan.) Verdict: Worth about \$0.01 plus shipping

Peter Godwin's book is not as trite as my title. It is a book of sensual childhood memories of wood smoke, African languages, complex relationships, colonial arrogance, and the conflicted feelings of being a white African just before the colony became independent and fought its way to majority rule. This was the forerunner of several decent books by expat Zimbabwean whites. To me, it is the best. My favorite part of the book was when young Peter's nanny brought him to the Apostolic church. The most difficult to read was in the second half of the book. He describes some of how he found himself behaving when, as a very young adult, he was conscripted into the brutality of a civil war. The saddest part is when he narrates the wasted opportunity to create a fairer country. President Robert Mugabe and his cohorts pillaged and destroyed productive farms and livelihoods with their greed, vengeance, and the anti-white racism they obviously felt was fair payback for what

they themselves had experienced in the colony. This escalated to the torturing and killing of their political opponents of color as well. Peter Godwin, by then a lawyer and journalist, found himself cataloging these atrocities, and has become a campaigner in the effort to bring these deeds into the light. The book is sobering and rich, and perhaps cautionary as well.

The best memoirs not only render a life, but also a unique time and place. I can't think of a memoir that has done this more beautifully than Peter Godwin's *Mukiwa*, the first installment in his Rhodesia/Zimbabwe trilogy. By now, I've read all three, and this one is not only my favorite within the trilogy, but definitely my new favorite memoir, and quite possibly one of my favorite books. As a work of creative non-fiction, it's deeply personal, yet unsentimental. It's meticulously crafted and literary, yet still honest and raw. It's a kind of *bildungsroman*, set against the backdrop of a crumbling Rhodesia, yet it's so much more than a coming-of-age story. Divided into three books, *Mukiwa* tells the story of Godwin's rather charmed childhood in Rhodesia, his experiences as an adolescent serving faithfully, yet begrudgingly, in the national police force during the war, and his return to Zimbabwe as an adult, as he tries to make sense the choices he's made, the tragedy that has afflicted his family, the dissolution of Rhodesia and the lingering deleterious effects of colonialism. It's difficult to choose a favorite section, as they each contribute uniquely to the big picture of his life; however, I just can't praise the first section enough. In it, Godwin captures all the poignancy of childhood - any childhood - as well as the magical quality of his own very strange and wonderful life growing up in Africa. In reading this first section, I was reminded of a theme that Sandra Cisneros grapples with in her vignette "Eleven" - this idea that each year of our lives represents a self that doesn't melt into our current self as we go from birthday to birthday, but that, rather, the little eight year old self is still there, hidden away "Russian-doll style" within the nine year old self, which is still lurking inside the ten year old self, and so on, all the way up to our current age. The honesty and tenderness with which Godwin recounts his childhood years resonated quite deeply with the way I saw the world as a child - albeit, a very different world. His writing made me feel as though that former child is still very much a part of my current self. Children are simultaneously naive and perceptive, irreverent and compassionate - like the child who laughs at a drunken homeless man when he falls over in the alley, and then weeps bitterly when she learns he has no family to go home to and no bed to lie down in at night. As though he were some Freudian psychoanalyst, Peter Godwin so expertly draws that child out so that you are suddenly seeing the strange and hilarious characters of his own youth in that deliciously flippant, yet painfully tender, light, so unique to childhood. As he recounted events, I often found myself stifling what I worried

was inappropriate laughter, only to find myself in tears on the very next page. And, as dark and tragic as this memoir is, there are a few memorable moments of levity and ironic humor. It's late, and I feel like this review is descending into cheesy madness really fast, so I think I may stop. It's very difficult to capture in words every feeling I have about this memoir. It's too good!

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