
Michela Wrong

I Didn't Do It for You
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An Interview with Michela Wrong

You wrote about the Congo under General Mobutu Sese Seko in your previous book, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*. As a writer, why do you find Africa such a compelling subject?

I first went to Africa for purely professional reasons. I was working for Reuters news agency and was posted to the Ivory Coast. At that stage I never imagined I would spend more than a decade writing about the continent. But Africa is such a rewarding place to work — so incredibly varied, so vivid, so terribly under-reported — that the period became longer and longer. In Europe, you're aware of the many intermediate layers separating you from an experience. In Africa, it's often a case of either you saw it with your own eyes, or it effectively didn't happen. I like that directness. And at a banal level, there are a few practical reasons why I keep working there. Firstly, I speak most the languages that allow you to get by. Secondly, being a working woman is not an issue, in sharp contrast with the Middle East.

Eritrean friends described pre-colonial Eritrea as a "green haven," but rather surprisingly, photographs of late 19th-century Eritrea depicts it otherwise. As a journalist, how difficult is it to separate fact from wishful thinking, to know the veracity and loyalties of your interviewees?

Knowing what is going on inside people's minds is far more important than having an encyclopaedic knowledge of the facts on the ground, which is why I often include jokes, proverbs, and myths in my books. A community's dreams can make it capable of amazing things; its nightmares can hobble and emasculate it. The vision an ordinary Congolese or Eritrean holds of his or her rightful place in the world may be out of kilter with reality, but that's irrelevant. In this instance, Eritrean memories of a green, lush landscape were poignant expressions of a subjugated community's longing for freedom, the homesick exile's pining for a country that never existed, but should have.

Why do you feel that Nakfa's "most dangerous legacy was...the impossibly high expectations raised in a generation of Eritreans," that, in the case of the younger, educated Eritreans, "the stropier they get, the better"?

Every rebel movement that becomes a government, every government that endures and wins a testing war, faces the same problem — a public that made extraordinary sacrifices for the cause runs out of patience and clamours for its reward. That puts huge pressure on a new administration, but that's an extremely healthy phenomenon. Eritrean citizens *should* be constantly asking themselves "is *this* what we fought and died for?" It's just a shame that the leadership appears to have stopped asking that question. In Britain, the voters turned their back on Winston Churchill after the Second World War because they correctly sensed he wasn't the right man to build the peace. In Eritrea, they weren't given that opportunity.

***I Didn't Do it for You* alludes to the present crisis in Iraq. Western powers alternated between intervention and apathy at precisely the wrong intervals in Iraq. Do you believe we are in a similar situation today in regard to the Middle East?**

Both of my books deal with the damage done to Africa by the Cold War policies of the superpowers. It is becoming ever clearer that the "War on Terror" is twisting and distorting Western foreign policy in very similar ways to the Cold War, and the impact on not only the Middle East but Africa is likely to be equally long-lasting and disastrous. Looking back, the foolishness and wishful thinking of those years seems extraordinary, yet we refuse to learn the lessons of history. The least one can do as a writer is to point out the parallels.

Are you considering any future book projects?

I am currently researching a nonfiction book on Kenya. Once that is published, I think it will be time for a change, and I want to try my hand at fiction.