



I Didn't Do It for You

By Michela Wrong
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Introduction

Just before the turn of the century, Italy colonized part of Abyssinia, "buoyed by the bumptious belief -- shared by all Europe's expanding powers at the time -- that Africa was an unclaimed continent, theirs not just for the taking, but for the carving up and sharing out amongst friends." They named the country Eritrea, and over time this small African country saw the rise and fall of fascism, the ruthless pillaging of the British, the jaw-dropping indifference of the UN, the lethal ping-pong games of the Cold War superpowers, and a thirty-year guerilla war against the occupying forces of its much larger neighbor, Ethiopia.

In words both scathing and heartbroken, Michela Wrong vividly describes why no other country encapsulates the shifting geopolitical winds of the twentieth century more than Eritrea in *I Didn't Do It for You*. The result is a portrait of a battle-scarred and proud country, of a people still resilient in the

face of mounting betrayals and countless sacrifices.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the title reflect Eritrean disillusionment? When Wrong writes, "the expectation of betrayal can both create an extraordinary inner strength and distort a national psyche," to what events does she refer? How has history forged an Eritrean identity?
2. What are examples of how "colonial assumptions about authority rendered blacks effectively invisible" in Eritrea? Despite differing attitudes towards governance and involvement, how did the Italy, Britain, the UN, the US, and the USSR, all justify moral qualms about their actions?
3. A UN functionary's scribbled note, "I think we are really through with the question of Eritrea" summed up the international attitude towards Eritrea's struggle for independence. Given the importance of the Kagnew spy station, the British capture of Keren, Eritrea's Christian history and access to the Red Sea, what explains that blasé tone?
4. Compare the American G.I.s at Kagnew station and the Eritrean rebels hiding in Nafka. How does strength of purpose affect strength of character in each situation? Could the G.I.'s behavior and U.S. Eritrean foreign policy during the Cold War help answer the post-9/11 question of why America is sometimes viewed with jaundiced eyes?
5. In hindsight, could 'the geometer's approach to strategy,' the self-interested real politic of the Cold War superpowers, be viewed as sheer folly? How did Haile Selassie adroitly manipulate the US and USSR, and how did all three contribute to, if not create, the famine-ravaged state of war in the Horn?
6. Do Wrong's portraits of, for example, Italian governor Ferdinando Martini, the British suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst, the EPLF double agent Melles Seyoum and Haile Selassie's American advisor John Spencer, emphasize the power of individuals to affect the course of history? How does his failure to act in 1974 still haunt Paulos Tesfagiorgis?
7. Could Eritrea's role in the downfall of both Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie and his successor, Haile Meriam Mengistu, be viewed as a David vs. Goliath parable? What lessons does Eritean history offer on how a small suppressed community can topple an Empire, how "the weapons that matter most...are to be found in the complicated whorls of the human brain"?
8. Discussing the austere single-mindedness of the rebels in Nafka, Wrong rhetorically asks, "at what point does such purity of purpose cross the line in to oppressive authoritarianism?" When is that line crossed in Eritrea? How would you answer Wrong's question? Do you think we are in danger of crossing such a line in the US?
9. Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea, hailed as "African's new soldier-princes," soon found themselves locked in a pointless border war over a "one-hotel, two-bar village." Why are the qualities necessary for a great rebel leader so unsuitable for a democratic presidency?
10. "If the curse of so many African states has been low expectations...a generation of Eritreans stands immune," writes Wrong. Where did that curse come from, and why is this generation of Eritreans immune to it?

Author Bio

Michela Wrong began her career as a foreign correspondent for the Reuters news agency. She spent six years covering the African continent for Reuters, the BBC, and the Financial Times. Her first book, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo*, won a PEN award for nonfiction and was a New York Times Notable Book. She currently lives in London, and travels regularly to Africa.