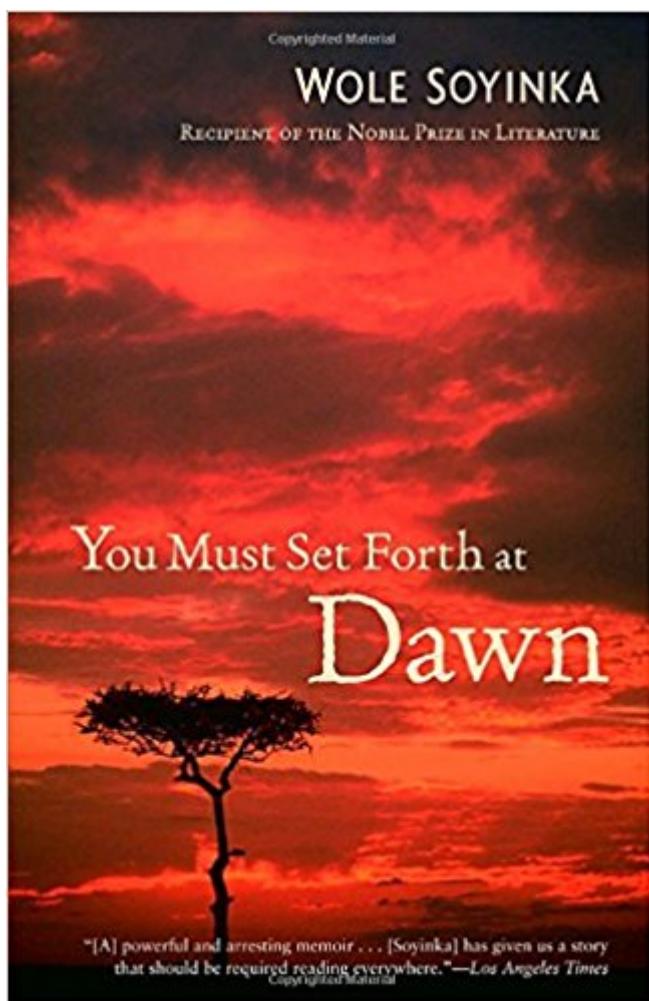


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# You Must Set Forth At Dawn: A Memoir



## Synopsis

The first African to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, as well as a political activist of prodigious energies, Wole Soyinka now follows his modern classic *Ake: The Years of Childhood* with an equally important chronicle of his turbulent life as an adult in (and in exile from) his beloved, beleaguered homeland. In the tough, humane, and lyrical language that has typified his plays and novels, Soyinka captures the indomitable spirit of Nigeria itself by bringing to life the friends and family who bolstered and inspired him, and by describing the pioneering theater works that defied censure and tradition. Soyinka not only recounts his exile and the terrible reign of General Sani Abacha, but shares vivid memories and playful anecdotes—“including his improbable friendship with a prominent Nigerian businessman and the time he smuggled a frozen wildcat into America so that his students could experience a proper Nigerian barbecue. More than a major figure in the world of literature, Wole Soyinka is a courageous voice for human rights, democracy, and freedom. *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* is an intimate chronicle of his thrilling public life, a meditation on justice and tyranny, and a mesmerizing testament to a ravaged yet hopeful land. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In this engrossing follow-up to his acclaimed childhood memoir, *Aké*, the Nigerian poet, playwright and Nobel laureate demonstrates what it means to be a public intellectual. Soyinka revisits a tumultuous life of writing and political activism, from his student days in Britain through his struggles, sometimes from prison or exile, against a succession of Nigerian dictatorships. Soyinka may be on a first-name basis with almost every major Nigerian figure and he's sometimes involved

in high-level intrigues; his chronicle of political turmoil is very personal, full of sharply drawn sketches of comrades and foes, and cantankerous rejoinders to critics. His novelistic eyewitness accounts of repression and upheaval widen out from time to time to survey the humiliation and corruption of Nigerian society under military rule. Soyinka also includes recollections of friends and family, of sojourns abroad with W.H. Auden and other literati and of stage triumphs and fiascoes. His lyrical evocations of African landscapes, the urban nightmare of Lagos, the horrors of British cuisine and the longing a dusty fugitive feels for a cold beer will entertain and educate readers. By turns panoramic and intimate, ruminative and politically resolute, Soyinka's memoir is a dense but intriguing conversation between a writer and his times. (Apr. 18) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Early in this memoir, Soyinka, the Nobel-winning playwright, says that he is "a closet glutton for tranquillity." The account that follows details a decidedly untroubled life of activism, imprisonment, and exile over the past half century. In 1956, as a Nigerian student in England, Soyinka considered joining the Hungarian uprising against the Soviets, thinking it a "perfect rehearsal" for future African insurgencies, but his father advised, "Kindly return home and make this your battlefield." The bulk of the book concerns Soyinka's struggles against one corrupt Lagos administration after another, shedding light on the outsize characters of African politics. Along the way, Soyinka recalls how once, in Venice, W. H. Auden tried to pass him off as an African prince, and reveals that, after winning the Nobel Prize, he came down with writer's block, "overwhelmed by the futility of everything I had ever done." Copyright © 2006 The New Yorker --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I expected a master piece from a mastermind in You Must Set Forth at Dawn, and I was not disappointed. Indeed, I got value for the money and time I spent on this engaging memoir by Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka. The author has been one of the prominent actors in the political and socio-economic journey of Nigeria. He was a leading player in the western Nigeria uprising of 1964-65 in which he hijacked a radio station in Ibadan. He was active in the Nigerian civil war, for which he was imprisoned. And he was a thorn in the flesh of several military and democratic rulers in Nigeria. However, the book is not only about Soyinka's political battles and rascality particularly in Nigeria and Africa, but also about his core beliefs, such as justice, freedom, honor, and merit. And he is passionate about true friendship, as illustrated by his profuse dedication and homage to a late

friend, Olufemi Babington Johnson (OBJ). Soyinka is intellectually mischievous and intelligently deviant. The book is filled with riveting episodes and anecdotes about his student days in England; acquaintance with literary giants, including British philosopher Bertrand Russell; falling in love with a dancer in Havana, Cuba; clandestine diplomatic shuttles around the world; dinners with world leaders in many countries, including with Nelson Mandela and Francois Mitterrand in Paris; an encounter with President Bill Clinton; and a quiet lunch in Israel with Shimon Peres, when he was no longer Israeli Prime Minister. However, as I read the book, these words continue to ring in my head: Whose spy is Wole Soyinka? Which foreign governments are his paymasters? His connection with security agents is mystifying. Often, he is ahead of people who are after his life, thanks to his informants in government and security agencies. Sometimes, he is so comfortable strolling on the streets of major world capitals, and at other times, he is undercover because members of a roving death squad are after him all over Europe and America. How did Soyinka know of a secret telephone in the wardrobe of Olusegun Obasanjo, then Officer Commanding Western Zone of the Nigerian Army in the 1960s? Obasanjo, who later became Nigeria's military head of state, and a democratic president, never knew the telephone existed in his own bedroom until Soyinka called him on the telephone box. That shows the level of Soyinka's influence even in the military intelligence corps. But as I immersed myself in the book and followed some daring sagas and daredevil acts by the author, the answer unfurled. Soyinka is nobody's 'spook.' Whether he is on a fact-finding and exploratory visit to Bekuta, a slave settlement in Jamaica inhabited by descendants of the Egbas who might have migrated from Abeokuta in Ogun State, western part of Nigeria; or in Bahia, Brazil to retrieve a stolen artifact; Soyinka exhibited a kamikaze mind-set difficult to comprehend superficially. But as I reflected deeply, I understood that he follows and holds tenaciously to any cause he truly cherishes. I call that, passion. My best chapter in the book is, Olori-Kunkun and Ori-Olokun. The chapter is vintage Soyinka. For me, this encapsulates his nature. Ori-Olokun is a "long-lost" bronze head of a principal Yoruba deity stolen from a courtyard in Ife, the cradle of Yoruba civilization. Soyinka traced the relic to Bahia in Brazil, with the intention of stealing it from the home of a private art collector and returning it to its due place in Africa. But a surprise awaited him. The book has vivid plots, characters and dialogues. And I wonder if Soyinka wrote in a diary many of the events and people he described profoundly in the book. But that is not so, because he explained on the acknowledgement section that he didn't keep such a diary. I was so sucked into the scenery which came alive as he ran from Oyo State in Nigeria to the Republic of Benin through the bush on the way to exile. As I read this divine escape, I was transported to the thick forest, dodging the branches of trees which lashed and lacerated the author as he sat precariously on a motorbike on a moonless night. I was

able to follow the entire book without being lost in some sections which have winding details and numerous digressions. Soyinka used digression copiously to create suspense, to espouse his beliefs or engage in reflective thinking. I am not sure if this style will not put off some impatient readers. Despite this, I truly enjoyed the book. Not only once, but twice, I read it.

I disagree with all those who think this is an exercise, by the author, in self aggrandisement and hubris. Far from it, this is an old man telling the story, or some stories, of the often turbulent and privileged life he has lived. To say the book is boring is an unfair comment by those who may seem threatened by Soyinka's word prowess. I have enjoyed all Soyinka's prose more than his poetry, and even drama (the beatification of area boy comes to mind) in some cases. However, I have always seen it as a necessity to arm oneself with a dictionary when attempting a Soyinka work. He makes no apologies for his use of hifaluting words; the imagery invoked at times is most beautiful and at others, it is lost on the reader as it is totally incomprehensible. In that respect, I do sympathise with a lot of readers. I too have struggled to grasp certain concepts, and to understand his use of certain terms. Having said this, my diction and imagination have become the better for it. This book is well written, but there is a lack of coherence in the chapters - one idea set forth in one area is so far removed from its predecessor or successor. Also, a lot of what he has written has been mentioned, albeit, cursorily, in his other works - *The Man Died*, Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years. Did he really need to rehash the same things? Maybe and maybe not. A lot of people who are not too familiar with the development of Nigeria may not readily appreciate the social dynamics and certain characters mentioned in the book. I guess I have had the (dis)honour of having lived in some of the turbulent times and am familiar with a lot of the villains as told through Soyinka's eyes. I may have been a child in the eighties, but felt the brunt of the Buhari-Idiagbon regime, the corruption of the Babangida era, and the tyranny of Sani Abacha. I could readily identify with what the author was saying. Perhaps that is why some others may find it difficult to appreciate that part of a country's history; the linguistic sophistication does not help matters either. There were passages of sheer beauty, and there you see Soyinka excel in his use of vocabulary. Compared to his other works, I found I did not have to consult my dictionary as often. I suspect it is an improvement in my diction and not the author becoming soft. Overall, I think if one were to take up the challenge of reading the book there is some reward; it may be in learning new words, grasping new concepts and ways of presenting ideas. More importantly, others who have never been to, or been exposed to, Nigeria, will get to know its beauty, its people, the decimation and ruination of its collective psyche by past leaders, and how the inchoate democracy is striving to reclaim that lost glory.

I first saw this author, Wole Soyinka, on a TV program, and was very intrigued by what he had to say, so ordered three books written by him. You Must set Forth at Dawn, The Lion and the Jewel, and Ake, the Years of Childhood. I would like to see everyone read these - - he described in detail much about his life, his struggles, his beliefs and in doing so opened another world for me in the process - - his history was so greatly different than anything I had known, and he really was able to explain his life - and his actions as he made decisions and tried to help others through the years.

I don't sit through long books unless I'm captivated by the story. For me, African experiences richly articulated, mixed with intrigue and gut-wrenching story lines make my day and keep me on the edge of my seat as it were. I had no idea how politically involved Wole is and the position he's in to make immediate contribution to Nigeria and Africa for peace, democracy, human rights and cultural preservation. I hope that this generation fully utilizes this cultural, historical, literary and political icon to preserve African integrity for future generations.

Enjoyed every bit of it. It was very instructional in the history of Nigeria under military dictatorship. However, the writer sometimes got carried away with his poetic self by diving into several paragraphs of word play before coming back to the meat of the book..... The story.

So-so read. Thought it would be more compelling.

well written and gripping.

What more can I write. Prof. Soyinka is a master of the English language, civil rights crusader, poet, Theatre Director and naturalist.

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