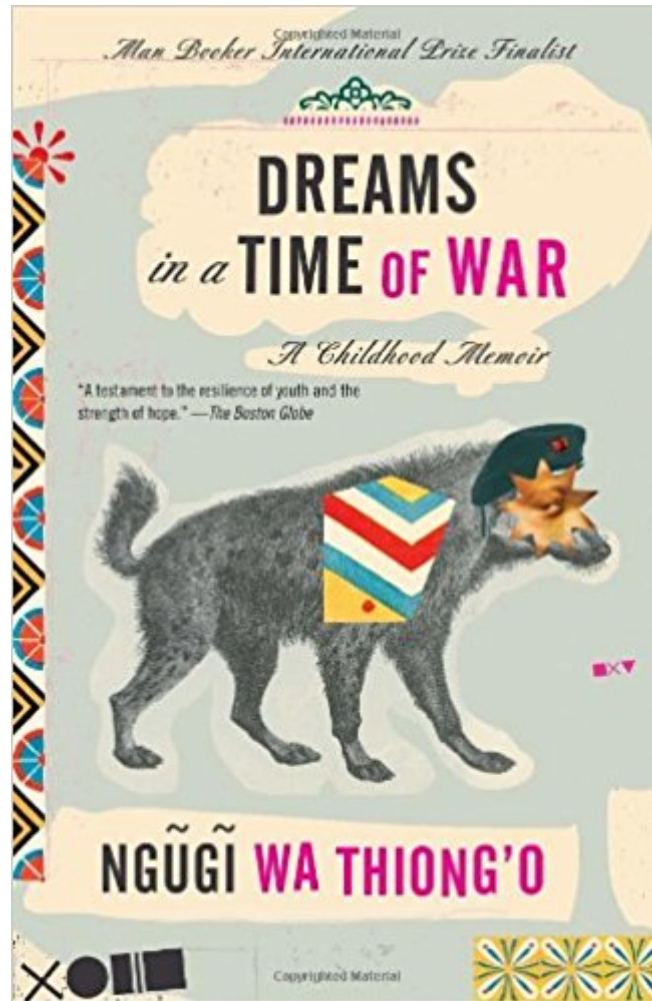


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Dreams In A Time Of War: A Childhood Memoir



Synopsis

Born in 1938 in rural Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o came of age in the shadow of World War II, amidst the terrible bloodshed in the war between the Mau Mau and the British. The son of a man whose four wives bore him more than a score of children, young Ngũgĩ displayed what was then considered a bizarre thirst for learning, yet it was unimaginable that he would grow up to become a world-renowned novelist, playwright, and critic. *In Dreams in a Time of War*, Ngũgĩ deftly etches a bygone era, bearing witness to the social and political vicissitudes of life under colonialism and war. Speaking to the human right to dream even in the worst of times, this rich memoir of an African childhood abounds in delicate and powerful subtleties and complexities that are movingly told.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is reputedly one of the greatest living African writers of fiction. ("Reputedly", because I have not read any of Ngugi's fiction nor much of other noted African authors, such as Peter Abrahams and Chinua Achebe.) Ngugi was born in 1938 in Kenya, and grew up in Limuru, a town about one hour from Nairobi. By virtue of being born when he was, Ngugi, as a youth and young adult, lived amidst the turmoil of social and political life in Kenya as it went from oppressive colonialism, through revolution, and on into oppressive post-colonial dictatorship. Ngugi left Kenya in 1977, since when he has lived in the United States, teaching at Yale, NYU, and University of California, Irvine. *DREAMS IN A TIME OF WAR* is Ngugi's memoir of his childhood, until, at the age

of 16, he left home to begin secondary education at a highly selective high school. His father had four wives and 24 children. During Ngugi's youth, his father and mother became estranged, and she left the homestead to live with her father, taking Ngugi and a younger brother with her. His mother clearly was an unusual woman of considerable fortitude and character. She helped fan within Ngugi a burning desire for education and then sacrificed herself in various ways to enable him to pursue that education. But their dreams of education had to be pursued during parlous times of unrest and violence, and hence the title of Ngugi's memoir. For me, the chief value of the book is the picture it gives of native Kenyan life in a rapidly changing world - of such matters as family customs within an extended, polygamous family, traditional rites like circumcision, and communal story-telling.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is one of Kenya's most famous writers. Over the years, I've read a few of his novels -- The River Between (1965), Petals of Blood (1977), and the masterful Wizard of the Crow (2006). Both of the earlier two novels are set against the backdrop of the Mau Mau rebellion, an uprising against the British colonial government by Kenyans - mostly Kikuyus - in the 1950s. Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir, tells the story of Thiong'o's early life, through the mid-1950s when he was admitted to high school. As with several of Thiong'o's novels, this story also takes place against the backdrop of Mau Mau. It's a fascinating account, and it balances the personal with the political. On the personal side, Thiong'o tells of growing up in a polygamous household and of his mother's efforts to get him to school. His mother and father split when he was a child, and he becomes the scribe to his maternal grandfather. He gives an account -- the first I've read -- of going through the circumcision ceremony, the rite of passage that makes him a man. At the same time, he describes the political excitement and tension of the time. In the course of Mau Mau, his uncle goes to the mountains to fight, and Thiong'o himself is detained by colonial police on the way home from a religious meeting. The political and the personal intersect repeatedly. With little access to newspapers - and those filtered by colonial authorities - he and his friends rely on semi-informed and highly creative informants: "Ngandi, like some of his audience, has to read between the lines of the settler-owned newspapers and government radio. But he enriches what he gleans here and there with rich creative interpretation.

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