



‘SAY YOU’RE ONE OF THEM’

by Uwem Akpan

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Reviewed by: Olatoun Williams



Almajiri children in Northern Nigeria



Say You're One of Them is catholic priest, Uwem Akpan's debut book set in selected countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. Emerging out of the book's unleashed passions, are two monsters and a wounded angel. The first monster has two heads: one is poverty, that chronic, terrifying condition of lack; moral chaos is the other: the disintegration of values when the only organising principle that society offers is survival. Towering over Africa, an ancient tree planted in her soil, the second monster bears two fearsome names: *Ethnocentrism*, *religious fanaticism*. A swooping vulture, *religious fanaticism* surveys endless carnage with stony eyes and *ethnocentrism* surveys the remains of armed conflicts erupting in his name, throughout African lands.

Childhood is the wounded angel, the limping giant on the run, frantically seeking a way out of the shocking, heart-wrenching conditions depicted in Akpan's book. You will find it hard to look into the wide- open eyes of Jigana, a Kenyan boy of no more than 8. His eyes have been emptied of everything we wish to recognise in a child's eyes. How can we bear to look into the eyes, turned up towards us, of Kotchikpa, a Beninois boy of 10 years and his sister, Yewa who is 5? After reading Uwem Akpan's book, Angelique Kidjo, the very real, legendary Beninois songstress, was so moved by it, she composed an elegy in memory of her fictional 5 year old compatriot, Yewa, trafficked for sex. Readers will meet Monique, a 9 year old Rwandan girl who must now in the wake of war and genocide take care of her baby brother. Readers will meet Ethiopian Salem and her best friend who are six year olds caught in religious strife. In Uwem Akpan's debut fiction, only the Nigerian, Jubril, a conservative Muslim, is adolescent.



Kibera, Largest slum in Kenya



Children in Ethiopia

Every story in this book presents child justice travestied. All eight children are inviting us into the sanctuaries of their hearts where we will discover thoughts, feelings and responses which would have been our own had we been in their shoes. In *Say You're One of Them*, you will recognise your own children's voices in the clear, sweet voices of these fictional ones who express desires, bewilderment and fears - the childhood kind - from their demonized corners of our planet. And because this book will be read for a long time to come, our children will recognise their own children in the homogeneous features of childhood illustrated within its borders. For generations to come, readers will live out childhood's universality which extends beyond the borders of Africa and beyond boundaries of class, creed and ethnicity, to embrace us all.

In 2010 I moderated a reading for the book's Nigerian publishers, Book Craft, at the Jazz Hole in South West Ikoyi, Lagos. The first thing I asked of the Catholic priest and author, was to talk to us about the genesis of *Say You're One of Them*, the book that had left Oprah Winfrey "gasping" and which went on to achieve historic status as the Oprah Book Club pick for 2009. Due to constraints of time, though all five stories are outstanding, I made that clear, we were unable to spend time in the killing fields of Rwanda, or on board the fated Nigerian bus in the company of Jubril – the teenage Almajiri boy, heading South, heading unbeknown to him towards atonement and towards the revelation of the heart of an Allah in whose sovereign plan every soul counts.



Rwanda Civil War

In our joint review of the book, Father Akpan and I focused instead on three stories of the five.

The incapacity of parents in *Ex-Mas Feast* turns a street family into a child headed household. That child is their eldest daughter, Maisha, a self-sacrificing 12 year old turned child prostitute on Nairobi streets. In a heroic bid to pay her brother's school fees, and to save some money for herself, Maisha will make a decision that will drive her family and you, the reader, to despair. Maisha's decision will drive the story to a dénouement that will not only rend your heart, it will terrify you.

Set in a border town in Benin, *Fattening for Gabon* centres around the trafficking of children into commercial sex slavery. As I read the story one thought repeated itself in my mind: only those with no choices whatsoever would entrust orphans to a relative already beset by his own crushing poverty. The relative in question doesn't want to be a border tout; he doesn't want to be a petty thief forever. This likeable rogue is bereaved too; and if not bereaved, then bereft of hope for a future. Isn't that a form of bereavement? He craves relief in many forms: a two tone brand new motorbike, new clothes, new shoes, good food to eat. Blood ties might bind but in the scale of the good life versus family loyalty, the good life is so tempting.

In an Ethiopia torn apart by the violence and schism of religious conflict, *What language is that?* is a sweet song of hope rising out of the darkness which defines so much of Father Akpan's book. Two 6 year old girls succeed in rescuing their blameless friendship from the detritus of war. You will feel joy and admiration watching their ingenuity as they defy their parents, daring to cross battle-lines their parents have etched out across the religious divide. 6 year old girls standing on their balconies, looking across the street at each other, each longing, like star-crossed lovers, for the other; sharing love in a new language: one of their own. 6 year olds. In their resistance you will hear a call to arms against violence, against blind hate and ignorance and in their clandestine love, you will, like I did, experience uplifting victory and you will enter into a celebration of those secret triumphs so beloved of childhood.

In 2010 when Akpan's book was published in Nigeria, figures for children trafficked internationally every year for commercial sex were a dizzying, 1.2 million. In armed conflict across Africa, checking the figures for the same year, over 100,000 children, some no more than 7 or 8 years, were recorded to be participating as soldiers. At the same time, in 12 local government areas across 6 Nigerian cities, the number of street children was put at 2009. Staggering figures, but for me just that, figures, nameless and faceless figures until one Catholic priest sat down in front of his computer, at his keyboard, to honour every single one of them. He succeeded in this vital, life-affirming project by giving names and vibrant life to some of them.

Authors' Biography



Uwem Akpan was born in Ikot Akpan Eda in southern Nigeria; his parents were teachers. After studying philosophy and English at Creighton and Gonzaga universities, he studied theology for three years at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. He was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 2003 and received his MFA in creative writing from the University of Michigan in 2006. In 2009, Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* was selected as Oprah Winfrey's her 63rd book club pick.

In 2007, Akpan taught at a Jesuit college in Harare, Zimbabwe. Until he left Nigeria for the United States of America, he served at Christ the King Church, Ilasamaja-Lagos, Nigeria



Reviewer, Olatoun Williams