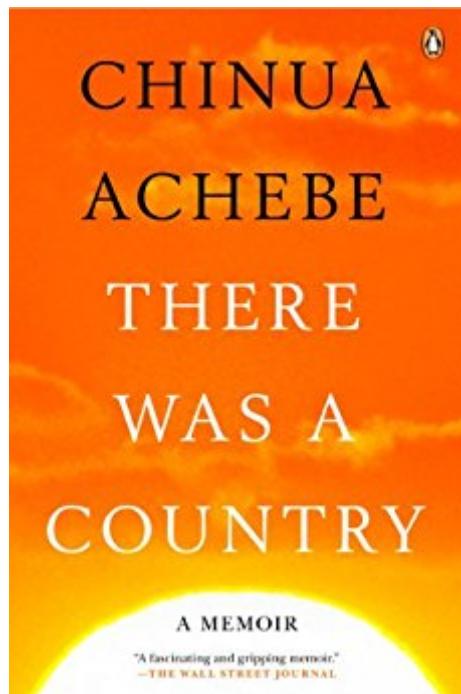


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There Was A Country: A Memoir



Synopsis

From the legendary author of *Things Fall Apart* "a long-awaited memoir of coming of age in a fragile new nation, and its destruction in a tragic civil war" For more than forty years, Chinua Achebe has maintained a considered silence on the events of the Nigerian civil war, also known as the Biafran War, of 1967-1970, addressing them only obliquely through his poetry. Now, decades in the making, comes a towering account of one of modern Africa's most disastrous events, from a writer whose words and courage have left an enduring stamp on world literature. A marriage of history and memoir, vivid firsthand observation and decades of research and reflection, *There Was a Country* is a work whose wisdom and compassion remind us of Chinua Achebe's place as one of the great literary and moral voices of our age.

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Customer Reviews

The 1967-1970 Nigerian-Biafran war in which an estimated three million people died, most of them Achebe's Igbo people, was a tragedy. What would have been an additional tragedy was Achebe not providing for the unborn generations his pivotal view of the event, and a sharp cross-examination of the actors. In *There Was A Country*, Achebe does it the Achebe way. In Part one, Achebe reveals

the golden days of Nigeria and how through hard work and support from his family he positions himself to receive the baton from exiting colonialists at the dawn of Nigeria's independence. Achebe's story in this regard is the story of how the Igbo, in only 30 years, were able to bridge the educational gap that the people of the then Western Nigeria had as a result of early exposure to Western education. Achebe's early childhood story and path to success mirror the drive that has propelled the Igbo since they became part of Nigeria- a drive that came from Igbo republican society that abhors royalty, encourages competition, and rewards personal achievement. In stories of personal struggle, rugged determination and unique foresight, Achebe makes it known that there is no magic wand behind the Igbo emergence and attainment of preeminent position in the Nigerian project other than by shared industriousness. The consequence of this accomplishment was an immediate fear of Igbo domination. That fear quickly took hold in the psyche of other Nigerians and practically truncated the Nigerian dream of Achebe generation.

In "There Was A Country", Chinua Achebe (without mentioning names) described Rep. Chuma Nzeribe and Senator Andy Ubah as "Politicians with plenty of money and very low IQ." The sections of this Achebe's latest book that chronicled the state of decay and corruption in Nigeria to me is a must read not just because it paints a clear picture of how deep our crisis is but that it enables us to start taking steps and actions that will halt and hopefully reverse the decline. So, rather than dwell on Achebe's account of the genocide perpetrated by Gowon and given economic strength and dimension by Awolowo, which has been universal knowledge just reinforced by Achebe for posterity, I want to focus on something that is happening and what could happen to Anambra State if these "Politicians with plenty of money and very low IQ" are allowed to have their way. It was primarily because of these politicians who Achebe called renegades trying to turn Anambra state into "a bankrupt and lawless fiefdom," that made him (Achebe) reject being among six recipients of Nigeria's second-highest award, the Commander of the Order of the Federal Republic in 2004. These are men with distorted minds and evil in their hearts. They lit series of fires and watched the radio and TV houses began to take a new ugly shape and face as smoke billowed into the early morning sky. The smoke got into their lungs, caused them to cough but delighted their evil heart all the same. On that faithful November morning, we all asked was this real? Tears spilled down our cheeks. We listened and watched without comprehension. We felt a sudden pain behind our breastbone, vulnerable and defeated.

A profoundly important document from one of the world's greatest writers. Here, Professor Achebe

is addressing his readership not solely as a novelist, critic, children's author and poet, but as a statesman. The book is broken into four parts - something the writer Obi Nwakanma has cleverly observed also corresponds to the four market days in the Igbo week and may have provided the super structure for Achebe's literary world view. Nnena Orji also has admirably observed that "It seems...that the insertion of poems in the story is also a throw-back to Igbo traditional narrative styles that emanated from the oral tradition where the story itself was interspersed with chanting, singing and poetry. It occurred to me that Professor Achebe was making a concerted effort to embrace this "authentic African narrative structure" and was not, as some other shallow readings have suggested, just experimenting or taking artistic license. In the western literary tradition, narrative structure followed very strict rules. I think it was G.F.W. Hegel in the 19th century that referred to poetry as "the universal art of the mind [that] runs through all the arts and is art's highest phase, one phase higher than music?"[1] Poetry was treated as an art form apart and was hardly 'married with prose.' Part one of the book deals with Professor Achebe's family and coming of age. Tender descriptions of his mother and father and their interactions with English clergy are particularly touching. His own education and encounter with some of founders of modern African literature are also found here with luminous beauty.

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