

My Life in the Bush of Ghosts

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My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, Amos Tutuola's second novel, was first published in 1954. It tells the tale of a small boy who wanders into the heart of a fantastical African forest, the dwelling place of innumerable wild, grotesque and terrifying beings. He is captured by ghosts, buried alive and wrapped up in spider webs, but after several years he marries and accepts his new existence. With the appearance of the television-handed ghostess, however, comes a possible route of escape.

My Life in the Bush of Ghosts Details

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Author : Amos Tutuola

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From Reader Review My Life in the Bush of Ghosts for online ebook

the gift says

somehow lost the review, for this as second reading, but as remembered: no different than any of his work, sort of a comic odyssey, from the very beginning the narrator must learn what is 'good' and what is 'bad', being an unloved child of second wife, who escapes the slavers by falling through 'the bush' and over the years he is trying to escape... there is some contention that the author merely is transcribing Yoruba myths on his particular voice (mostly west-African spoken English) but he is simply building this fantastic quest of return...

this follows the narrator through adventures in 'the bush', going from town to town, from monstrous and magical, when he comes to know them, lives there for apparent years then escapes to their next town, river ghosts and the marriage under the river, 20 th town of ghosts, short ghosts and their flash-eyed mother, then the 'television-handed ghosts'... there may be allegorical values, i do not know, and through the adventures and transformations, he does change in learning what is 'good' and what is 'bad'... he is someone recounting fantastic bush and ghosts and towns and magic. this is for me a fun read, in poetics, in energy, in imagination...

Jaredjosephjaredjoseph harveyharvey says

"This is what hatred did."

Samir Rawas Sarayji says

This review has been moved to Samir's Critical Corner here.

Az says

I've never quite read a book like this. I've noticed that a few reviewers have taken to referring it to the African Wizard of Oz, or as a prime example of African magical realism. I would argue though that 'My Life in the Bush of Ghosts' is a hell of a lot more visceral and vibrant. This is my first foray into Amos Tutuola and in fact anything of its kind.

The story begins with a young Nigerian boy, too young to understand concepts of "good" and "bad", and his escape from a gang of slavers into the African bush - the forbidden bush of ghosts. Our protagonist makes his way through a myth-infused environment populated by unnerving and often animalistic spirits. These encounters, as in mythological traditional, often coincide with the boy himself shape-shifting into a variety of forms and creatures. These encounters that comprise the adventure in this story do not really progress linearly at all, and neither is there much character development. There is only a semblance of continuity between the individual stories and so I feel that this, and stories like it are best appreciated orally rather than

as a novel.

Evan Suttell says

This was a frustrating but very quick read due to its episodic nature. While I did find some great material in this book, such as the chapters in which the narrator is a cow, and the one where he meets his cousin, I was put off by the repetitive “ghosts are mean” theme of most chapters.

The so-called “ungrammatical” nature of Tutuola’s writing did not bother me, but his use of repetition did, as it was not used for rhythmic effect, but simply as filler, as if he was repeating a sentence he said a paragraph ago to make sure the reader heard correctly.

I did find some deeper meaning to the text, such as the fear of outsiders (apparent on 165 esp.) and it can be read as an allegory for the pain of hatred (last line), but those themes were not interesting nor present enough for me to take the work as symbolic.

Daniel says

A disappointing read for me. I call this type of work "and then" fiction, meaning there is little to no character or plot development, merely a series of episodes ("...then XXX happened, and then YYY happened...") told towards no discernible purpose or meaning.

To the book's credit, often these episodes are impressive for the depth of imagination on display - such as when the narrator gets turned into a cow and has to find a way back to human form - but overall the whole thing just felt boring.

J.M. Hushour says

A series of surreal, bizarre encounters with ghosts and their towns in the bush of ghosts. The narrator, lost in the bush of ghosts by the age of seven endures being persecuted by the Deads in myriad ways (from forced domestic servitude to being trapped and body elongated in a occult pitcher through which he is forced to eat strange meats) befriended by some (such as the "Super-Lady" he later marries) and witness to a thousand weirderies. He learns magic from a ghost magician the fallout of which is their running duel of transformations through the bush of ghosts trying to steal each others' juju. He meets the sore-ridden "Television-handed ghostess". He suffers the vagaries of the Nameless-ghost-town and Hopeless-ghost-town. He meets HM, King of the Bush of Ghosts. He fails to differentiate good from bad but in the end knows that these adventures were born out of the evil of man.

That's as close to a plot summary as one can get. Part Lewis Carroll and part H.P. Lovecraft if Lovecraft were born in the Congo or Cameroon and his pantheon of ancient evils were spread and sprinkled over a thousand haunted towns. Tutuola wrote in his second-hand English, which charms with its consistent grammar inconsistencies and almost poetic clumsiness.

Aubrey says

2.5/5

Despite my best efforts, my reaction to 'My Life in the Bush of Ghosts' was similar to that of my reaction to The Palm-Wine Drinkard; confused, one too many times frustrated and not finding the brief moments of engagement worth it for large stretches of a super short text. I'm not going to be an ass about it like this text's introduction is with its yammering on and on about "the thoughts of other races, even of those who resemble us superficially", but it does drive home how cavalier I was to stumble across this and TPWD and think it would be grand to take a chance on hearsay. Still, I can at least appreciate that hearsay from afar, as well as enjoy my mental wanderings down intricate pathways such as the underlying narrative similarities between this and The Journey to the West, and how this text's references to TPWD make for a more complex experience rendered strange by my own half remembered tidbits of plot and pathos. I can only hope that donating this work will send it on to another intrepid soul who may understand it better, but ideally will respect it regardless of their own personal enjoyment. Only time will tell.

Most of things I appreciate about this novel involved being reminded of something else. For example, I've heard the term "Antelope Wife" thrown around in instances before this (although it may have just been another's review of this self same work), and have incomplete rememberings from TPKD and more distantly related things such as the aforementioned JttW and the film 'Spirited Away' Indeed, now that I think about it, the film has strong resonances with this story, albeit MLitBoG is far more brutal and resonant with images of child slavery and intervillage warfare and comparatively fewer ones of peace and prosperity. Something could be made of the witches and Christianity and devils that op up every so often, but I don't have the wherewithal for it. I've already overworked my analytical appreciation more than I usually do in order to give this work a fair review, so any further rhapsodizing on themes and imagery will have to be done by another, hopefully more enthusiastic soul.

I'll be honest and say that I likely won't be picking up any more of Tutola's works until I have far more relevant critical faculties at my disposal. I wouldn't mind a biography or even an analysis if it wasn't too dense, but I just wasn't up to the challenge when I read TPWD, and I wasn't up to the challenge now. The best I can do is pass my book along to a more worthy reader and pass my review along to a future me who is taking stock of their Nigerian/African author read count and weighing whether it needs to be supplemented at the time. I've got Ousmane Sembène's Xala coming up soon, so the latter category, at least, is in no danger of being neglected at this time.

Sonic says

DO NOT READ THE "Foreword" TO THIS BOOK! While I enjoyed this unusual book very much, I found the Foreword extremely offensive. It was written by your typical pompous-ass scholar type who condescendingly uses words like "primitive" to describe something his elitist bias finds difficult to categorize. To me the Foreword also spoiled other aspects of the book.

There is a poetry to his writing and what's more, a mythology that is very unusual, and to my orientation, surreal. In my culturally conditioned world super-natural experiences are met with close-minded skepticism, but in Amos Tutuola's book they are described with an unquestioning matter-of-factness that is exciting and very interesting. Just as the author describes a time before he was familiar with the notions of "good" and "bad", the lack of such simple discrimination, as well as a lack of moralistic preaching is wonderfully

refreshing! I can see why David Byrne and Brian Eno took the title and used it for their seminal pop-rock masterpiece as the title and also all of the chapter headings are extremely stimulating to the imagination.

Porsche says

It's weird and it's wild. It's the folklore of an aboriginal religion that was very nearly killed. Thanks to this book, and the tenacity of its people many of its values survived. This is a fascinating look into culture raised in the shadow of deep dark jungle. Reach the end, and you'll find an even deeper message about the morality of a time, and the destruction of a people.

Michael says

From the reviews of others, my initial reaction (as a Westerner) to this book seems a common one: WTF am I reading?! However, without wishing to uproot it from its African soil, the folklore motif a person lost in the otherworldly realm of spirits is universal: the Faerie of the Celts and Britons, and the land of Xibalba of the Quiché Maya springing to mind. Actually, the adventures of the twins Hunahpú and Xbalanqué from the Popol Vuh are probably the closest thing I've read to "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts" in terms of atmosphere.

So, a seven-year-old boy escapes from soldiers and unknowingly wanders into the spirit world. His experiences are nightmarish, comical, disturbing and wonderful. There is little in the way of plot, other than the boy's desire to return to earthly life, but it is in the reader's exposure to the surreal world of non-conscious experience that the book's power lies.

Burke says

Wanted to like this book. Didn't. The best thing about it by far is the title (which is epically great). More interesting in concept than execution. The fact that there are some who absolutely love it smacks of post-colonial guilt-inspired patronization to me: it's just not very well-written or especially engaging.

Skip the book, get the album of the same name by Brian Eno and David Byrne. That really is great.

Mar says

No me ha gustado.

Tiene su gracia, pero a pesar de lo corto que es, se me ha hecho interminable.

Uche Ogbuji says

I might come back to a fuller review, and I will say that if you must pick one Tutuola book, pick "The

Palmwine Drinkard" (five stars from me) over this one. For now I just felt compelled to record that this is a darkly imaginative and funny saga set in the West African idea of a chthonic "bush" where the real and spirit worlds intermingle, using a broken English with elements of Nigerian Pidgin, but largely Tutuola's fantastic, poetical idiolect. For other books that might better suit the unadventurous Western lib arts educated dabbler and that work with the cosmological idea of a "bush of ghosts," read Helen Oyeyemi or Nnedi Okorafor. You might "get" Tutuola and enjoy his writing, or you might hate it, just as with any unusual author. But I do want to address the egotistical numpties who say stupid things such as "people who like this book are only working out their colonialist guilt." Tutuola's is an unique, iconic and magical work, and no more primitive than, say, Ulysses. It's just prose, people. And it has the great advantage that you will discover very quickly whether or not you like it, and you can always put the book down and leave it for others to enjoy.

Nate D says

One day in Nigeria one of the three common types of war breaks out, and a 7-year-old boy is abandoned to it by his father's jealous second wife. He is too young even to know the meanings of "good" and "evil", but escapes by accident into the human-forbidden bush of ghosts, where the spirits walk, and he will find himself pursued by fearful specters, changed in form, worshipped as a god, and taking part in strange rites. Conveyed in the conversational tones of spoken Nigerian English and drawn from the rich, otherworldly mythology of his colliding Yoruba/Christian-upbringing, Tutuola's novel is seemingly unique in literature: a sort of effortless home-grown African surrealism, rich and memorable. The novel's series of pared-down episodes without a lot of description or character development seem consistent with an oral tradition rather than a literary one (of course), but that suits the immediacy and vibrancy of the telling just fine. Though so much happens at times as to overwhelm, and to make me wish I could hear more about just a few of the strange, nightmarish villages and landscapes through which our protagonist must travel during his odyssey. I'd really like to know how much of this is purely Tutuola's imagination versus cultural memory.

Eileen says

Difficult to review. Probably a lot of that is due to my comparative ignorance of African culture and lit. The whole book is so deeply steeped in African culture, beliefs, mythology that I have very little authoritative to say. Sudden, visceral. You should read this one.

Hadrian says

This is a strange, even unsettling book. It's so far out of my usual depth of experience that I have barely any ideas on what to say. It might be lumped in with 'magical realism' though that term seems more and more inadequate. This old edition uses the insulting word 'primitive', but almost as a form of praise.

This is a sort of *Bildungsroman* where a young boy flees bands of slave-traders and hides in the African bush. The land is populated by strange ghosts (here meaning spirits, not only the deceased), with freakish forms and unknown motives. There's one without eyes, without hands, one who is decorated with scorpions for rings and a snake-belt. Their names, too, are strange - 'Skulls', 'Give and Take', 'H.M. The King of the Bush of Ghosts'.

The boy himself changes. He takes animal form. He is mistaken for a ghost's dead father, he grows eyes and becomes a god. He is buried alive by the spider-eaters, he marries a woman who was once an antelope.

Tutuola's language is direct yet unusual - partly the result of his limited formal education, partly from local oral traditions. He describes this supernatural world directly, matter-of-factly.

What can I call this? It might be 'fantasy', but that too is a limiting word for it. It's weird and never boring.

Josh Boardman says

Yeah man, this African Summer was a good call. This book is miraculous. It reminds one of Dante, or Homer, or the most to me, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*. The stories contained herein (it's essentially a novel in stories) run the gamut of funny to horrifying, and Tutuola's masterful manipulation of the English is a delight.

Let me reiterate that last point. Tutuola's masterful manipulation of the English. The fucking editors of the edition pictured above seem to think that his English is "primitive" (oh god) for lack of education, although the author was better than fluent by the time he wrote this story. Honestly, I don't know if they have a new edition yet, but the blurbs on the back of the book and the introduction make me cringe and cry and beat my chest. They're racist, straight up. It's horrible to see Western scholasticism just missing the mark so badly.

Anyhow, this is a masterpiece. It can be difficult to read, as it is heavily colored (zing!). But it is so worth it. A must-read.

Mala says

Tutuola's second book, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, is an improvement on the first, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, in terms of plotting, but the earlier one scores high on spontaneity & exuberance.

Both deal with a young boy, facing a series of strange & fantastic adventures, learning to outwit his adversaries (who come in all shapes & sizes) & adverse circumstances with a little help from magic & fate. They are a bildungsroman of sorts as there's a progression of years & accumulation of various experiences via the vicissitudes of life. One recalls the charm of *One Thousand and One Nights* in the oral tradition of Tutuola's story-telling in that they are episodic & linked in nature but there is no framing device as such rather his narrative conjures up the image of an inebriated shaman, telling a bewitching yet horrific tale to his fascinated audience around a crackling wood fire to the sounds of tribal beats. While the hero's trials & tribulations, the supernatural occurrences, remind one of the *Odyssey*, & *The Golden Ass*, also, a fascination with the grotesque & playful aspect of life, show a Rabelasian bent of mind— in short, Amos Tutuola is in august company.

Surprisingly, Tutuola's "primitive" English becomes his strength as it helps him smoothly convey native West African myths in a natural native usage— they seem more grounded & believable that way. His language has the charm of children learning to speak— they make mistakes but how charming those mistakes sound that you wouldn't have them any other way!

In this highly imaginative tale, two characteristics stand out— a superb comic sense & the matter of fact presentation of the most bizarre happenings. I still roll with laughter when recalling "the gentleman of completed parts" & the hilarious sub-heading of that chapter: "Do Not Follow Unknown Man's Beauty" from

The Palm-Wine Drinkard, here too one encounters that madcap comedy in chapters like The Smelling Ghost, The Short Ghosts and their Flash-eyed Mother, I Meet My Dead Cousin in the 10th Town of Ghosts, etc. The ferocious dead babies crawling on the road to the "Dead's Town" meet their match in the "Burglar-ghost" here: (view spoiler)

In the mechanics of this bush of ghosts, Tutuola's imagination blends with the mythology of West African tribal life so that this ghost world is presented as an elaborate system of some parallel world. We are transported from realism to the magical/supernatural with an ease that captures the essence of folk art. These ghosts aren't really that different from human beings in that they have a clear hierarchy, initiation rites & cults, why, they even have a church, school, hospital, agriculture & animal husbandry, & carry guns & money!

They eat, drink, sing & dance— such a merry lot! No wonder, despite his long ordeal, our hero doesn't really want to come back from their world— Persephone or Stockholm Syndrome, you decide. How come Tim Burton & Johnny Depp haven't yet heard of this tale is beyond me!

Some of the tales here I've also encountered in Indian folktales e.g., The Man with Three Wives, & some others in various permutations, makes you wonder about the generic nature of such folklores.

Freshness & Innocence are the words that spring to mind when speaking of Amos Tutuola's fiction. It has the pure joy of story-telling— making up stories as you go, no wonder it took me back to the summer holidays from childhood, when swinging under a huge mango tree, with cousins gathered from different corners of the world, I would listen in rapt attention to my grandmother's tales. Some of the older kids objected to her extravagant elements, pointing out lack of logic, she would laugh & say—Oh but it's a story; anything can happen! Were she alive today; I would read Tutuola's books to her. She would've enjoyed them immensely.

Some snippets:

(view spoiler)

Neal Adolph says

How do you review a book when you are not confident that you have the toolset to understand it? Perhaps that is where you start.

I've never read a book like this before.

My Life in the Bush of Ghosts is a fascinating adventure through the landscape of a mysterious civilization hidden in the West African forest. It contains short adventures, all of which are entirely unbelievable, but each containing within itself some story or suggestion about life, danger, economy, human relations, trust, and "the other". I think that is, of course, the point, and, of course, you could look back at this as a collection of parables that have been banded together in some mist-like manner. In fact, I would suggest that the approach is somewhat in line with Don Quixote, though, based on what little I know of the author, I doubt he had read that book. Perhaps that great accomplishment of the Western canon is less astonishing than we

think.

While I was reading this, I often thought that an illustrated edition would be really quite special. I even had brief glimpses of a film directed by Hayao Miyazaki capturing the flow from one nightmare to another and giving it some consistency. The imagery here is wonderful, and it really engaged my imagination. I don't think that is true of stories that settle into realism - at least not in the same way.

What struck me as quite bizarre about this book was the pacing. I couldn't make sense of the pacing whatsoever. There is not effort to meditate on the stories - that is left up to the reader - and, as a result, the adventure thrusts itself forward before the reader is ready to continue onwards. Again, I think that is part of the point. Again, I think that might be part of the point. After all, after reading the introduction (which is quite poorly done) my sense is that the book is structured to mimic stories shared over a campfire, wisdom found not in the story-teller so much as in the story itself. Does this make sense? I'm not sure - I'm definitely not a child of an oral tradition (and this often disappoints me).

In the end, it is the pacing that really throws off my ability to give this book a better rating, though I really enjoyed reading it and think it is quite fascinating (and worthy of some serious study - somebody somewhere must have done some work on this, right?). It made me use my brain in different ways than most literature, and I'm grateful for that. I'll maybe even read it again some day. It contains many mysteries, and many stories, that I wouldn't mind parsing out. Before I do that, though, I'll likely read Tutuola's other work, *The Palm-Wine Drinker*, and see if it, maybe, helps me understand the approach used in this book.

Recommended for those interested in exploring a totally different method of story-telling. An exciting and interesting, though often grotesque, adventure. Prepare to be perplexed.
