

Sandhira Wijayaratne—Sweren Student Book Collecting Contest Entry
Title: Moralistic Humanitarianism and Africa

I was sitting in on a panel conference focused on the discussion of human development when a Congolese academic asked his listeners to recall the first time they heard of Africa. A dead and heavy silence ensued as we tried to rack our brains for our first memories of the continent. But our presenter beat us to it, reading our childhoods faster than we could remember them. And as soon as his deep voice spoke the words that are still etched in my mind, we all knew he was right: “The first time you refused to finish your food, I bet your mother said that there are starving children in Africa.”

His point was clear, that Africa was consistently used as a tool to measure our own fortune against: always an object of pity, never something to be admired—always looked down upon, but never looked up to. As I trace my first legitimate thoughts for the continent, I am slightly ashamed to say that they were out of concern. It was in 2004, my freshman year of high school, when I first heard about the atrocities in the Darfur region of Sudan. The brutal genocide during the time ignited what I see as the moralistic conscience that still burns within me. It was because of Darfur that I picked up *Not on Our Watch*, the first book in an endless collection that continues to redefine and change my passion for the region. In it, Cheadle and Prendergrast introduced me to the devastation that was western Sudan, how lawlessness and government-backed militias slaughtered and raped thousands, how they burned thriving villages and destroyed within months livelihoods that lasted for centuries. But what struck me most was their haunting depiction of an outside world bearing witness, bystanders that were not blind nor deaf—that could definitely see and hear—but onlookers that were apparently overcome by muteness, overwhelmed and wrought with paralysis. The failure to strongly speak and act against what was an obvious genocide is a complete failure of our globalized humanity, of a world supposedly dedicated to the basic rights of all. While governments were bickering about the specifics of what was occurring on the ground, the people of Darfur suffered for years. But woven into the authors’ account of a failed world system were suggestions and advice that individuals could follow to ensure that such atrocities do not go unnoticed. Their tips give me hope that I can do my part to ensure that these issues are never ignored.

The spark was lit, and in spite of the wide range of contradictory opinions I am now aware of, the dryness of my high school mindset caught fire, serving as fertile ground for the fluid embers that took over. Despite the Congolese speaker’s words, I do not see my initial interest in African issues and humanitarian endeavors as a product of pity; there was no way I was looking down on the Darfuri people. But I was definitely horrified—not only of the things that man could do to man, but more from what man would not do for each other. The silence and inaction that followed the news reports may perhaps ring a lot louder than the cries and gunshots that drowned the region. At first, I thought such immobility was due to a dearth of knowledge. I was one of the few in my class that knew about Darfur, let alone the names of more than five countries on the continent. It was this combination of privileged awareness amidst this environment of cluelessness that pushed me further. I was not caught with a bout of sympathy, but with a rapid fever of questioning. *How long has stuff like this been going on? Is there anything being done? How could people not know about this? And most importantly: Why didn’t they care?*

It was in that state of mind that I picked up Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the classical literature on Africa. Achebe’s work provides beautiful insight

into the complexities and nuances of tribal life before colonization, culture much more refined and enigmatic than the “savage” that Conrad depicts in his *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad’s prose was frustrating to read through because of such portrayals, but I believe he was attempting to represent the European attitude towards Africans at that time, which, if true, is unbearable to believe. From these fictional accounts rooted in history, I moved onto nonfiction. *I Dreamed of Africa* and *The Shadow of the Sun*, narratives by outsiders to the continent, provided compelling and poignant stories of the vivid life and sage beauty that lies inherent in the soil and the spirit—the appreciation that these Westerners had for Africa and its many diverse peoples and traditions. Meredith’s *Fate of Africa* chronicled the continent-wide hope that the nationalist movements inspired, as well as the corruption, conflict, and power struggles that have dictated much of Africa since independence. His work is the single-most comprehensive history of the entire region that I have read.

The failure of African states to grow post-independence attracted me to the international development academics and their literature: Sachs, Easterly, Collier, Stiglitz, and Sen. Each has profound insights that somewhat contradict each other, but reading them all has given me a more holistic view about what the problems are, and how multi-faceted they have become. There is no cure-all solution, and no one knows everything, but the strategies put forth at least provide the framework for what can work. It was Sen’s *Development as Freedom* that was particularly enthralling, his capabilities framework setting the stage for an original interpretation of development: not as economic data or other statistics, but as the increased access to various freedoms dictating the quality and ease of life. He reminded me that there are real, live people behind that veil of numbers—the form that development often takes. If we re-focus our commitment to people’s capabilities as opposed to just growth and GDP per capita, we get to the heart of what development is supposed to do: raise people’s livelihoods, and not only countries’ wealth.

Yet, despite development efforts from abroad and within, there is still much to be desired. Poverty is one problem that persists. Conflict is another. Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed Along With Our Families* is an in-depth portrayal of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, a remarkable piece profiling various parties on the ground. His work reinforces the notion that genocide is a global problem that supercedes national boundaries. When it happens, the open wound that remains is a hole in the Earth; everyone feels it because everyone dug it. Thus, we all are perpetrators, and we all are victims. *What is the What?* tells the story of one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, refugee children fleeing the internal war within their country. Valentino Achak Deng escaped the civil war, survived refugee camps, and was given a new home in the United States, only to find that the insecurity and exhaustion that he thought he left in Africa took on a different form in his new American life. *Outcasts United* complements this theme of unrelenting woe following those who have fled conflict, even after resettlement. But it also transcends it, highlighting the fulfillment of the hope that can be realized. In this true story, a female, Jordanian coach pushed her refugee youth soccer team to put aside the war they fled and the differences in their diverse cultures. The coming together of kids from Afghanistan to Liberia is a shining example of the innocence that can be saved when there are those willing to save it. Dr. Paul Farmer is another example. Profiled in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, in addition to the multitude of books he himself has written, Dr. Farmer is the epitome of how one man can make a huge difference. It was these individual stories of dedication in my book collection that convinced me that I also could move beyond just reading about Africa’s problems

to committing myself to action that works to solve them. Yet, I never once did think that books would be part of the potential solutions.

Last spring, I studied abroad in Kenya through the School for International Training. Part of our curriculum allowed us to develop and carry out our own field research projects. I chose to work with a free school for AIDS-affected children in the Kibera slums of Nairobi, one of the largest slums in the world and the largest in East Africa. The HIV/AIDS epidemic runs rampant through this community. Most of the children have a mother or father infected with HIV. Others are orphans, having lost a parent to the disease. Sadly, the damage doesn't stop there: some of the children themselves are infected. Couple this epidemic with slum life, and the situation becomes worse for these kids. However, their school, called Angels of Hope-Kibera, is doing an amazing job of uplifting these forty children. The free early childhood education, daily feeding program, and psychosocial counseling that the school provides have done much to alleviate the plight that these kids face at home. Yet, Angels of Hope-Kibera is limited by an all too common resource: funds. The scant budget it runs on is always on the verge of collapse.

Seeing this school embodied this epidemic's unfairness: how innocent kids were born into these troubling situations, and how even when inspiring institutions existed, they were often crippled financially. This inequity was what moved me to act. I developed my field project around fundraising for the school. Though I was initially not sure through what method I would raise money, I gradually adopted the idea of a photobook: a book of pictures and narratives documenting the kids and their stories. The concept came from conversations with friends, as well as Lana Wong's *Shootback*, a copy of which we had in our office. So I visited the children's homes with the school's director, interviewed their families, and subsequently photographed the children. Later on, I compiled narratives that I wrote from the interviews with the photographs I took, and produced the first book—*Faces of Angels*. Four months later came *Under the Red Bandana*, a shorter book with the same photographs and themes, but with much less content. I have used both photobooks as tools to generate revenue for Angels of Hope-Kibera, and to this point, about \$2,000 has been raised. The school continues to function, and eight of the older kids can now attend age-appropriate schools with the funds that I have raised.

Books serve as both the source of my honed passion for African affairs, as well as the medium through which I created my own service to the region. This contest serves as yet another way that books can give back to my little brothers and sisters in Kenya. Should I be awarded any prize by the selection committee, I will send all of that money to Angels of Hope-Kibera.

I still reflect on the Congolese academic's words, and continue to sift through his implications. But, I also think about the violence, disease, poverty, and injustice that much of Africa continues to contend with. My dedication to the continent is not an admission of feeling sorry, but it does serve as recognition that Africa struggles with significant problems that affect countless people in countless ways. Many of the books in my collection document how awareness of such steep hurdles is met by inactivity to do anything substantial about them. This phenomenon, though counterintuitive, is too frequent to keep track of. Above anything, I think my commitment to the region works against such blatant ignorance; it is our duty as global citizens to act on things we know are wrong. Nevertheless, I consistently question my motives, the underpinning rationale for my obsession with Africa. Sometimes I hear the low tones of a Congolese voice. Other times I hear my own trying to make sense of things. But mostly, I hear those of the kids I met in Kibera. Every time I hear their singsong laughter, I think to myself: I must be doing something right.

Works Cited:

1. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
The foremost name in African literature, Achebe's masterpiece speaks about the beauty and culture of Nigerian tribal life, and the ugliness that colonialism brought upon this society.
2. Cheadle, Don and John Prendergast. *Not On Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond*. New York: Hyperion, 2007.
My first encounter with these issues, the authors present the genocide in Darfur with alarming detail, but they pace it with interventions that everyday people can follow to make a difference.
3. Collier, Paul. *The Bottom Billion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
Collier's hypotheses present the obstacles that upset the progress of developing countries in the form of different "traps." His views are brilliant, and are backed by various forms of economic and empirical data.
4. Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Penguin, 1999.
The classical text of African colonialism, Conrad paints a disturbing portrait of the inhumanity of slavery and imperialism on the continent, as well as with the infamous Mr. Kurtz. *Heart of Darkness* has a polarizing effect on its audience, but none can deny the emotion and outcry Conrad's writing evokes.
5. Easterly, William. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
Easterly makes a case for the failure of Western initiatives to aid the poor in developing countries, and how we must reform the overarching structure of international aid to finally see the results of actions and money that he has seen, to this point, as not only waste, but also as damage to the populations that our governments purport to assist. A must-read in development literature.
6. Eggers, Dave. *What is the What?* New York: Vintage, 2006.
Eggers tells the true-life tale of Valentino Achak Deng: a refugee who became one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. Through Deng's voice, his story of tragedy and subsequent escape from Sudan, to Kenya, and finally, to the United States, is an unfortunate, ongoing reality for many refugees, even those who have been resettled in Western states.
7. Farmer, Paul. *Pathologies of Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
Farmer's acumen goes above and beyond medicine. His capturing writing style drew me into the unfairness and extremity of the health problems that the global poor face.
8. Gallmann, Kuki. *I Dreamed of Africa*. New York: Viking, 1991.
Gallman's memoir evokes much of what attracts people to the continent: the rugged yet beautiful landscape, the history the continent captures, and the individual fascination that

overcomes those outsiders who truly love Africa. Some of the feelings she describes as an Italian woman living the rest of her life in Kenya, I can also relate to.

9. Gourevitch, Philip. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.
An amazing and poignant journalistic investigation into some of the people and events that led up to genocide in Rwanda, a chillingly efficient killing machine that took one million lives in a hundred days.
10. Kapuscinski, Ryszard. *The Shadow of the Sun: My African Life*. New York: Penguin, 2002.
Kapuscinski poetically writes about his accounts traveling across the continent from country to country. What makes this book great is its accuracy in terms of its on the ground likeness, as well as its appreciation of the different people he meets on his travels—not just “Africans,” but Ghanaians, Nigerians, Ugandans, etc.
11. Kidder, Tracy. *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. New York: Random House, 2004.
A profile of Dr. Paul Farmer, his background, his motivations, his passion, and all of the amazing work he is doing in Haiti and with his organization, Partners in Health.
12. Meredith, Martin. *Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2005.
An overview of the continent in the past fifty years, particularly focused on how the jubilation of the independence movements did not lead to effective governance and state building. Meredith talks about key leaders and events, and attempts to piece together why Africa is in the state it lies in today. Its history of the continent is pretty comprehensive.
13. Nolen, Stephanie. *28 Stories of AIDS in Africa*. New York: Random House, 2007.
Nolen narrates twenty-eight different stories about how the HIV/AIDS epidemic have impacted Africans across the continent, one story for each million infected within the region. The most emblematic, to me, was her chronicle of the great Nelson Mandela’s coming to terms with his son’s death, a victim of the epidemic.
14. Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. London: Vintage, 2003.
Like Achebe, Okri appears to write about Nigerian culture in this novel, about a spirit child who continues to be born and die in a cycle that never ends, to the detriment of his family. But unlike Achebe, Okri’s style is a bit more magical. I remember reading the first page and I could not help but be amazed by not only the flow of the words, but also its powerful substance.
15. Sachs, Jeffrey. *The End of Poverty*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
Another giant in the international development literature, Sachs is on the flipside of Easterly. He remains hopeful that aid can do what is expected of it, but only with careful planning and a differential diagnosis of each country’s wants and needs. Contrary to Easterly, he appears to be a pretty big proponent of Western aid.

16. Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
Sen is a genius in his unique portrayal of development as increasing capabilities, and thus increasing freedoms. The augmentation of freedom capabilities is a process that is done together, and his examination of development as a subtler science than the hard numbers of economics, makes this a very influential and all-encompassing read. Out of all the development thinkers, he is ultimately right, because development is much more than poverty indicators and GDP per capita; it is the ability of individuals and families to live out their lives as freely as possible.
17. St. John, Warren. *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference*. New York: Random House, 2009.
The story of Clarkston, Georgia, USA, and the youth soccer team that played there, composed of refugee children from many diverse backgrounds. The account is not only a heartwarming story of how these children come together through soccer, despite the conflict they fled and the hostility they felt from Clarkston locals, but it is also an indictment of small-town America as a whole, and how hypocritical we can be with the values we espouse. A very quick and easy read, the issues portrayed go far beyond sports. I've recommended it to pretty much everyone.
18. Stiglitz, Joseph. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.
Yet another big player in international development, Stiglitz examines the biggest supranational institutions dedicated towards development: the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This book is an attack on those institutions, as he systematically illustrates the arrogance and hypocrisy of its leaders and vision, how they force certain policies onto poorer countries in an effort to make them more "globalized." Stiglitz goes further to indicate the harm that they have done in light of the good these entities are supposed to bring about: causing economic crises, withholding aid unless a country adopts all of its neoliberal prescriptions, and failing to learn from the mistakes they have made in the past.
19. Wijayarathne, Sandhira. *Faces of Angels: Real Stories of AIDS-affected Children in the Kibera Slums*. San Francisco: Blurb, 2011.
The first photobook I made. I designed the book as a fundraising project to financially support Angels of Hope-Kibera, a free school for AIDS-affected children living in the Kibera slums of Nairobi, Kenya. It documents the interviews I conducted with the kids' families, as well as photographs that I took of the children. I compiled everything together in this book as a way to honor these kids and the two-toned struggle they face: victims not only of the AIDS epidemic, but of slum life as well. The stories and pictures depict not only what is tough in their lives, but also what is hopeful, particularly with the school and the remarkable job it is doing in uplifting these kids.

20. Wijayaratne, Sandhira. *Under the Red Bandana*. San Francisco: Blurb, 2011.
A separate photobook, again utilizing some of the pictures I took of the children, but in a different format that uses a window technique and a poem to get across underlying reflections of my experience with these amazing kids. It was made though “The Artist in the Museum: Making Books” class offered at Hopkins last fall. It was on display at the Evergreen Museum through the months of December and January, along with my classmates’ work.
21. Wong, Lana. *Shootback: Photos by Kids from the Nairobi Slums*. London: Booth-Clibborn, 2000.
Harvard-trained photographer Lana Wong goes into the Mathare slums of Nairobi, Kenya and works with the youth living there. She teaches these kids how to use cameras and take pictures, and this photobook is the result—a vivid portrayal of the obstacles surrounding these kids, as seen through their own eyes and no one else’s. A visually powerful work, this book was what convinced me to design my own project around pictures and my kids’ stories.

Wish List:

1. Biehl, Joao. *Will to Live: AIDS Therapies and the Politics of Survival*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
A portrayal of those left out by Brazil's "universal" access to HIV/AIDS care.
2. Collins, Daryl et al. *Portfolios of the Poor: How the World's Poor Live on \$2 a Day*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
Stories about how those living on two dollars a day cope and manage to subsist.
3. Farmer, Paul. *Haiti After the Earthquake*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011.
An account of Farmer's experiences on the grounds after the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti, and the resilience of the Haitian people.
4. Farmer, Paul. *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
Farmer's brilliant writing examines why the worst of medical scourges continue to target the poor.
5. Greene, Melissa Faye. *There Is No Me Without You: One Woman's Odyssey to Rescue Her Country's Children*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2007.
True story of an Ethiopian woman taking in AIDS orphans. As this related to the scope of my work, I simply must have this.
6. Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. New York: Mariner, 1999.
A chilling account of the brutality of Belgian colonialism in the Congo.
7. Moyo, Dambisa. *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. New York: Penguin, 2010.
Moyo makes the argument that aid not only is incapable of working, it has made things much worse for Africans and their countries.
8. Mycoskie, Blake. *Start Something That Matters*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011.
The TOMS shoe creator provides insight in making meaningful change in the world.
9. Wrong, Michela. *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2002.
Extending off of Conrad's hauntingly infamous character, Wrong examines the history of a Congo wrought in atrocities led by Joseph Mobutu.
10. WuDunn, Sheryl, and Nicholas D. Kristof. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York: Vintage, 2010.
The journalistic married couple provide examples of how investment in women has

created, and continues to bring about, more holistic development and human rights in the world.

11. Yunus, Muhammad. *Creating a World Without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2009.

As the founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, understanding the innovation behind this microfinancer's model of development is a must for me.