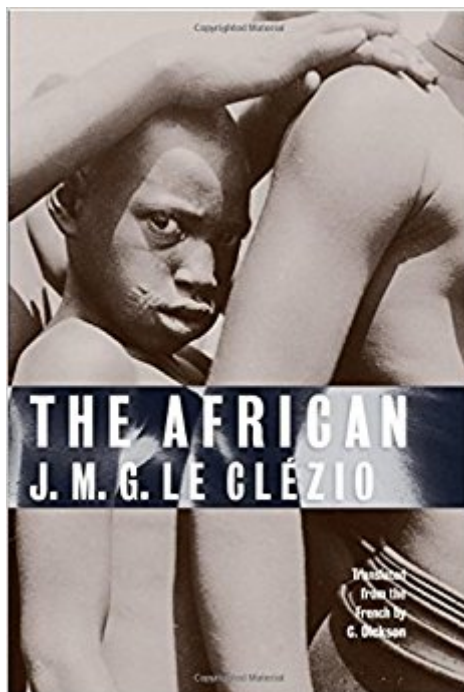


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# The African



## Synopsis

The African is a short autobiographical account of a pivotal moment in Nobel-Prize-winning author J. M. G. Le Clezio's childhood. In 1948, young Le Clezio, with his mother and brother, left behind a still-devastated Europe to join his father, a military doctor in Nigeria, from whom he'd been separated by the war. In Le Clezio's characteristically intimate, poetic voice, the narrative relates both the dazzled enthusiasm the child feels at discovering newfound freedom in the African savannah and his torment at discovering the rigid authoritarian nature of his father. The power and beauty of the book reside in the fact that both discoveries occur simultaneously. While primarily a memoir of the author's boyhood, The African is also Le Clezio's attempt to pay a belated homage to the man he met for the first time in Africa at age eight and was never quite able to love or accept. His reflections on the nature of his relationship to his father become a chapeau bas to the adventurous military doctor who devoted his entire life to others. Though the author palpably renders the child's disappointment at discovering the nature of his estranged father, he communicates deep admiration for the man who tirelessly trekked through dangerous regions in an attempt to heal remote village populations. The major preoccupations of Le Clezio's life and work can be traced back to these early years in Africa. The question of colonialism, so central to the author, was a primary source of contention for his father: "Twenty-two years in Africa had inspired him with a deep hatred of all forms of colonialism." Le Clezio suggests that however estranged we may be from our parents, however foreign they may appear, they still leave an indelible mark on us. His father's anti-colonialism becomes The African's legacy to his son who would later become a world-famous champion of endangered peoples and cultures.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Le Clezio is ever the master at rendering existence at the level of sensation with a daring and admirable freshness of language. --Peter Brooks, New York Times

For many years now, the publishing house of David R. Godine has been producing some of the most attractive books of our time. Witness this little volume of reminiscences by J.M.G. Le ClÃfÂ©zio, the recipient of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature. [...] Apart from award-winning novels, starting with *The Interrogation*, J.M.G. Le ClÃfÂ©zio has written repeatedly about ecology, landscape and colonialism, paying particular attention to Africa, Mexico, Central America and his family's native Mauritius. Given that he has produced more than 40 books, *The African* can represent only one aspect of, in the words of the Nobel committee, an author of new departures, poetic adventure and sensual ecstasy, explorer of a humanity beyond and below the reigning civilization. Still, this brief memoir provides a good entry point, honoring, as it does, Le ClÃfÂ©zio's father and mother and his own lost African childhood. --Michael Dirda, Washington Post

The past has receded, become so distant that no memory, no attempt to summon it can possibly bring it back. Nobel Prize winner J.M.G. Le ClÃfÂ©zio tells us as much, even as his slim memoir, "*The African*," valiantly attempts to call back a lost time. [...] Le ClÃfÂ©zio's book is as much a speculative biography of a man he now realizes he hardly knew as a memoir of a complicated childhood. It is a memory palace, a deliberately disordered evocation of the past that hopscotches through time. --Saul Austerlitz, Boston Globe

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clezio, winner of the 2008 Nobel Prize in Literature, was born in 1940 in Nice, France. His first novel, *Le Procès-Verbal* (*The Interrogation*), won the Prix Renaudot in 1963 and established his reputation as one of France's preeminent writers. He has published more than forty works of fiction and nonfiction, including *The Prospector* (Godine, 1993) and *Desert* (Godine, 2009). He and his wife currently divide their time between Nice, New Mexico, and the island of Mauritius.

In this beautiful (physical and language-wise) small volume, Mr. LeClezio examines both the experiences of freedom during his childhood years in Africa and the lack of a warm relationship with his emotionally distant father. He details the arc of his father's life, an extraordinary man dedicated to his role of doctor first in Guyana, then in Cameroon and Nigeria, who singlehandedly serves a wide territory with modern medicine. When war breaks out, his father is

separated from his family for years and joy slowly fades from his life as he turns more and more toward disciplined hard work. His father comes to realize that even as a doctor, he too plays the role of colonizer, a role he despises. The seeds of revulsion toward colonialization are planted in Mr. LeClezio's early years. Honoring his father, an African by destiny, and his African mother by conception, the author skillfully weaves together a colorful tapestry of his African heritage with clear and vivid descriptions of his parents, places, and events. This book is especially poignant for me, as I, too, experienced a colonial childhood in Africa prior to independence, arriving by boat from the Mediterranean with my mother to join my father in Northern Nigeria, and also coming to terms with an uneasy relationship with my father. Mr. LeClezio's words evoke visceral sensory African memories, from the drama of violent late afternoon thunderstorms, the fiery bite of red ants, the red dust of laterite roads, and the nourishing scent of groundnut stew simmering on a woodstove. Only recently introduced to the literature of Mr. LeClezio, I anticipate many happy hours ahead of reading, learning, and being entertained by his other books.

The book is terribly interesting for anybody who has come to know Africa. The descriptions of the life the doctor and his wife lived in Africa reminded me of the life I lived in Ghana about half a century ago. I read it with great pleasure. The author's style is quite lyrical which makes reading the book all the more pleasurable. Anybody who has had some experience of life in Africa so many years ago will find it as interesting as I did. Congratulations to the author, the doctor's son. He does deserve the Nobel prize.

Love it. Beautiful narrative, very poetic. You can feel nature and its greatness, the grassland, savannah, torned down stone "castle". Everything is so real and so beautifully described. It is a pleasure to read.

The African is more than a nostalgic reading of a lost World. It is a homage to enduring memories and truly love. I can only say that this book is beautiful and inspiring. Families are situated on the far side of perfection. And that is an unequivocal truth.

Compelling - must read!

This is an extraordinary journey into the heart of "Africa profound." Highly recommended to those who understand and appreciate what Africa has been and can be.

"L'African" is J.M.G. Le Clézio's father, and this slim, elegant book is a poignant profile of Le Clézio's father and, to a lesser extent, a memoir of the few years of his own youth that were spent in Africa. The book is a small gem, of the elevated, distinguished quality one would like to think the norm for Nobel laureates. Of French extraction, Le Clézio's father was born and raised on Mauritius, which since 1810 had been a British colony. In 1919, the family was evicted from its ancestral home, and Le Clézio père went to Great Britain where he was educated as a doctor. Without wealth or societal connections, he entered British service as a physician on assignments to remote colonies - first to British Guiana and then, in 1928, to West Africa, where he was posted to areas now in Biafra, eastern Nigeria, and western Cameroon. "[I]t was a region in which war was all-pervasive, the war of human beings against one another, the war against poverty, the war against abuse and corruption inherited from colonization, especially the war against germs." While in West Africa, he married his cousin and for a time they lived a rather primitive but relatively Edenic existence in the more peaceful African highlands before his wife returned to France, where she had two sons, one being Jean-Marie Gustave (born in 1940). The outbreak of World War II separated the family, with mother and sons in France and father in western Nigeria. It wasn't until 1948 that they were re-united and J.M.G. first met his father, at the age of eight, when he and his mother and older brother moved to Nigeria to join his father. Much of the early part of *THE AFRICAN* consists of vignettes from J.M.G.'s boyhood in West Africa, where he and his brother were the only white children within a sixty-kilometer radius. They played with the native children, some of whom were naked, and they explored a land of termite mounds, scorpions, and rushing rivers; in short, they experienced the power and mystery of Africa. About a third of the way into the book, Le Clézio turns to the profile of his father, while he continues his picture of West Africa and begins developing an understated but still incisive condemnation of colonialism. His father, for years, was the only doctor for thousands of people, his competition being witch doctors, a situation that undoubtedly engendered uncommon psychic rewards. But eventually, his father "discovered - after all those years of having felt close to the Africans, like a relative, a friend - that the doctor was just another instrument of colonial power, no different from the policeman, the judge, or the soldier." When his father finally left colonial service, in the early 1950's, he was an embittered man. And his relationship with his sons was a distant, often stormy one, which J.M.G. touchingly recounts. But still, his father passed on to J.M.G. a deep-rooted repulsion for the colonial system - or, perhaps, that repulsion developed in J.M.G. from the same sorts of experiences and innate sensibility. *THE AFRICAN* is beautifully written (and thus, I assume, beautifully translated from the French by C.

Dickson). The prose is easy to read and follow, unlike, so I understand, some of Le Clézio's fiction. As the book progresses, the writing gathers force yet, at the same time, it becomes increasingly poetic. For those who care about J.M.G. Le Clézio, THE AFRICAN probably is essential reading. As he writes, "I am forever yearning to go back to Africa, to my childhood memory. To the source of my feelings, to that which molded my character." But even for those who have read little of Le Clézio - as was the case with me - THE AFRICAN is a wonderful book. Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the excellent quality of the book itself, as published by David R. Godine. It is handsomely and sturdily bound, with substantial semi-gloss pages. It contains maps (two printed as end pages) and about a dozen photographs of West Africa from Le Clézio's personal collection. The text is set in Minion, a fitting and attractive modern type. It is a model for twenty-first century book production.

Le Clezio's African is not the Africans themselves, but his father. The book talks of the impression and the effects that the bodies and the land of Africa left behind on the author and his father, how it carved their sensibilities, worldview and eventually turning his father into a misfit in his native France. At times elegantly written, but the book falls short in convincing the reader about the power of African experiences. Perhaps, a longer memoir would have done this more justice. None the less, the book is an interesting stimulator to read the better known works by Le Clezio

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