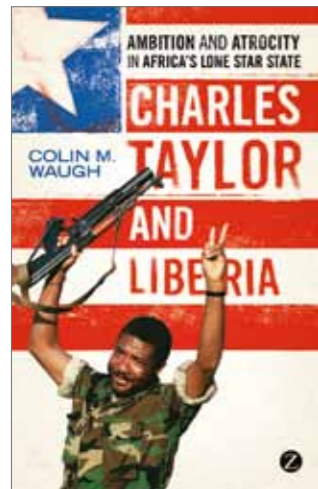


Selected and reviewed by **Belinda Otas**

Book reviews

Charles Taylor and Liberia: Ambition and Atrocity in Africa's Lone Star State
 By: **Colin M. Waugh**
 Published by: **Zed Books Ltd**
 ISBN: **978-1848-13-8476**



President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is serving her second term in office, having won last year's elections, in what has been a long road of healing and recovery for Liberia. It is hard to understand why she stressed the need for reconciliation and reconstruction, and placed emphasis on national unity as a priority during her second tenure, without first understanding the complex historical context and deep divisions that resulted in the Liberian civil war.

The divisions go back to the founding years of the nation, when freed slaves from the US resettled in the country. The tensions that soon arose between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous people due to social, economic and political inequalities saw the marginalised natives trying to fight back – for a share of the national cake.

It was the cycle of discord in addressing the issues of inequality and margin-

alisation that led to the coup of April 1980 which propelled a native son, Master-Sgt Samuel Doe to power, thus ending “133 years of Americo-Liberian ascendancy”.

Liberians welcomed the change of government, but, after the initial years of good work, Doe, supported to the hilt by the USA, turned out to be a nightmare in the end. Both the Reagan and Bush administrations turned a blind eye to his human rights abuses as he plunged the country into chaos.

It was Doe's rampant nepotism and lack of accountability that would bring Charles Taylor, initially a member of the Doe government until he was forced to flee the country due to allegations of embezzlement, into contention.

Colin Waugh's book is a thoroughly researched historical account of a nation on the cusp of redefining itself. He brings to the fore the complicated domestic affairs and the regional and international interference that set Liberia on a path of total chaos.

More fascinating is Waugh's ability to piece together the impact of Taylor's years in government and how it shaped Liberia and the ensuing civil war in Sierra Leone.

While Waugh acknowledges that during the war “working conditions improved for many living in the Taylor-controlled ‘Greater Liberia’ (though “the puppet government in Monrovia was haemorrhaging economically”), he says it is Taylor's role in supporting the Sierra Leonean rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) that would later lead him to The Hague via the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

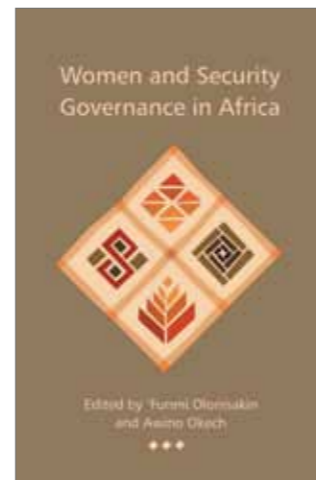
The book is a bold offering from Waugh because he takes the reader on a journey that is historically astute but never once loses sight of those who have suffered the most, the citizens of the land.

It is an illuminating and insightful examination of greed, corruption, war and

violence, and its ravaging effect.

Waugh leaves you wondering if Liberia is a victim of history as it is a victim of the external forces involved in its national affairs.

Women and Security Governance in Africa
 Edited by:
Funmi Olonisakin and Awino Okech
 Published by: **Pambazuka Press**
 ISBN: **978-1906-38-7891**



The ills suffered by women during war and conflict is now an area that international bodies like the UN, UN Women and various women campaign groups take seriously. From Liberia to Sierra Leone to DR Congo, women have found themselves sandwiched between multiple warring factions and have often become victims of heinous violence and rape.

At a time when the role of the African woman is continuously being redefined, from that of a housewife to a state minister to a president, *Women and Security Governance in Africa* examines the strategic positioning of women during peace

negotiations in conflict times.

This book brings together diverse viewpoints about the corporate participation and visibility of women at crucial negotiation points, and says without women it will be impossible to achieve a peaceful and harmonious society.

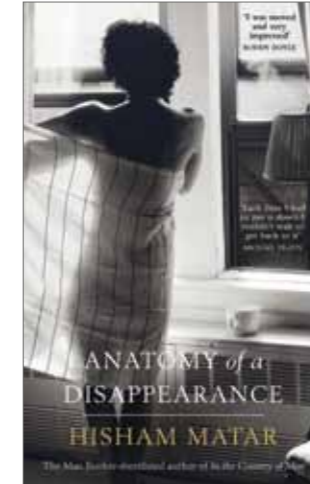
When UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security was adopted in 2000, it was heralded by policy analysts, women's groups and international observers as a turning point in the protection of women during conflict times.

After years of women's security and their wellbeing during conflict times being relegated to the margins, this was the first time that the security concerns of women in situations of armed conflict and their role in peace building were placed on the agenda of the UN Security Council.

But, as the authors argue, “real change towards ending violence against women requires a coordinated and sustained effort at many levels, focusing on legal and institutional reforms, with particular attention paid to the repeal [or amendment] of all discriminatory laws...”

This is a book which must be read by women campaigners, policy makers, government officials and staffers at the UN in order to gain practical insight into a problem that continues to grow, with changes few and far inbetween.

Anatomy of a Disappearance
 By: **Hisham Matar**
 Published by: **Viking**
 ISBN: **978-0670-91-8072**



Hisham Matar wastes no time in laying the foundation for a profoundly moving story about the loss of a loved one and the psychological impact it has on those they leave behind.

“My father disappeared at the beginning of my school Christmas holiday, when I was fourteen”, says Nuri. Matar's protagonist does not know if his father, who was abducted, is dead or alive.

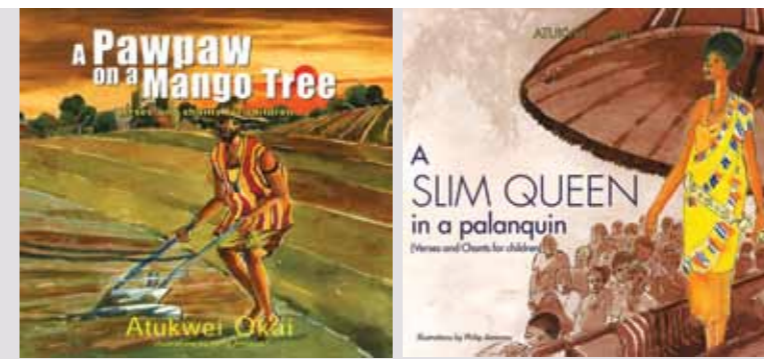
Matar is a Libyan writer whose father was a political dissident and was critical of Al Gathafi's government. He was kidnapped in Egypt in 1990, when Matar was 20. If one mistakenly assumes that *Anatomy of Disappearance* is a semi-autobiographical work by the writer, whose debut was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, one could easily be forgiven.

Beyond the story of loss is the story of a young boy going through the rites of passage. When Nuri first sets eyes on Mona, while on holiday with his father, in Cairo, she has a profound impact on him and he quickly takes to her.

However, it is Nuri's father that Mona marries and soon a secret jealousy of his father builds up in the young boy, creating a rather uneasy relationship between all three – Mona, who is all too aware of what her presence does to the impressionable Nuri, his father who knows his son is fond of his wife, and Nuri, who keeps his secret guarded, or at least thinks he does until he is sent off to boarding school and confides in his room mate Alexei.

Nuri soon learns that what used to matter, Mona, is no longer of such significance without his father in his life.

Matar paints a vivid story that leaps at you from the pages. It is a poignant and timely book by a writer who understands the Libyan narrative.



1. **A Pawpaw on a Mango Tree**
 2. **A Slim Queen in a Palanquin**
 3. **The Anthill in the Sea**
 By: **Atukwei Okai**
 Illustrations by: **Philip Amonoo**
 Published by:
Smartline Ltd, Accra, Ghana
 ISBN: **9988-600-25-9**
 ISBN: **9988-600-20-8**
 ISBN: **9988-600-23-2**

A collection of verses and chants for children, Atukwei Okai, one of Ghana's and Africa's greatest poets and writers, has put together poetry and illustrations which remind you of childhood stories as relayed by grandparents, uncles, aunties and older family members.

If his aim was to take parents back in time and remind children about what it means to be a child being raised by a com-

munity, he succeeds. His poetry has lessons embedded in it: “The tall big trees in our forest, I salute! For the beautiful things they contribute: The desk and the bed and the door and the chair...”

Such a simple yet effective form of writing for children means the message hits home and Okai's latest children's books (three on the trot) are a good way to introduce children to reading poetry and keeping their attention.

“Serengeti! Serengeti!
 We are getting ready! To come on a jetty
 And cross your fabulous ferry
 With many thanks for your mercy
 For making our world so cheery...”

And all the poems are beautifully illustrated. All three books are the sort that should keep African children rooted in their environment. They come highly recommended. ■NA