



## Africa: A Biography of the Continent

*John Reader*

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**Africa: A Biography of the Continent** John Reader

"Awe-inspiring . . . a masterly synthesis."

--*The New York Times Book Review*

"Deeply penetrating, intensely thought-provoking and thoroughly informed . . . one of the most important general surveys of Africa that has been produced in the last decade." --*The Washington Post*

In 1978, paleontologists in East Africa discovered the earliest evidence of our divergence from the apes: three pre-human footprints, striding away from a volcano, were preserved in the petrified surface of a mudpan over three million years ago. Out of Africa, the world's most ancient and stable landmass, Homo sapiens dispersed across the globe. And yet the continent that gave birth to human history has long been woefully misunderstood and mistreated by the rest of the world.

In a book as splendid in its wealth of information as it is breathtaking in scope, British writer and photojournalist John Reader brings to light Africa's geology and evolution, the majestic array of its landforms and environments, the rich diversity of its peoples and their ways of life, the devastating legacies of slavery and colonialism as well as recent political troubles and triumphs. Written in simple, elegant prose and illustrated with Reader's own photographs, **Africa: A Biography of the Continent** is an unforgettable book that will delight the general reader and expert alike.

"Breathtaking in its scope and detail." --*San Francisco Chronicle*

## Africa: A Biography of the Continent Details

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Author : John Reader

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## **From Reader Review Africa: A Biography of the Continent for online ebook**

### **Konstantin Kirilov says**

A tremendously informative book that IMO should be compulsive reading. The only issue I have is that it is dated, since the narrative ends around the mid 1990-s. Not sure if there is an updated version, but would love to read one either way. Highly, highly recommended!

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### **Nathan says**

John Reader has an agenda. He loves Africa, a continent that has been misunderstood and misused by Westerners for centuries, and he wants you to love it, too. Reader approaches his “biography of a continent” with unbounded ambition and intelligence, gracefully synthesizing academic arguments from disparate fields to construct a portrait of humanity’s first homeland that is insightful and reverent. The scope is staggering, with detours into geology, evolutionary biology, anthropology, archeology, linguistics, economics, and, of course, history. It is a beautiful journey through the story of how we came to be us, and how African countries came to suffer the tragedies they experience today.

Reader does an excellent job of avoiding the romanticization of African traditional ways of life that many sympathetic westerners fall into. Nature is heartless, and life could be brutal. Starvation was—is—a constant threat, and none of our modern notions of human rights applied. But he tries to show that far from being backwards, African cultures achieved something the West never has: homeostasis in cooperation with the environment. Technology evolved locally inasmuch as was needed to adapt to changing conditions, and cultures developed to allow groups of people to live symbiotically without a coercive state. Westerners mistook balance for backwardness, and thus, Reader shows, their (our) influence has been malevolent from the first.

From time to time, it is clear that Reader is writing beyond his expertise. In a book of this scope, that’s inevitable. His economic analysis sometimes leaves something to be desired, and occasionally he pursues his sympathetic agenda at the cost of intellectual honesty—but only in small ways. You can’t just accept everything Reader writes, but I don’t think he’d want you to. The story he is telling is too complex to have only one truth, and even this tome doesn’t have space to present every perspective. But Reader does give you a story that is fresh and compelling, an analysis of humanity’s relationship to Africa which takes you pretty damn close to the heart of what it means to be human.

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### **Ryan Murdock says**

I read this book in the lead up to my recent trip to Namibia. Reader provides a great broad-brush overview of African history from an Africa-centred perspective, drawing heavily on the evolution of hominids, geology and geography to paint a very different picture than what you read in most post-colonial modern history texts.

Reader turns many widely-accepted notions of Africa on their heads. The competition for resources is seen as much more important than warfare, small peaceful communities as more significant than the noisy leadership of “big men”, and the developments and innovations of Africans as much more significant than

was previously acknowledged by those who prefer to see the continent as stagnant and undeveloped until "liberated" by the West.

It's a massive book, but well worth your time. Essential reading for anyone traveling to the Dark Continent.

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### **AC says**

Review to follow... Excellent book, though. A thoroughly digested and thoughtful account of a million years of history... Literally, a biography of the continent.

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### **Brook says**

Not recommended - surely there are a few other books that better cover evolution, the geology of Africa, and its history and pre-history.

The New York Times Book Review is quoted on the cover: "... a masterly synthesis." A synthesis, yes, but not a masterly one. (Here I'd recommend "From Dawn to Decadence".)

Reader does well with several parts (evolutionary theory, several ancient civilizations like Aksum, several European schemes like King Leopold II's Belgium) but could have used stronger editing throughout.

For example, he gives 22 pages to South African gold and diamond mining. The book could have easily been pared down by a fifth.

Some of the freed pages could have then been turned into local area maps, diagrams, etc. While his photography is nice, it and a few continental maps in the appendix just don't draw enough of a picture.

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### **Bruce says**

This detailed but very readable work begins with a historical discussion of the geography of the continent, including continental drift, and moves quickly on to the begins of life, the first two chapters spanning billions of years in relatively few pages while providing an adequate and interesting outline of the topics. Reader then discusses changes in climate over millenia, the accompanying evolutionary changes, and the emergence of humans and the evidence that has accumulated to support our understanding of these processes. He continues by discussing the cultural anthropology that defined the various peoples populating the continent by drawing on data from a host of disciplines. All of this is very clear and interesting.

Many of Readers' observations, eg about the relationships between geography and culture, can be generalized to all parts of the world. He also, however, is astute and clear about illuminating how the unique African experience was different from other places. The gradual development of various economies and economic types was of interest, particularly as related to the past few centuries, and I was intrigued to learn more about the evolution of the slave trade in particular as it changed from being primarily an activity internal to the continent to a more widespread and global phenomenon. Indeed, Reader argues that slavery, both domestic and external, and the introduction of firearms into Africa, were the two most pivotal events in

transforming traditional culture, economics, and society into what emerged over the past three hundred years, both processes having continent-wide consequences. Ironically, after the abolition of the slave trade by nations outside of Africa in the 19th century, slavery within the African continent actually increased dramatically.

I found particularly helpful Reader's presentation of the history of South Africa over the past three hundred years, his explanations clarifying for me areas of history of which I had a weak understanding. Keys to understanding this period for Africa as a whole include the discovery and exploitation of diamonds and gold, on the one hand, and the establishment by Leopold the Second of Belgium of the Belgian Congo on the other, this latter setting off the race of colonialism involving the entire continent. In the Congo itself, as but one example, the human and material exploitation involving rubber was almost unimaginable, the most vivid portrayal of the ambiance for us today being Joseph Conrad's novel, *The Heart of Darkness*.

After tracing the colonialization of Africa by European powers during the 19th century, Reader describes the terrible environmental and ecological devastation caused at the end of the 19th century by rinderpest, a fatal viral disease of domestic and wild animals that was introduced by cattle from Italy; subsequently, and directly caused by this plague, came the rapid spread of the tsetse fly and its human disease, sleeping sickness. These catastrophes so decimated the human population of the continent that the people were unable effectively to resist the exploitation of the European powers.

During the colonial period and thus after the European powers seemingly arbitrarily created national boundaries, the approach to Africa by these powers was highly paternalistic, discounting indigenous history and culture. And when, beginning in the 1960's, pressures for independence became too strong to be resisted despite the lack of preparation of many African nations for self-government, political instability became more the rule than the exception. Most of the conflicts were within rather than between nations, and the paths of individual nations varied widely, from the horrors in Rwanda on the one hand to the more orderly transitions in South Africa on the other.

Reader's story ends when his book was published in the mid-1990's, and so a knowledge of subsequent history must be sought elsewhere. Nonetheless, he has done a masterful job of tracing the history of this fascinating continent.

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## **Mark says**

Some of the material covered here, on things like fossils and plate tectonics, might be more technical than a general reader (like me!) would be comfortable with.

That said, this is a well-written, absorbing, and commendably comprehensive account of Africa's history. The passages dealing with slavery are very fair, but still harrowing, and the account of the 1994 Rwanda massacre is chilling.

Most chilling of all is that, as that awful thing was happening, South Africa was installing Nelson Mandela as president of its first government after the horror of apartheid. The contrast is mindboggling.

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## **Mark says**

A truly incredible book. The author brings together geology, geography, history, economics, politics, linguistics and several other disciplines into a sweeping and breathtaking description of Africa. What can one say about a book which begins at 3.7 billion years ago as the continent forms, moves on to a "mere" 5 million years ago when the first humanoids are said to appear in Tanzania, describes how a mere handful of humans (maybe as few as 50) made the journey out of Africa 200,000 years ago to eventually populate Eurasia.

The book does a fantastic job of describing the differences in the nomadic pastoral tribes and the stationary agricultural tribes in Africa and how those lifestyles influenced evolution of the various people and the continent. There is also a great overview of the climatic impact and the sometimes violent climatic changes which drove human movement and development as once fertile valleys turned into a giant desert 100,000 years ago.

There is a great description of the African local commerce and the eventual encounter between the Europeans and the Africans which led to a combination of violence, slavery and development across Africa. The story of Belgian King Leopold II was especially interesting. The King managed to create a private rubber corporation for himself out of the entire Congo area vastly enriching himself and also sending vast riches to Belgium.

Eventually, the book brings the reader to the struggle for independence and the violence which ensued as local tribes fought for control over newly independent territories. The book ends around mid 1990's on a mixed note as the author highlights the recent tragedies of tribal slaughter in Rwanda and the peaceful transfer of power in South Africa. This is to highlight the author's view that Africa remains a land of trouble and a land of hope, I think.

A breathtaking read!

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## **Mindy McAdams says**

One of the more interesting nonfiction books I've ever read — the subtitle of this book is accurate: "A Biography of the Continent." While anthropologists criticize it for leaving out some of the important archaeological finds, and political scientists/historians criticize it for failing to detail every coup and skirmish, I have no similar complaints. As a general reader, poorly educated in all aspects of Africa's past, I found fascinating new information in every chapter in this book.

The reason it took me two years to read this was the sadness I felt starting late in part 4 (of 8 parts) when the European trade in slaves and the products of the African continent began to figure largely in the story. The book proceeds chronologically from the geological formation of the continent (part 1) and the emergence of early humans (part 2) through what we today know about the early civilizations and social structures in Africa (parts 3 and 4) — we don't know much, but what is known was all new to me, and here I found some of the most wonderful and compelling chapters.

John Reader has researched all his material deeply, and he includes a number of contemporary quotations once the Europeans arrive and start making written accounts that still survive for us to ponder. He also includes quotes from writings by Africans when they are available, even early on. His writing style is compact and straightforward and sympathetic. I worried when I first encountered this book that his Eurocentric view might be unfair — he's not from Africa, although he's spent loads of time there and clearly loves it — but if he's biased at all it is against the excesses and exploitation wrought by the Europeans. This

is not the account of a colonizer, an owner, an acquisitive capitalist.

As the book came to the infiltration of the continent by European settlers, I really had to be in the right mood to pick it up. Whenever I did read another chapter, I still enjoyed learning new things, and I still enjoyed the author's style and attitude — but it was hard to read more than one or two chapters because there's just so much death and land stealing and waste and the mines and the wealth and the labor and the rinderpest killing the cattle and f-king Belgium! and then the empires and the trading of territories and World Wars I and II. It's sad, and it's hard, and it made me want to cry.

After World War II ends and the empires fall, the book speeds quickly to a rather sudden end. Maybe Reader was feeling as bummed out as I was by that point. He covers the story of Rwanda and its genocide well, with the precursors in chapter 51 and then the genocide in chapter 55, the last chapter. He tries to ring a peal of hope with South Africa's historic elections in 1994 (the same year as the Rwandan genocide), but since I know too well how challenged South Africa still is today, that failed to lift my spirits. The influence of the Soviet Union and communism are faintly mentioned, and Africa's new invaders from China are not in this book at all.

Don't let that dissuade you! If like me you have a yearning to learn more about Africa and its history — not by present-day countries but rather from its origins, both land and people, the way they grew and changed and prospered and fell victim to so many factors, including climate and terrain — then go ahead and take on this book as a reading project that will surprise you and finally illuminate what for so many of us has long been kept from the light.

## BACKGROUND

From a review of the book in *The Economist*: "... his account combines the best of academic research with a sense of Africa which is vivid and understandable—an Africa to which all mankind is related."

<http://www.economist.com/node/113256>

I also found two other reviews, accessible through a university library's database:

"The author is at his best in the first 200 pages. He has previously written on the origins of man and his laying out of the physical history of Africa, the domain of all of our ancestors, is exciting, most engagingly and accessibly written." —*History Today*, Mar98, Vol. 48 Issue 3, p53. 2p.

"His emphasis is on processes of change through time: he employs specifics selectively, using case histories that best illustrate his point. He is a vivid and evocative writer and the review is highly interesting and readable. The volume is a powerful introduction to Africa for the layman." —*African Archaeological Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1999, pp. 137-142

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## Hana says

Vast, kaleidoscopic--an ambitious tour through millions of years of African history and prehistory. There is so much to like and be impressed with here that I feel somewhat churlish rating it three rather than four stars, but the book suffers from its own ambition and, especially towards the end, from too scattered a focus. Still,

for those looking for a thoughtful and intriguing introduction to a very big and complex land, Africa: A Biography of the Continent deserves to be well up on the TBR list.

John Reader is at his finest when he centers his narrative firmly on how the land was formed and how the people and the land continued to shape each other down through the millennia. He does a brilliant job setting the geological background: "Africa is the Earth's oldest and most enduring land mass. Ninety-seven percent of the continent has been in place and stable for more than 300 million years...and some for as much as 3,600 million years" and we meet these ancient land masses again when diamonds and gold are discovered in South Africa igniting the fires of human greed.

Continents drift and rain forests shift splendidly and majestically: "Africa has had more of its land surface covered with tropical forest, for a longer period, than any other part of the globe. But the forests have not been static. They have migrated across the continent as the continent drifted about on the face of the Earth....The Equator lay across what is now the Sahara to begin with, and then moved south as Africa drifted northwards."

Reader does a superb job illustrating how and why the continent has been, and still is, among the most challenging environments that humans face on earth: millions of years of co-evolution have created a horrific set of diseases that still defy us. Trypanosomes, hookworms, schistosomiasis, malaria. A UNESCO survey revealed an 80% hookworm infestation rate in the West African rainforest. "The larvae burrow through the skin and begin an incredible two-day journey to their final destination in the small intestine."

Nor is the larger wildlife any friendlier. As humans shifted from pure hunting and gathering, they found they had serious competition. "Farmers, by contrast [with hunters], were in direct competition with elephants." I had never thought of elephants as THE ENEMY! Now I can see them: looming nearer and nearer to my hard-won crops, with their terrible great feet and knowing old eyes and long, long prehensile trunks just waiting to grab the meal I need to get me through the dry season.

Yet humans *did* tame the land and large swathes of Africa became rich grazing land for the continent's pastoralists, who in turn shaped the plant and animal life and even the mix of parasites. Cattle, for example, have a long and ancient history in Africa dating back over 7,000 years ago. But the human edge was always fragile. Starting in 1890, after 25 years of above average rainfall, the next decades saw continent-wide drought followed by epidemics of cholera, typhus, smallpox and horrible jiggers--a kind of burrowing sand flea introduced from Brazil. And then came rinderpest, a plague that killed 90-95% of African cattle, along with sheep and goats and other grazing animals. Then, as he tells it, on the once-rich pasture lands depopulated by rinderpest, the land reverted to tsetse-infested bush and woodland inhabited only by wild animals. Influential environmentalists who thought these plains were pristine wilderness fought for their 'conservation' and now most (including the famed Serengeti) are tsetse-infested game parks devoid of their ancient human populations. That's Reader at his most incisive and unexpected.

His discussion of archeological evidence of sub-Saharan cultures is masterly and very engaging, but he largely ignores centuries of North African civilization, allotting a mere six pages to Pharonic Egypt and giving Rome, Byzantium and the Islamic Empires barely a glance. That would be fine except that the influences of those cultures shaped the fortunes of Africa's sub-Saharan native populations just as surely as did Western European colonialists. And it is in the coverage of Africa's modern history, from the arrival of the Portuguese on, that the narrative becomes scatter-shot and less compelling. Too many pages are given over to oft-told tales, like the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, but without the perspective that a look at the North African trade might have granted us. Similarly, the long history of colonial rule under North African and Arab powers is not discussed, but that of Europe is.

Truthfully, I wish that some editor had taken a sharp red pencil to much of the last hundred pages of political narrative and pushed Reader to refocus his view on the story he knows best: the interaction of the land and its people. Every time he returns to that theme, the book takes off again and the ah-ha moments kept me searching hopefully. Alas, he ends with the Rwandan genocide, with only a very brief look at the end of apartheid in South Africa--a finish that left me exhausted and confused.

But don't let the downside stop you from trying this--it's a great place to start on any serious tour of a land filled with marvels. Group read with Great African Reads

Content rating: PG warning for dark thematic elements such as slavery and genocide.

For a thoughtful and readable perspective on trade and interactions between the Arab and Mediterranean worlds and sub-Saharan Africa I recommend Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora. For a brief and interesting history of North Africa, see: A Traveller's History of North Africa.

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### **Siria says**

This is a big book with big aims: to tell, over the course of seven hundred pages, the story of sub-Saharan Africa from its geological formation through to the mid 1990s. Considering the magnitude of what he was attempting, Reader did well. It's obviously well-researched, cleanly written and accessible even for people like me, who know shamefully little about Africa. Yet I think the strain of compressing so much into such a small space began to tell on him after about the first two hundred and fifty pages or so—where they are strongly argued and well paced sections dealing with human evolution, and with the kinds of stresses and demands which led to the formation of Africa's distinct horizontally-organised socio-economic systems, the remaining four hundred or so pages become disjointed and choppy.

The earlier part of the book has the case studies serving to illustrate the thematic histories which he was constructing; in the latter half, however, the case studies become an end to themselves, and it's less easy for the reader to bring it together as a whole. A lot of the information which he presents about the awful impact which invasion and colonialism had on Africa was startling (if sadly not surprising), and what he had to say about the ways in which European intervention changed African culture very interesting, but I was left wishing that he'd had an editor ask him to step back a little and think about *why* he was saying what he was saying a little bit more, to recreate the structure of it. An interesting book, and probably a good starting point if you want to know more about Africa, but not without its flaws.

Lastly, there were one or two things which made me tilt my head. Reader has spent a lot of time in Africa, but as he acknowledges himself in the introduction, he is a white man and thus has to overcome a lot of internalised assumptions when talking about the continent. In many respects—at least to me—it seemed like he succeeded. But for instance, there were times when he referred to 'miscegenation' without problematising the term, showing how it's an ugly, ugly word, and that bothered me.

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### **Tim Martin says**

Africa: A Biography of the Continent by John Reader is a very well-named book, a thorough and engaging look at the epic story of this land, from its geological origins to its most recent political struggles. Though a thick book at 682 pages (plus appendices, endnotes, and bibliography), it is a wonderful read.

The introductory section laments that Africa has been "woefully misunderstood and misused by the rest of the world," and that humanity does not properly "recognize its debts and obligations to Africa." A question the author asks, and returns to again and again in the book, is why did the population of humans that left Africa 100,000 years ago grew at much faster rate, or conversely, what prevented the Africans from growing at a similar rate?

Part one was four chapters detailing the geological and paleontological history of Africa, the author noting that the search for missing links is a tradition in African paleontology ("an icon...hunted with fervor bordering on the zealous"), whether the links between reptiles and mammals, lower and higher primates, or hominids and modern humans.

Part two was fantastic, devoted to the origins of the hominids. Hominids he noted arose in an ecological diverse setting (there was no abrupt replacement of forest by savanna when they arose 7 million years ago) and that apes were preadapted for bipedalism (apes carry 60% of their weight on their hind legs, contrasting with 40% for most quadrupeds). Hominids may have evolved to become nomadic, to take advantage of an unexploited food resource, the natural deaths that occurred in the great east African game herds (research has shown that as much as 70% of all carcasses found in the region died from other than predation and are largely unexploited by the highly territorial carnivores). He also cited such researchers as Peter Wheeler, who concluded that "thermoregulation is at the root of all things human," that being bipedal gave hominids additional advantages (walking upright exposed less body surface to direct rays of the sun and allowed for more heat to be removed from the skin by convection by taking advantage of the cooling effects of being higher above ground) that allowed them to remain active in temperatures that would drive a quadruped to heat stroke.

Part three looked at the origins of modern humans civilization, spending a good deal of time on the importance of language and the increasing evidence that sophisticated modern behavior did not arise first 30,000-40,000 years ago among humans that had left Africa for Eurasia, but instead had occurred in Africa some 35,000 years earlier than that, the author providing accounts of the manufacture of sophisticated tools and early attempts at agricultural practices. A fascinating chapter was devoted to the spread of the iron-using Bantu-speaking peoples, who in less than 3,000 years expanded from their homes in modern Nigeria and Cameroon to colonize virtually all of sub-Saharan Africa, "an event unmatched in world history."

Part four was an immensely interesting section, detailing many interesting African civilizations, including the Aksum of Ethiopia (whose influences at its height extended into Arabia and developed Africa's only indigenous written script, Ge'ez) and Jenne-jeno (an urban civilization of the inland Niger delta in Mali that was not hierarchical and lacked centralized control yet was quite prosperous). The history of African agriculture is well-covered, noting the importance of bananas and plantains to the diet, the differing practices of raising cattle for milk versus beef (surprisingly interesting), and the fact that elephants were a real impediment to African agricultural development until comparatively recent times. Slavery is also covered, as the author stated that between 30-60% of all Africans were slaves during historic times, far exceeding the number taken from the continent by the slave trade, these being slaves used within Africa.

Part five examined early European exploration of Africa and the origins of the Atlantic slave trade and also delved into many aspects of African political and economic development, noting how various factors, such as unpredictable climate, disease, problems of food production, the need to maintain voluntary and

cooperative trade links, and the age-set system of rule mitigated against the development of powerful, densely-settled African states (and the disadvantage this would put the Africans at when facing Europeans). Reader also spent a good deal of time noting just how profoundly four centuries of slave-trading "seized the entire social and cultural ethos" of Africa, leading to destruction of some peoples, the creation of others, and the commercialization of African economies (sadly, even after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade indigenous slavery not only continued to exist but actually expanded).

Part six largely dealt with the history of South Africa. Surprisingly, the Zulu state owes its existence less to the rise of Shaka than popularly thought, as it was "squeezed into being" between spreading white settlers in the west and the disruptive activities of slave traders to the east. Early established labor practices for African workers in the Kimberly diamond fields and Witwaterstrand gold mines would have profound implications and influence on Africa, firmly establishing Africans not as true employees but something to be exploited.

Part seven looked at the European scramble for Africa, the horror of King Leopold's Congo and its "carnival of massacre," some of the political legacies of European colonies (177 different ethnic groups according to one study are divided by European-established national boundaries), why Africans accepted the "thin white line" that was colonial administration, and the profound impacts of the rinderpest plague, which killed a staggering 90-95% of all cattle in Africa between 1889 and the early 1900s, leading to a disruption in agricultural practices and the return of the tsetse fly to large swaths of land (many famous game parks such as the Serengeti exist today largely thanks to this plague).

Part eight examined the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, the causes of Africa's frequent coups, and why prosperous, stable democracies are virtually unheard of in sub-Saharan Africa (the author examined the "Botswana exception").

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### **Tim says**

An incredibly well-researched book on a very complex continent. John Reader begins at the beginning. Africa IS the beginning. The beginning of humanity, the cradle of all that is in the world today. The fact that the Western world has historically considered itself superior to the African continent is the tragedy of the human spirit. The damage that we in the Western world have done to the African continent will take many lifetimes for those original humans to overcome. The story is told from the origins of evolutionary history. The reader is taken through the origins of the vast natural resources of the African continent, perhaps the richest the world has ever known...hence all the problems that have developed out of foreign intrusions into the African continent. The evolution of humanity is covered in its entirety, and extremely compelling. Reader takes us back to 100,000 years ago when it was believed that the first humans to leave the African continent made the trek into what is now the Middle East, China, India and Europe. From there we are taken through an archeological history of what is believed to be the earliest examples of tools for hunting and gathering and the locations of the first city states governed by kings and chiefs. I was deeply touched and saddened by Reader's in depth account of the slave trade which has had a more powerful effect on world history than is often accounted for in literature. The pure insanity of this horrible crime against humanity is hard to comprehend. Reader spares no details in describing the voyage on the slave ship. Dysentery was rampant, and there was a line that has been seared into my brain about doctors going below deck to check on the living and the dead and feeling like they were stepping into a slaughter house with the blood, mucous and stench on the floor of the slave quarters. These human beings...the first human beings to walk this earth were treated worse than dogs...worse than rats. They were locked and chained for months on end in order to make the voyage across the Atlantic. A voyage that sometimes took nine months or more. It is a reminder of just

how far back racism has gone, and the inability of the average human being to look at another as an equal. Even amongst their own ethnic groups or race. Many Africans sold off their relatives to obtain European goods that they did not really need in the first place. The message from Europe to the African continent was that the Africans had nothing to exchange but slaves. So the first signs of materialism were apparent in the African continent. I am not going to say that all Africans were innocent...far from it. They contributed as much or more to the slave trade as the Europeans, Indians and Arabs. In fact, the first Portuguese slave traders sold slaves from one part of the coast to Africans on another part of the coast. That was the true origin of the slave trade. From the slave trade, Reader takes us to the origins of apartheid in South Africa which is really the origin of the diamond trade. The British sanctioned, governed and exploited diamond trade enacted rules that basically made slave laborers out of the Africans who helped to find these diamonds...right down to the laws for stealing diamonds...40-50 lashes as if they were indeed slaves. These laborers oftentimes had no other source for work, so they were forced to engage in the brutal working conditions of the diamond mining industry, and were tied to it as there was often no way for them to get out of their "working contracts" which tied them to involuntary servitude...either fulfill the contract or face the threat of jail. It was only a few years before the book was published that this system was finally abolished in South Africa. The next section of the book takes us up through the colonial period when the Europeans decided it was their right after war victories to divide the continent into countries that made no sense ethnically, religiously or culturally. After the African independence movement in Africa, the European powers simply could not keep their hands off of the continent. From assassinations to exploitation of resources, the "independence" turned out to be not so independent after all, and at that point we could throw the United States into the mix as well. Our failure to intervene in true tragedies such as that of Rwanda and the present day situation in the Congo is inexcusable. These humans are not valued as highly as others, and never have been. Plus our geo-political position and thirst for oil is driving us towards other countries...Middle Eastern and the African country of Nigeria. We owe more to the people and continent of Africa than we can ever afford to pay back in hundreds of years, and the people with the dark skin that come from that continent still feel the very deep roots of racism everywhere in the Western world. Africa is a tragic story, but it is also a rich story. Rich with culture, rich with its people, and rich with its resources. It needs to be left alone and become the great center of civilization that it was always meant to be.

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### **Lauren Albert says**

Reader gives a very good overview of an enormous topic. The book is literally a biography of the continent, not just the people. So he gives an overview of the development of the earth and of Africa in particular. I do not agree with the extent of his "nature" winning over "nurture" argument but it is an interesting one.

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### **Andrew Niederhauser says**

I wish this system allowed half-stars. This book's merits are only slightly diminished by its weaknesses, but a five-star rating is impossible. When I initially approached this, I anticipated learning about each individual nation as it was formed. I was pleasantly surprised at the sheer breadth of the work, including aspects of geology, evolutionary science, genetics, linguistics, and countless other specialized fields all collected in one sweeping narrative. From the construction of the continent itself billions of years ago to the end of apartheid, Reader's work is limitless in ambition and more than adequate for an understanding of the continent of Africa.

That being said, several shortcomings are evident. The emphasis on climate and geographical peculiarities is very helpful and enlarges the picture Reader constructs exponentially; though the repetitive nature of this information and Reader's emphasis on the reason for its inclusion often acts as an apology for why Africa never reached the "level of civilization" achieved by other world areas. It's as though by trying to reject Orientalism, he in fact embraces a tried and true aphorism of Eurocentrism- Said by way of Jared Diamond. For those interested in how Africa became the Africa popular imaging invokes, this may not be the book for you. Reader hops around both chronologically and geographically, never quite confining his knowledge to a particular area long enough for a complete narrative of a given region. Given that the book is arranged thematically and chronologically simultaneously, this isn't too surprising. By far the most challenging aspect is the lack of adequate maps. When hopping, skipping, and jumping across a continent for almost 700 pages, more than ten maps, none of which show cities, rivers, or regions constantly referenced, makes the tale extremely hard to follow once the historic period is reached. Additionally- though I can appreciate that the pictures included were supplied by the author, perhaps they should have pertained to the topics under discussion, rather than simply thrown in at random.

Overall, a challenging though highly informative work on a continent often misunderstood and much maligned.

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### **Kshitiz Goliya says**

Africa; the cradle of the human civilization. It is the land where three million years ago Humans originated and two million years thereafter, started walking on their feet.

As someone curious about the history of this continent, discussed not very frequently in international affairs or even in our course books, I was expecting an introduction to its political history. That is what a history scholar would have been more attracted to.

However, John Reader surprised and subsequently mesmerized me by taking a giant leap back, to the origin, not only of Africa's people but its geography. Starting from its geological history to elaborating the archaeological evidence, he showed the significance of this geological phenomenon for the present. And indeed it was quite apt, when he described some of the phenomenon as 'Geopoetry'. The history of how those natural resources, like Diamond, gold and other minerals, were created by natural processes helps put in perspective the mad race for them by Europeans, later in the sixteen century and beyond. Also highlighted is the the paradox that even after being one of the richest land in terms of resources, African is still world's most underdeveloped continent.

It also helps us understand the difference between two historical narratives. One is based on archaeological and paleontological evidence, following logical deduction, while other derives itself from the archives left behind by the humans themselves, wrapped in rocks and paper, studded with their outlook and prejudices. Which one is more reliable?

Finally the author elaborates with painstaking research and facts that horrible instance in humanity, still prevalent in some distant part of the world, called Slave trade. The present of Africa is heavily colored by its colonial past. The present territorial boundaries, the segregation of races, the nationalistic fervor and the embarrassment of still being an underdeveloped lot, all stem from the years of plunder and exploitation of the African people, by Europeans -enthusiastically complemented by some of the African leaders.

Beneath this opaque coating of contemporary history, John Reader has been able to scratch through to find the old remnants of African civilization that we rarely knew. It is a fabulous tale of humans consistently fighting with Nature for their survival. From battling with Tse Tse fly that killed their cattle to saving their agricultural fields from elephants, it demonstrates that our present surroundings were unthinkable few centuries ago. Africans tried to live in harmony with nature, knowing their boundaries until finally they overstepped them and humbled it by Europe's science and technology.

Slavetrade was not only a sociological but also an economic phenomenon that completely changed the living pattern of Africans. It lends some weight to the Marxist interpretation of history about the strong force of economic factors in deciding the course of history.

The author ends the book with a brief description of the chaos that Africa descended into after European retreated hastily post World War 2. A string of coups and racial genocides shattered the hopes of a united African century. Although Africans have done a lot to bring themselves to their present stage, there is no denying author's arguments, that Europe is majorly responsible for Africa's woes. As the people of Africa try to come together and carve out a more prosperous future for themselves, this book shines a new light as to how history is much more than just humans. History is like our universe, the farther and deeper one goes and observes, the more clearly it explains our present and the impending future.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

In my attempt to read more from and about Africa, this was a year-long group read with the Great African Reads group. True to form, I kept with the schedule up until July, and found myself needing to read the second half this week.

Can one book tell the story of an entire continent? Consider that the story of one empire's rise and fall takes six volumes (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire)!

And then. Then I found that Reader, who is not himself African, starts at the very beginning. As in, the formation of the world and the joining of the tectonic plates that would form Africa. Phew! It took a while to get to the people of Africa, as I'm sure you can imagine. But these pieces of information about the formation of the land ended up being crucial to understanding why some parts were sought for ownership, why some were set up to support rapid population growth, and why the very best diamonds would be formed in some of the depths of the earth of these nations.

Once Reader gets to the 19th century, it was as if he flipped a switch and talked about the nations staking claims that they had no right to, and I thought ugh, is it all colonies and empire? He says in passing that Ethiopia was the *only* African nation not to be claimed by a European country in their own empire building. Wow. I admit, I don't know that much about African history, and that *is* why I read this book, but that did surprise me.

The author takes the story of Africa pretty solidly up to 1960, although Egypt's role is largely neglected in the 20th century, and while Rwanda gets a mention in the 90s, AIDS is left out (although I learned a lot about rinderpest, and how when 90-95% of the cattle died that allowed the tsetse fly to return, etc.) The author does do a good job at making connections between the ramifications of seemingly small decisions and events, from the importance of rain to the fallout from requiring the people living in Rwanda to declare an ethnic

group.

I have a slightly different perspective on Africa since we had missionaries in our home on furlough throughout my childhood. Some worked with the Maasai, some with the Turkana, some traveled furtively and unofficially through countries unrecognized by the USA like Eritrea. I can sing in Swahili and have consumed ugali. But even that perspective is filtered by the imperialism that changed Africa forever. My later training in folklore, fieldwork, and anthropology comes from a field that really came into its own in the 1960s. That field places great importance on the insider perspective, and I want to read the story of Africa from that perspective. I want to understand the people without our framing of tribes and warring people groups. I want to understand their history and everchanging culture from their perspective. That isn't what this book is, but the author knows it. He tries to give an overview of how everything fit together. It is well-researched and documented, but the only African voices we tend to get are those in positions of power. I want the people!

And for a final, sarcastic send-off, I declare that I! Am Africa!

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### **Malapata says**

Llegué a este libro sin tener apenas idea de la historia de África, y su lectura fue una experiencia enriquecedora. En sus ochocientas páginas John Reader intenta abarcar lo más posible, seleccionando los temas para dar una visión global de la historia del continente. En sus páginas oí hablar por primera vez de la expansión Bantú, de el olvidado reino de Askum, de como el clima y el entorno (y la mosca tse-tse) configuraron los primeros asentamientos. Luego asistimos a la llegada de los europeos y cómo dieron ímpetu al comercio de esclavos, al reparto de la tierra entre las potencias y a la descolonización, para acabar con el genocio ruandés.

Un gigantesco fresco narrado de forma amena que ayuda a entender el presente del continente. Como única pega Reader retrocede a mi entender demasiado, empezando con la misma formación geológica del continente. Esta primera parte se me hizo muy pesada y estuve a punto de abandonar el libro. Afortunadamente al final me conformé con saltarme esta parte y empezar desde la aparición del hombre y las primeras sociedades.

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### **Michelle says**

An amazing introduction to African history and politics. As other reviewers have mentioned, the breadth of the subject matter is simply amazing. Reader covers millions of years of history in just 682 pages, giving enough of an overview of the continent to get you started towards understanding the continent.

I wish the end notes had been more extensive. I found myself turning to them, hoping for more information, and finding only a citation. And more/better maps would have been appreciated as well.

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## Adam says

Before I picked up this book, I had a relatively rich smattering of knowledge of Africa - particularly my trips to Sierra Leone and Tanzania and the reading I'd done associated with them. However, all these readings served to emphasize my lack of a broad, strong foundation of knowledge about African history. I was desperate for books by the end of my study abroad in Tanzania, which led me to browse the airport bookstore while waiting for a flight to Kilimanjaro, where I came across this enticingly ambitious and well-recommended brick of a survey. I took a gamble: the book was \$35, well more than I'd ever pay for a book, ever, but I was confronting a situation in which the only thing I'd have to read for the next week was Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* - which is absurdly highly regarded, but I never made it far enough in to gain the momentum necessary to finish.

The gamble paid off, more or less. John Reader's *Africa* is a history in the broadest sense, a synoptic overview of the geology, ecological evolution, human evolution, climatic trends, archaeology, human ecology, and recorded history of the whole thing. Reader's skill as a writer is evinced by the relative infrequency at which the book felt like it was groaning under the weight of its vast subject matter.

Aside from clear, accessible writing, Reader accomplishes this by focusing the book on revelatory ideas about causation and trend rather than aspiring to be comprehensive. He chooses new perspectives on old debates, avoiding an obligatory-feeling rehash of well-trodden pop-sci territory. Having just taken classes in human evolution and savannah ecology, I felt like I still had a lot to learn from Reader's points of view (though this is essentially a reflection of the overall shittiness of those classes). Among his interesting points, I remember especially the idea that those investigating ancient social regimes shouldn't only look at the earlier autocratic states, since there are several interesting examples of more egalitarian complex economies, like the Niger delta's cooperative interaction between fishers, farmers, and herders.

The biggest point he made regarded labor: while we tend to think of things in the Malthusian way, a competition for scarce resources, Reader asserts that in Africa the issue has more often been that there aren't enough people to produce and process the resources available. This issue was compounded by boom and bust cycles of climate that inhibited the stability of large populations; the high disease load of the continent where humans evolved (particularly tsetse and their trypanosomes, and malaria); and eventually slavery, rinderpest and its consequent famine, and the world wars. The struggle of colonizers was to marshal sufficient labor to extract the abundant resources they wanted to plunder.

As a Brit, Reader's perspective was generally liberal in bent, placing a lot of blame for modern African problems at the foot of European colonial powers (my estimation of Belgium suffered greatly, for instance - they seem to have been the most blithely selfish and inconsiderate of them). The policies of apartheid, ethnic division and internal conflict (particularly the Rwandan genocide), the generally execrable state of government, lack of human capital, population growth in excess of capacity to accommodate it, and even the existence of uninhabitable areas of wilderness like the Serengeti and Selous are all ascribed to European influence, usually due to policies that were self-consciously greedy and short-sighted, if not deliberately malicious. I guess it could be because he's playing to my biases, but I buy all these arguments.

On the other hand, beyond his interest in unorthodox explanations and interpretations generally sympathetic to Africans, Reader has no agenda or ideology in the strict sense. He never hesitates to criticize Africans for their bad decisions and behavior, and he even goes so far as to suggest that, in the light of colonial depredations, it's not inaccurate to say that many African states were "not ready" for independence. He has no patience for ideas about the pleasantness and harmony of pre-colonization lifestyles. He makes a point to

emphasize the existence of a native slave trade prior to that of the Europeans, and to illustrate the active and eager complicity of many states and chiefs in that vile trade.

The logistic nature of the timescale is weird in this book, as it is in all books like it, because there's something discontinuous about passing from geologic time to the often daily scale at which modern historical events unfolded. It feels like you are reading a different book by the end, which is fine, because all the parts are well done. The transition between the early colonial period and independence is particularly striking, which I think is genuine and not an artifact of the book's organization. People thought about the world in a completely different way after years of exposure to European culture.

If you want to learn about Africa, in general, this book is the best place I can imagine starting, a solid foundation that is thorough but digestible. It is also a fascinating exploration of issues that have broader relevance - human ecologies; the interaction between geology/climate and human ecology; the legacy of colonialism and independence from it.

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