

Say You're One of Them

by Uwem Akpan

About the Book

Each story in this jubilantly acclaimed collection pays testament to the wisdom and resilience of children, even in the face of the most agonizing circumstances.

A family living in a makeshift shanty in urban Kenya scurries to find gifts of any kind for the impending Christmas holiday. A Rwandan girl relates her family's struggles to maintain a facade of normalcy amid unspeakable acts. A young brother and sister cope with their uncle's attempt to sell them into slavery. Aboard a bus filled with refugees—a microcosm of today's Africa—a Muslim boy summons his faith to bear a treacherous ride across Nigeria. Through the eyes of childhood friends the emotional toll of religious conflict in Ethiopia becomes viscerally clear.

Uwem Akpan's debut signals the arrival of a breathtakingly talented writer who gives a matter-of-fact reality to the most extreme circumstances in stories that are nothing short of transcendent.

Praise for the Book

“Awe is the only appropriate response to SAY YOU’RE ONE OF THEM, a collection of five stories so ravishing and sad that I regret ever wasting superlatives on fiction that was merely very good.”

—**Jenifer Reese**, *Entertainment Weekly*

“It is not merely the subject that makes Akpan’s writing so astonishing, translucent, and horrifying all at once; it is his talent with metaphor and imagery, his immersion into character and place... Uwem Akpan has given these children their voices, and for the compassion and art in his stories I am grateful and changed.”

—**Susan Straight**, *Washington Post Book World*

“Akpan combines the strengths of both fiction and journalism— the dramatic potential of the one and the urgency of the other— to create a work of immense power... He is a gifted storyteller capable of bringing to life myriad characters and points of view... The result is admirable, artistically as well as morally.”

—**Adelle Waldman**, *Christian Science Monitor*

Courtesy of Hachette Book Group

About the Author

Title: Uwem Akpan

Known As: Akpan, Uwem Celestine; Akpan, Uwem

American Short story writer (1971 -)

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Personal Information

Born 1971, in Ikot Akpan Eda, Nigeria. Education: Studied at Creighton University, Gonzaga University, and Catholic University of East Africa; University of Michigan, M.F.A., 2006.

Addresses: Home: Zimbabwe.

Career

Priest and writer. Ordained Jesuit priest, 2003; lecturer at a Jesuit college, Harare, Zimbabwe, 2007--.

Awards

Institute for the Humanities fellow, University of Michigan, 2006.

Works:

Writings

- *Say You're One of Them* (short stories), Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2008.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Nigerian Guardian* and the *New Yorker*.

Sidelights

Uwem Akpan is a Nigerian Jesuit priest and writer. Born in Ikot Akpan Eda, Nigeria, he became an ordained Jesuit priest in 2003. Akpan studied English and philosophy in the United States at Campion College, a Jesuit community affiliated with Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, and at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, before pursuing theological studies at the Catholic University of East Africa in Nairobi, Kenya. In 2006, he completed a master of fine arts degree from the University of Michigan. The following year he began lecturing at a Jesuit college in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Akpan published his first short-story collection, *Say You're One of Them*, in 2008. The five stories each deal with African children and the horrific events that they often witness or experience first-hand. Akpan deals with topics ranging from child prostitution and slavery to religious conflict and genocide. In an article in *Sojourners Magazine*, Akpan told Kimberly Burge, "There is evil in my stories and in the world. I have no answers to the problem of evil." To this, Burge shared that "as a priest, [Akpan] cannot answer the unanswerable questions. But as a writer, he can hold a light up to expose the darkness and tell the stories of some of Africa's children. He is acutely aware of the responsibility that comes with that role." Akpan also had his own views on the duality of his jobs as a priest and a writer. In the same article, he recalled that "more and more, I'm beginning to believe that Christ was both a priest and a poet. The parables he told, the way he always found to bring in stories. There was always something very poetic and sensitive in the way he was not willing to flow with the legalities." Burge also relayed Akpan's views on the duality of his characters, having both good and bad qualities. Akpan stated, "People are complex, to say the least. No matter how badly somebody acts, I try to put some qualities in them that are good, something to complexify the character for the reader."

Michel Martin interviewed Akpan in National Public Radio's *Tell Me More*. Martin asked the author what he hoped readers would take away from his story collection. In reply, Akpan pleaded, "If you have children, do everything to raise them or be there for them. Love them. Make peace within your family, you know, husbands, wives. There's absolutely nothing as good as having a peaceful family. Sometimes there are people in the family that don't feel loved, you know. They are not able to connect, and it's such a trauma for such people, whether it's a husband or child or a mother. Can we risk one more time to make that connection, you know, work?" Akpan continued, "All the riches we have in this country, child suicide is there. There are opportunities. Why? Somebody's feeling unloved, unaccepted. That's the end of the road. So I think that would be my key message, how can we huddle together, express love in our families, in our work place and even come to accept ourselves and accept love? That for me--that would be very basic."

Carolyn W. Fanelli, reviewing the collection in *PopMatters*, found that "Akpan's attention to detail is notable. He conveys a true sense of place, from the language the characters use to his descriptions of people, neighborhoods, clothing, and food." Fanelli observed that "authenticity is one of the book's great strengths. There are few ways for many in the first world to become acquainted with how people live in Africa--their day-to-day struggles, the richness of their cultures, their joy for life. The news is generally horrific, the Hollywood films sensationalized,

and vacations to the continent skirt the slums for safaris. For a window of understanding, read this book." Alan Cheuse, reviewing the collection in *Chicago Tribune Books*, stated: "Juxtaposed against the clarity and revelation in Akpan's prose--as translucent a style as I've read in a long while--we find subjects that nearly render the mind helpless and throw the heart into a hopeless erratic rhythm out of fear, out of pity, out of the shame of being only a few degrees of separation removed from these monstrous modern circumstances."

Scott Korb, reviewing the book in *America*, opined that the first story, "An Ex-Mas Feast," about a starving family's economic dependence on an adolescent daughter who is a prostitute, is "the standout of the collection." Korb noted: "Asked to look, when we do we cannot help but feel bad for these children of Africa. We want to care for them. Yet there is no moralizing in *Say You're One of Them*. For Akpan, religion offers no simple solutions. ... Still, God is never the problem and never to blame. Akpan hopes, in fact, that despite all our human frailty--his own, no doubt, included--God's compassion can be revealed 'in the faces of the people' he writes about. And it is. Which is why, page after terrible page, we continue to sit with them. Until, time and time again, they run."

Sarah Krygier, writing in *School Library Journal*, pointed out that the mixing of languages may slow some teen readers down, but assured that "the impact of the stories is well worth the effort. The collection offers a multitude of learning opportunities." A contributor writing in *Kirkus Reviews* thought that the final story of the collection, "My Parent's Bedroom," set in war-torn Rwanda, "goes beyond disturbing toward unbearable." The same contributor summarized the book as "haunting prose" and "an almost unreadable must-read." Citing a lack of closure or consolation, Lev Grossman, writing in *Time* magazine, said that "these stories are so frightening and upsetting ... that you wonder what the point is of subjecting yourself to them."

Essence contributor Patrik Henry Bass observed that "Akpan never lets us forget that the resilient youngsters caught up in these extraordinary circumstances are filled with their own hopes and dreams." Bass claimed that a collection of stories like this is "long overdue." A contributor writing in *Publishers Weekly* commented that "Akpan's prose is beautiful and his stories are insightful and revealing." *Booklist* contributor Jennifer Mattson said that "the stories' tattered hope comes indirectly, from the thirst for broader knowledge about Africa's postcolonial conflicts they'll engender." *Entertainment Weekly* contributor Jennifer Reese declared that "awe is the only appropriate response to Uwem Akpan's stunning debut." Reese concluded that "the book should be depressing, but the blazing humanity of the characters and the brilliance of Akpan's artistry make this one of the year's most exhilarating reads."

Further Readings About the Author:

Periodicals

- *America*, Volume 199, number 4, August 18, 2008, Scott Korb, "We Want to Live," review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 24.
- *Booklist*, Volume 104, number 21, July 1, 2008, Jennifer Mattson, review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 37.

- *Chicago Tribune Books*, May 31, 2008, Alan Cheuse, "Chilling Tales," review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 4.
- *Christian Century*, Volume 125, number 21, October 21, 2008, Susan M. Felch, review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 34.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, June 26, 2008, Adelle Waldman, "Heartbreak and the Buds of Africa's Hope," review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 25.
- *Crisis* (Baltimore, MD), Volume 115, number 3, summer, 2008, Jabari Asim, review of *Say You're One of Them*, pp. 31-32.
- *Denver Post*, July 13, 2008, "Survival's Price: Story Collection Probes Children's Understanding of Hutu Genocide," p. E12.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, Issue 997, June 13, 2008, Jennifer Reese, "Out of Africa," review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 72.
- *Essence*, Volume 39, number 2, June, 2008, Patrik Henry Bass, "Little Children: This Summer's Most Eagerly Anticipated Literary Debut Is Worthy of All the Hype," p. 82.
- *Granta*, November 14, 2008, Jeremiah Chamberlin, author interview.
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- *National Post*, Volume 10, number 195, June 14, 2008, review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. WP12.
- *New Yorker*, June 13, 2005, Cressida Leyshon, "Between Two Continents."
- *New York Times*, June 27, 2008, Janet Maslin, "As Africa's Horrors Rage, Suffer the Little Children," p. E27; July 3, 2008, Charles McGrath, "Channeling the Voices of Africa's Lost Children," p. E1.
- *New York Times Book Review*, July 27, 2008, Charles Taylor, "Can I Get a Witness?," review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. L16.
- *O, the Oprah Magazine*, Volume 9, number 6, June, 2008, Vince Passaro, "Amazing Grace," review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 150.
- *Publishers Weekly*, Volume 253, number 28, July 17, 2006, Matthew Thornton, "Debut Stories," p. 8; Volume 255, number 15, April 14, 2008, review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 36; Volume 255, number 15, April 14, 2008, Willona M. Sloan, "Genocide, through Children's Eyes."
- *School Library Journal*, Volume 54, number 10, October, 2008, Sarah Krygier, review of *Say You're One of Them*, p. 177.
- *Sojourners Magazine*, Volume 37, number 10, November, 2008, Kimberly Burge, "Through the Laughter and the Tears: Nigerian Uwem Akpan Follows a Double Calling as Priest and Writer," p. 44.
- *St. Petersburg Times*, July 26, 2008, John Freeman, "The Invisible Children of Africa," p. B2.
- *Tell Me More*, National Public Radio, June 23, 2008, Michel Martin, "Author Gives Voice to Plight of African Children."
- *Time*, Volume 171, number 25, June 23, 2008, Lev Grossman, "Art of Darkness," p. 127.
- *USA Today*, June 26, 2008, Deirdre Donahue, "African Stories Go to Well of Empathy," p. D5.

- *Washington Post Book World*, Volume 38, number 26, June 29, 2008, Susan Straight, "Survivors," p. 1.

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- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (January 29, 2009), author profile.
- *Calvin College Festival of Faith & Writing Web site*, <http://www.calvin.edu/> (January 29, 2009), author profile.
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Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000188059

Uwem Akpan Bio from the Author's Website

I was born under a palm-wine tree in Ikot Akpan Eda in Ikot Ekpene Diocese in Nigeria. I was inspired to write by the people who sit around my village church to share palm wine after Sunday Mass, by the Bible, and by the humor and endurance of the poor. My grandfather was one of those who brought the Catholic Church to our village. I was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 2003, and I like to celebrate the sacraments for my fellow villagers. Some of them have no problem stopping me in the road and asking for confession!

I have very fond memories of my childhood in my village, where everybody knows everybody, and all my paternal uncles still live together in one big compound. When I was growing up, my mother told me folktales and got me and my three brothers to read a lot. I became a fiction writer during my seminary days. I wrote at night, when the community computers were free. Computer viruses ate much of my work. Finally, my friend Wes Harris believed in me enough to get me a laptop. This saved me from the despair of losing my stories and made me begin to see God again in the seminary. The stories on that first laptop are the core of *Say You're One of Them*. I received my MFA in creative writing from the University of Michigan in 2006. In 2007, I taught in Harare, Zimbabwe. Now I serve at Christ the King Church, Ilesamaja-Lagos, Nigeria.

I always look forward to visiting my village. No matter how high the bird flies, its legs still face the earth. When I get back to Ikot Akpan Eda, my people and I will celebrate this book in our own way—with lots of tall tales, spontaneous prayers, and palm wine!

Courtesy of <http://www.uwemakpan.com/bio.htm>

Author Interview

A Conversation with Uwem Akpan

From Hachette Book Group

After publishing “An Ex-Mas Feast” in *The New Yorker’s* Début Fiction issue for 2005, Akpan discussed his writing with Cressida Leyshon, deputy fiction editor.

Your story, “An Ex-Mas Feast,” is about a family living on the street in Nairobi, Kenya. When did you first start thinking about these characters and the world that they inhabit?

When I went to study theology in Nairobi, in 2000, I was taken by the phenomenon of street kids. I’d never seen anything like it before.... I started talking with the bunch of kids around Adams Arcade, which was near my school. These kids were not very wild, because they still went back to their homes in the slums in the evening. There was one kid, Richard, who was their leader. I started calling him Dick. He had some English, and was very respected by the others. If I wanted to give them money, the whole bunch would ask me to give it to Dick, because they knew he would not cheat them. He would talk with me and ask me about Nigeria. I don’t know how he managed to be so nice, unlike his friends. After the Christmas holiday of 2000, he disappeared. I started asking questions. Some of his friends told me that maybe he had gone to the city to become a real street kid. I really thought I would run into him someday in the city. But I never did. I kept hoping that he would keep his gentleness even in the very wild gangs of the City Centre.

You’re working on a collection of stories about children in various countries in Africa. Can you talk a little about the other stories? Why do you want to write about a number of African countries rather than one or two—for example, Nigeria, where you grew up, or Kenya, where you studied for three years?

I would like to see a book about how children are faring in these endless conflicts in Africa. The world is not looking. I think fiction allows us to sit for a while with people we would rather not meet. I have had the chance to study and to travel a bit. I really hope I can visit these places and do good research, so that the stories can be truly those of the people I am trying to write about. I want their voices heard, their faces seen.

Do you find it easy to move between the two continents, [Africa and America] or does it take time to adjust to life in each place again?

The rhythm of life here is different from that of Nigeria. I really liked the efficiency and accessibility of things here, the educational opportunities. And I was touched by the beauty and tolerance it has taken to fashion America. But, for instance, the thing about old people staying in “homes” away from home blew my mind. As did how little Americans know or want to know about life elsewhere.

It is a great thing to be able to move back and forth. I get to see my friends. There's also the challenge of remaining faithful to my roots. Now each time I return to Ikot Akpan Eda, my home, I ask my parents and old people a lot of questions. I am more interested in my Annang culture now than I was before I started coming here. I am always interested in listening to old people in my village. Everybody knows everybody, and people tell tall stories. After Mass on Sunday, people sit together outside the church and share fresh palm wine. One of my mother's cousins used to come around to our home to tell us stories he made up about different people in the village. He seemed to have a license to change any story into whatever he wanted. My granddad, who helped bring Catholicism to my village, became a polygamist at one point and later came back to monogamy. So I have many uncles and aunties. My father and all his brothers live in one big compound. My mother's place is not far off.

Have you set much of your fiction in the United States?

I have not set any of my fiction in the U.S. . . . Not yet. I feel that you guys have tons of writers "discovering" the American experience for you. I feel that the situation of Africa is very urgent and we need more people to help us see the complexity of our lives. Ben Okri has said that rich African literature means rich world literature. Having said that, it would be great to set some of my fiction in this country. A lot of African refugees are coming to America now. So that could be where to begin.

What do you read, mostly?

The stories I find in the Bible keep surprising me. All the crimes are already committed in Genesis, yet God stays with the ones who committed them. I read extensively, though ever since I started writing, my reading speed has gone down considerably.

Is your faith important to you when you're writing? What role, if any, do you think it should play in your fiction?

Since it is not something I can put away, my faith is important to me. I hope I am able to reveal the compassion of God in the faces of the people I write about. I think fiction has a way of doing this without being doctrinaire about it.

*In a story you have published in *The New Yorker* ["An Ex-Mas Feast"], two of the main characters, Jigana and his sister Maisha, live in a harsh world. Do you think that they'll survive?*

My continent is in distress and has been since the beginning of slavery. Leadership is a big problem. My hope is that things will change in Africa. Europe fought endlessly with itself in past centuries; now they have a European Union, not just in name, like the African Union. I hope that someday all the stupid wars on the African continent will end. I am amazed at the endurance of people, whether in Asia or Latin America or Africa, caught up in harsh situations.

What do you do when you want to forget about everything?

(Laughs.) A priest has no way of forgetting about everything! I like to watch good soccer on TV. Take long, slow drives. Read. Visit with people.

Courtesy [http://www.hachettebookgroup.com/Uwem-Akpan-\(1078840\)_AuthorInterview\(1\).aspx](http://www.hachettebookgroup.com/Uwem-Akpan-(1078840)_AuthorInterview(1).aspx)

Discussion Questions

1. Each of the stories in *Say You're One of Them* is told from the perspective of a child. Do you think this affected your reaction? If the narrators had been adults, might you have felt differently about the stories? Why do you think Akpan chose to depict these events through children's eyes? How do Akpan's young characters maintain innocence in the face of corruption and pain?
2. In "An Ex-mas Feast," Maisha leaves her family to become a full-time prostitute. Do you think she chose to depart, or did her family's poverty force her to flee? Is it possible to have complete freedom of will in such a situation? Is it reasonable to judge a person for her actions if her choice is not entirely her own?
3. In "Fattening for Gabon" the children's uncle and caretaker, Fofu Kpee, sells them into slavery. How does Fofu's poverty and vanity contribute to his unthinkable actions? Do his pangs of conscience redeem him for you? Why or why not?
4. In "What Language is That?" Hadiya and Selam are kept apart by their parents after the escalation of religious conflict. Have you ever experienced a situation in which friends and family have objected to someone in your life for reasons you didn't understand? What did you do? How did you feel?
5. The bus in "Luxurious Hearses" is a microcosm not only of African hierarchies and religions but also of the continent's numerous languages and dialects. Discuss how speech is related to class, culture, religion, and heritage. How does dialogue function in the other stories? Do we hold similar attitudes about language in our own culture? What are some examples?
6. This book takes its title from instructions given to a Rwandan girl by her mother in "My Parents' Bedroom." Did the familiar domestic detail in this story — Maman's perfume, little Jean's flannel pajamas, toys like Mickey Mouse in the children's room — intensify for you the horror of what ensued? Is there comparable detail in any of the other stories that helped you to identify with Uwem Akpan's characters?
7. Although the stories in *Say You're One of Them* are fictitious, the situations they depict have a basis in reality. How do the emotions you feel when reading these stories compare to your emotions when reading accounts in the news media of similar atrocities? Has reading *Say You're One of Them* changed the way you think about these issues?
8. Uwem Akpan addressed his other vocation in an interview, saying, "A key Vatican II document makes it very clear that the joys and anguish of the world are the joys and anguish of the Church." While reading these stories, were you ever reminded that this writer is also a Jesuit priest? Does Akpan's subject matter seem to you to be imbued with religious values? In what ways? Do the drama and power of Akpan's fiction call forth any biblical stories for you? If so, which ones?

9. Some of the children in *Say You're One of Them* are not poor. What are the particular obstacles these children face that are not issues in your own country? Are there challenges other than poverty with which you can identify? Do the family dynamics feel familiar to you?

10. The poet and memoirist Mary Karr wrote that Uwem Akpan “has invented a new language — both for horror and for the relentless persistence of light in war-torn countries.” Did you find any beauty or goodness in these tragic tales? If so, offer some examples.

Courtesy of Hachette Book Group