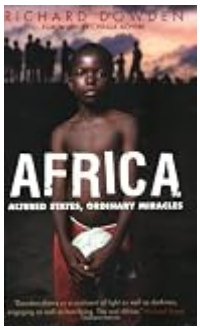
AFRICA: ALTERED STATES, ORDINARY MIRACLES

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Categories: Africa, Reviews



At the moment, the BBC is showing the remarkable David Attenborough series "Africa"; all beautiful scenes and amazing animals. However, as is often the case, the Africa of the nature documentary seems more or less devoid of people.

If you would like to know more about the human side of the continent, you could do far worse than start withÂ Africa: Altered States, Ordinary MiraclesÂ by Richard Dowden.

Africa is huge and incredibly diverse and no book (even one of 550 pages) can hope to cover every aspect of African life. However, over 18 chapters, most of which are inspired by events in a particular country, this book gives a pretty good introduction to the current situation across sub-Saharan Africa.

Though it doesn't shy away from war, corruption and poverty, this is predominantly optimistic book. It points to beacons of hope and development which are rarely mentioned in the west because they don't fit the agenda of the media and aid agencies). For that reason alone, I'd love to see more people reading this book.

The book is told through a mixture of the author's own traveller's tales and reflections on national and international politics. Individual stories and global geopolitics are interspersed seamlessly to give a fascinating picture, which is never dull to read.

It would be easy to complain about things which are not in the book (there is not enough about CÃ´te d'Ivoire and Mali for my liking), but this is unfair. The book never claims to be comprehensive.

Sections on the growth of the African middle classes and the use of technology (especially the mobile phone) and the growth of Chinese influence across the continent seem to indicate that Africa will be a very different place through the 21st century than it was in the 20th. Though the fact that the American response to Chinese commercial activity in the area has been to put a regional military force in place is rather worrying.

Africa is far bigger and more diverse than Europe, with a fascinating and complex history. If your idea of Africa is limited to elephants, giraffes and grass huts, you should probably read buy Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles!