



# NEVER LOOK AN AMERICAN IN THE EYE

A  
MEMOIR

FLYING TURTLES, COLONIAL GHOSTS,  
★ ★ ★ AND ★ ★ ★  
THE MAKING OF A NIGERIAN AMERICAN



OKEY NDIBE

author of FOREIGN GODS, INC.



# NEVER LOOK AN AMERICAN IN THE EYE

SOHO PRESS — PRIORITY TITLE

FLYING TURTLES, COLONIAL GHOSTS, AND  
THE MAKING OF A NIGERIAN AMERICAN



A MEMOIR BY THE AUTHOR  
OF FOREIGN GODS, INC.  
OKEY NDIBE

Hardcover/eBook  
PUB DATE: 10/11/16  
PRICE: \$25.00  
Page Count: 224  
ISBN: 9781616957605  
eISBN: 9781616957612

The author of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* and *Arrows of Rain* tells his own immigrant's tale, where what is lost in translation is often as hilarious as it is harrowing.

The title of Okey Ndibe's third book and first memoir, *Never Look An American In The Eye* (Soho Press | October 11th, 2016), refers to a bit of advice offered to the young journalist in the days before he journeyed from Nigeria to the U.S. "Never look an American in the eye," his uncle advised, "Americans can't stand any stranger looking them in the face. They take it as an insult. It's something they don't forgive. And every American carries a gun. If they catch you, a stranger, looking them in the face, they will shoot."

This, of course, was horrific news to the young man who up to that point had been walking among the clouds. His hero, the great Chinua Achebe had procured for him travel to the United States, as well as schooling and a position as the founding editor for the soon-to-be influential (if always fiscally fraught) magazine *African Commentary*. But Achebe had mentioned nothing of the deadly manners of America.

Like many of the stories in this book, the reality was somewhat different than its initial portrayal. In the 1970s and 80s, as part of the effort to keep much of Africa out

of communist control, the CIA began showing American cowboy movies, often free of charge, in countries like Nigeria. The goal was to make the U.S. look cool and heroic. In the case of Okey Ndibe's uncle, these psy-ops programs instead fashioned a different vision of the America, courtesy of the Old West. It wasn't until he was actually in the U.S. that Okey Ndibe learned anything about what real Americans were like. Or that he had more to fear from the New England winter than mustachioed gunslingers.

Starting with a childlike infatuation with American “professional” wrestling while growing up in Nigeria and his first journalistic coup—an ill-fated interview with Achebe himself where both of the young journalist’s tape recorders inexplicably stopped recording—and ending with the chance meeting of his future wife at a party he was crashing, Okey Ndibe’s first book-length foray into autobiography is full of the humor and insight readers have come to expect from the author of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* It’s delightfully awkward to read of the young writer blundering through a lunch while not understanding what “Going Dutch” means, not to mention the incident where he is arrested for robbing a bank near Amherst. The latter situation made all the more harrowing by young Okey’s refusal to look the inquiring officer in the eye. Yet in even this troubling encounter Ndibe finds much to chuckle at.

Always charming and often laugh-out-loud funny, Okey Ndibe’s memoir is full of hard-won wisdom about the immigrant experience and the ever-shrinking world in which we live.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Okey Ndibe first came to the U.S. to act as founding editor of *African Commentary*, a magazine published by Chinua Achebe. He has taught at Brown University, Connecticut College, Simon’s Rock College, Trinity College, and the University of Lagos (as a Fulbright scholar). He is the author of two novels, *Arrows of Rain* and *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, and his award-winning journalism has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and the *Hartford Courant*. Mr. Ndibe lives in West Hartford, Connecticut, with his wife, Sheri, and their three children.



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Paul Oliver  
Director of Marketing & Publicity  
poliver@sohopress.com  
(212) 260-1900

# AN INTERVIEW WITH OKEY NDIBE

**The title of your new memoir is very evocative and dovetails with conversations about immigration and race in the United States. Can you talk about the story behind the title?**

Okey Ndibe: I'm intrigued by the title's evocative power and its convergence with Americans' conversations around race. Yet, my title has its roots on the other side of the Atlantic, in Nigeria. A week or so before I left Nigeria for the US, an uncle of mine said to me, "When you get there, make sure you don't look Americans in the eye. Every American carries a gun and—if you look them in the eye—they'll shoot you." This uncle had never been to America, in fact hardly ventured much beyond his place of nativity, Amawbia. He had formed this idea of the ubiquitousness of guns in the US from watching some old, scratchy westerns that used to be shown, once in a while, in soccer fields. He'd seen movie after movie in which these cowboys would gather in a bar, throw down some stiff drinks, exchange a few words (which we hardly ever understood), and then stare one another down—an immediate prelude to shooting. Rather innocently, my uncle went away with the impression that to look an American in the eye was something of a capital crime. So, the hilarious advice came from Nigeria, but it was inspired by the western, one of the major global artifacts of American culture.



**That uncle's bad advice ended up connecting a little too much with the black experience in America when you were detained in connection with a bank robbery...**



ON: On December 23, 1988, just thirteen days after my arrival in the U.S., some armed guy robbed a local bank in Amherst, Massachusetts, which was my first place of residence in America. That morning, I was huddled with many others at a bus stop near the center of Amherst, eyes set down, waiting for a bus that would take me to the University of Massachusetts where I had a meeting. I was aware that traffic was building up right in front of me, the traffic light having turned red. I raised my eyes and met the gaze of a police officer in his cruiser. I panicked, because I remembered my uncle's entreaty not to look Americans in the eye. And here I was making eye contact with a man in uniform! I made a dramatic gesture of looking away. The alacrity of it was meant as a wordless but earnest demonstration of penitence, a silent way of indicating to the officer that I had not meant to provoke him to homicidal rage. The light changed to green. From the corner of my eye, I saw the officer drive forward and then turn right onto a side street. I heaved a sigh of relief. Well, a minute or two later, I got a tap on the shoulder. I whirled around to the police officer. He invited me to step to the back of the bus stop. At first, I was certain that he wanted to talk to me about looking him in the eye. So as I spoke to him, I made sure not to make eye contact. Imagine the sheer shock and dread that seized me when the officer told me there had been a bank robber and I fit the description!



**There's a lot of humor in this book but perhaps nowhere more so than some of the punning hijinks that your name has led to in the U.S., often not just at your expense but also to strangers. How much does the foreignness of a name influence the immigrant experience?**

ON: Names and the stories around them are a major part of many immigrants' experiences. It's certainly true for me and for many acquaintances who are immigrants. My name, which is pronounced almost as the word "okay," has occasioned many hilarious encounters in America. On first meeting me, many Americans pronounce my name as Okie. I know several Nigerians who have "Americanized" their names in order to solve the problem. I'm different; I insist on calling people by their proper names and being called correctly as well. I'm willing to invest the time to learn how to say anybody's name correctly—and to teach others how to say mine.





“IF YOU’RE AN AFRICAN,  
BUT YOU DON’T HAVE  
A SENSE OF HUMOR  
ABOUT THE ASTONISHING  
THINGS SOME PEOPLE THINK  
ABOUT AFRICA, WELL,  
YOU’RE GOING TO BE  
PERMANENTLY ENRAGED,  
AN UNPLEASANT FELLOW”

I was at a talk of yours a few years ago where a student asked if you had ever met a lion in Africa. To which you replied: “No. But I have met many very nice people there.” To my reckoning it’s a great response and politely strikes at the core problem with perceptions of “Africa” as a singular place of jungles, wooden masks, and dangerous mega-fauna. You’re able to laugh (as in the story of the graduate student who believed you when you said you came to America via a crocodile’s back) at this but it must be frustrating. Is this perception intentional or inadvertent?

ON: If you’re an African, but you don’t have a sense of humor about the astonishing things some people think about Africa, well, you’re going to be permanently enraged, an unpleasant fellow. And don’t get me wrong—there are occasions that call for just a touch of unpleasantness, a measure of cutting wit and nonlethal acerbity, but I find that a sense of humor has often served me best.

The Internet and myriad social media have significantly improved people’s awareness of different places and cultures, including Africa. There are more Africans visiting or living in the U.S.. Africa has come into its own as a destination for American students in study abroad programs as well as for tourists.

Even so, in Americans’ popular imagination, Africa remains something of a charmed kingdom of people, a landscape blighted by hunger, disease, and wars. You asked whether this “perception” of Africa was intentional or inadvertent? Some people have linked it to the imperial impulse, three centuries ago, to characterize Africa and Africans in unflattering light in order to justify the enslavement of its humanity, the hijacking of its natural resources. I can’t claim to know. But of this I am certain: America has enough resources to educate its citizens soundly about other peoples and places. So there are no excuses.

The pathological portrait of Africa ought to be constantly engaged and corrected, not so as to depict an idyllic Africa but in order to create room for more nuanced narratives that capture the continent’s complex nature.

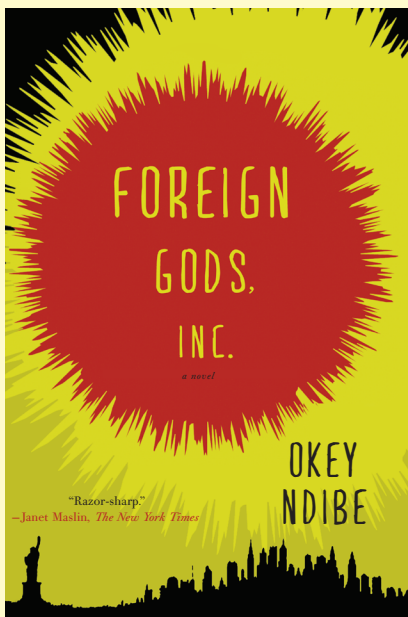
There’s no question that the perception quotient has been improving. Let me illustrate the point. It’s been years since I encountered an American who assumed—once I said I was from Nigeria, a country in West Africa—that it followed I had to know some African s/he’d met whose father was “a very important man in Africa,” a medical doctor or lawyer, say. It was then as if some Americans believed Africa to be some tiny village, a scattered collection of huts being all there was to human habitation, with a vaster ring of jungles that teemed with wild animals. These days, one rarely comes across that degree and species of ignorance about Africa. I used to seize opportunities of those encounters to give free lessons, informing my interlocutor that Africa had 54 countries, or that Nigeria alone had more than 100 million people.

**You’re a lucky guy. That kept occurring to me while reading your memoir. You’ve leapt from a lot of frying pans and seemingly every time landed several feet away from the fire. Do you feel like you’ve been lucky? There’s more to it than that, isn’t there?**

ON: I don’t deny it: there’s a certain stubborn sense of buoyancy, an ebullience of spirit, in stories and style. From the sideline, an observer would be entirely justified in declaiming, “Wow, what a lucky guy!” Yet, I have known suffering, lost things and people I held dear, been dealt a rough hand quite a few times. It’s simply not in my nature to dwell on my troubles, to bemoan my difficulties, to wear a sad face. In the final reckoning, I incline to a decidedly robust, enlivening account of my life. Looking back on the life I’ve led in America—and before it, in Nigeria—I have adopted a celebratory, exuberant accent, consistent with my upbeat temperament, my recourse to laughter, even when I was mired in dire circumstances—especially then, actually. I confess, then, that what comes across as luck is indeed that, but it’s also accentuated by a measure of pluckiness. I’ve been lucky, but it’s often luck that’s purchased with the currency of hard work and leavened with a resilient spirit. I rather like to reckon light as the terminus of darkness, joy as the ultimate translation of every ordeal.

# ALSO BY OKEY NDIBE

AVAILABLE FROM SOHO PRESS



## FOREIGN GODS, INC.

BY OKEY NDIBE

"RAZOR-SHARP."

—*The New York Times*

"A STORY OF SWEEPING CULTURAL INSIGHT AND ABSURD COMEDY."

—*The Washington Post*

"UNFORGETTABLE . . . A PAGE—TURNING ALLEGORY ABOUT THE  
GLOBALIZED WORLD."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"A HARD LOOK AT THE AMERICAN DREAM, WHICH SEEMS TO BE  
RECEDING FURTHER AND FURTHER INTO THE DISTANCE THESE DAYS."

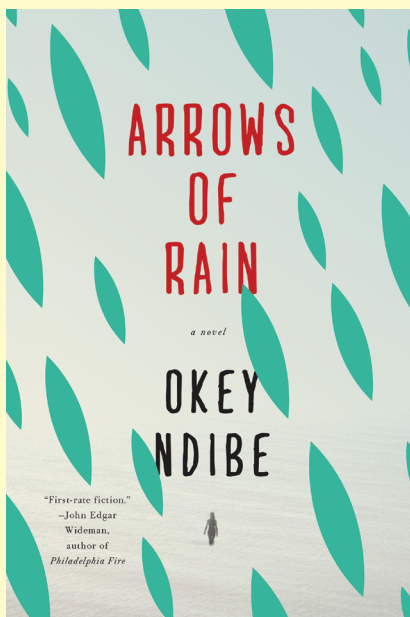
—*GQ*

*Foreign Gods, Inc.*, tells the story of Ike, a New York-based Nigerian cab driver who sets out to steal the statue of an ancient war deity from his home village and sell it to a New York gallery.

Ike's plan is fueled by desperation. Despite a degree in economics from a major American college, his strong accent has barred him from the corporate world. Forced to eke out a living as a cab driver, he is unable to manage the emotional and material needs of a temperamental African American bride and a widowed mother demanding financial support. When he turns to gambling, his mounting losses compound his woes.

And so he travels back to Nigeria to steal the statue, where he has to deal with old friends, family, and a mounting conflict between those in the village who worship the deity, and those who practice Christianity.

A meditation on the dreams, promises and frustrations of the immigrant life in America; the nature and impact of religious conflicts; an examination of the ways in which modern culture creates or heightens infatuation with the "exotic," including the desire to own strange objects and hanker after ineffable illusions; and an exploration of the shifting nature of memory, *Foreign Gods Inc.*, is a brilliant work of fiction that illuminates our globally interconnected world like no other.



# ARROWS OF RAIN

BY OKEY NDIBE

This debut novel from the author of the powerful, universally acclaimed *Foreign Gods, Inc.* looks at a woman's drowning and the ensuing investigation in an emerging African nation.

A young prostitute runs into the sea and drowns. The last man who spoke to her, the "madman" Bukuru, is asked to account for her death. His shocking revelations land him in court. Alone and undefended, Bukuru must calculate the cost of silence in the face of rampant corruption and state-sponsored violence against women.

*Arrows of Rain* dramatizes the relationship between an individual and the modern African state. Okey Ndibe examines the erosion of moral insight in both public and private life, drawing out the complex factors behind the near-collapse of a nation.



"HIGHLY EVOCATIVE."

—Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize Laureate

"SMART AND OFTEN DEFTLY WRITTEN, A PARABLE OF POWER AND THE HUMANITY IT STRIPS AWAY ... *ARROWS OF RAIN* REMAINS A NOVEL OF RESISTANCE—IF NOT POLITICAL RESISTANCE, EXACTLY, THEN RESISTANCE AT THE LEVEL OF THE SOUL."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"NDIBE IS A GIFTED WRITER AND AN ADEPT STORYTELLER, WHO CLEARLY EXULTS IN THE TELLING."

—*Essence Magazine*

"A POWERFUL REMINDER THAT THE IMPRINT OF HISTORY — ITS MACHINATIONS AND CULTURAL USURPATIONS, ITS ELEVATIONS AND DENIGRATIONS—IS NOT MERELY ON THE SUBSEQUENT CHRONICLE, BUT ON SUBSEQUENT INDIVIDUAL SOULS AS WELL."

—*The Cleveland Plain-Dealer*

CONTACT: Paul Oliver  
Director of Marketing & Publicity  
[poliver@sohopress.com](mailto:poliver@sohopress.com)  
(212) 260-1900



ISBN: 978-1-61695-760-5



52500

9 781616 957605