

TRIALS OF HOPE / የተስፋ ፈተና

YIRGA GELAW WOLDEYES

ABOUT THE BOOK

In this profound and groundbreaking narrative, Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes weaves together stories of heritage and heartache. His unique memoir celebrates the depth, strength and beauty of Ethiopian culture while mourning its erosion – first under colonial forces, and later through internal conflict. Framing his work via the Ethiopian belief in the four elemental stages of human experience – wind, fire, water and soil – Yirga’s story celebrates and honours the voices that fight to preserve his culture. This is an essential exploration of the human condition, urging us to connect with a nation of people whose sagacity and spirit have endured through centuries.

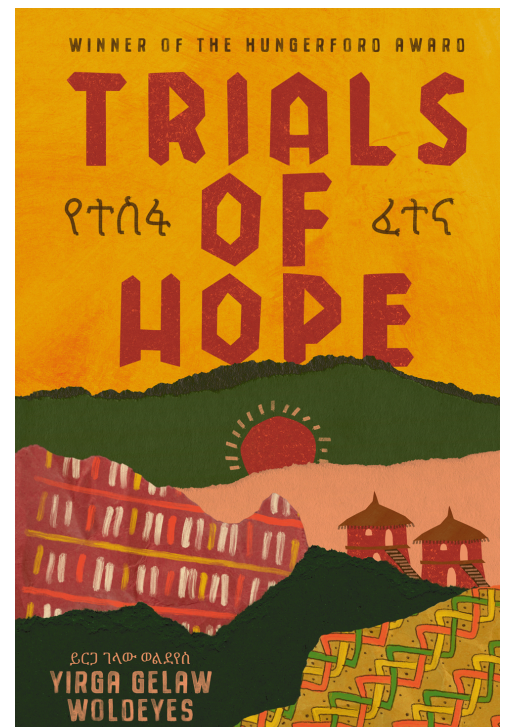
Trials of Hope / የተስፋ ፈተና won the 2024 Hungerford Award.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes is a writer, researcher and poet from Lalibela, Ethiopia. He is Director of the Centre for Human Rights Education at Curtin University in Perth, WA. His academic and creative work revolves around African traditions, Ethiopian philosophy, epistemic justice, issues of looted manuscript repatriation, and the politics of language and belonging. His Amharic poetry was compiled and published in a solo collection titled የተረሮች ጩኸት (*Yeteraroch Chuhet, The Cry of Mountains*) and has been performed widely on stage and radio in Ethiopia. His English creative work has appeared in *Westerly*, *Stories of Perth* and *Ways of Being Here*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this memoir called *Trials of Hope*?
2. What is the significance of the sections it is divided into: wind, fire, water and soil?
3. Can you apply these elemental stages to your own life?
4. How would you describe Yirga as a child?
5. In what ways did his community protect him and in what ways did it allow him the freedom to become himself?
6. Who are the significant adults in young Yirga’s life and what does he learn from them?
7. At what stage does he become a poet, and why?
8. The teenage Yirga runs away to a monastery with his friends (see Wind Reflection 3). What does this episode tell us about him – and about the man he will become?
9. ‘Alienation from your people, from your culture, from your way of living in and knowing the world: this is what causes a person to crumble. And the bonds that held me and my culture were stronger than stone.’ (p.75) Does this statement in the ‘Wind’ section hold true for the author across his memoir?
10. What erosions to Ethiopian culture does the author himself witness in his childhood and across the book?
11. How is it that ‘wind’ becomes ‘fire’ in this young man?
12. This memoir explores what it is like to grow up in a country that was never colonised – whose author only learned that he was black when a visiting African-American professor told him so. What are students being asked to do when they are told to think of themselves as ‘black’?
13. How does Woldeyes experience ‘blackness’ when he arrives in Australia?
14. How does he begin to gain agency over the way that he is perceived, and how he perceives himself, in this new, white-settler colony (see ‘Water Reflection 1’)?



15. How is it that 'fire' becomes 'water' to the young man Yirga in Australia?
16. What is Woldeyes' relationship to Lalibela after he leaves?
17. How is it possible to manage the pain of not living somewhere that you love, and from which you are an exile?
18. Choose two or three of your favourite poems and read them aloud. Why have you chosen these ones in particular?
19. What do the poems tell us that the prose chapters do not?
20. If you do not read Amharic, what is the effect for you of seeing Woldeyes' poems written in two languages?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Which did you write first: the poems in Amharic or the English? The prose or the poetry?

I wrote the poems first. In fact, many of the poems were written across decades. From my childhood in Lalibela, to my time as a health assistant across rural Ethiopia, all the way through to my life in Australia, I wrote versions of the poems that appear in this book. I write when poetry strikes me, wherever that may be. For instance, when I was a security guard, from midnight to daybreak, my body would cross buildings and lawns, but my mind often invented poems. I created a small notebook similar to the security notebook we were given to record incidents, just for jotting down lines or even whole poems. To me, the poem is like the spirit or soul, while the prose is the body or the clothes. The prose is there to hold up the poems. Except for maybe one poem, I never write in English first. I write in Amharic without thinking about the English. Amharic poetry has strict rules. If you carefully look at the end of each line, you can see that many of the last letters match. This is because Amharic poetry must rhyme. I always feel free when I write in Amharic; translation happens after.

Were there challenges in re-entering and giving shape to the memories contained in these pages?

Did you discover anything that you did not anticipate in writing them?

My memoir is full of gaps and absences. Some stories unrelated to the present get abandoned, while less important stories in my past are picked up, mainly as illustrations for the points I'm trying to make about African heritage, colonialism, or belonging in Australia. For example, the story of the African-American professor talking about black consciousness was marginal to my life. Yet, it became central later because I understood what she meant after I came to Australia. I also did not understand the uniqueness of my upbringing, or the value of freedom I enjoyed as a child, until I was an adult living in another country. We truly belong or feel free when we are not conscious of our belonging or freedom, when it is just a fact of life rather than something contested or needing to be claimed. When I re-enter and give shape to memories, I am doing that from the perspective of today, from where I stand today and what I want to tell the world.

Why is this an important Australian story?

My book may be different from the usual Australian story, but this difference is what makes it an important Australian story. Some may think what makes the book exceptional is the inclusion of Amharic, a foreign language. But Amharic is not an exception. English too is a foreign language to this land. The book disrupts the attitude that considers Amharic as foreign but English as native. It also reminds us that in this country, not all languages are equal citizens. If there is a European way of becoming an Australian, shouldn't there be an Ethiopian way of becoming an Australian too? How would these different forms of becoming Australian coalesce into each other if our relationships were to be guided by Country. You cannot erase 60,000 years of history with a 200-year-old fable without committing a terrible crime – the crime of terricide – where the land is not allowed to nurture and give birth to diverse cultures. Instead of seeking belonging from institutions and laws, I seek citizenship from the 'Kole', from the ancient spirit of this land. That is an Ethiopian way of becoming Australian.

You have a bilingual son. Have you been able to find books here in Australia written in Amharic? Why is it personally important to you to keep your language alive?

I haven't been able to find any books written in Amharic in Australia, and even the books that come from overseas are mostly poor translations written by non-native speakers. As a result, I have resorted to translating many of my son's English books, writing directly onto the books themselves. I also write entirely new stories in Amharic for him, trying to merge his interests with stories from Ethiopia. I have only ever

spoken to him in Amharic and, as such, he has two mother tongues: Amharic and English. We swim in these two languages in our household, our son effortlessly switching between the two.

It is important to keep my language, and *all* languages, alive because each one contains an entire unique universe. Language represents what people feel, experience, know, believe, love, fear and hope. Even the same language does not represent identical realities. Language allows us to live in plural universes; it helps us imagine, invent, remember and forget. In my tradition, it is one of the attributes of our soul. It is the lifeline of generations. Denying one's language is killing the spirit of the ancestors: their memories, their histories and their lifelines. It harms all of us. Colonial languages implant the memory of the coloniser into the culture of the colonised. As such, it's very important to keep one's native language alive. It is a responsibility my wife and I take seriously, and we are raising our son as bilingual to connect him to the spiritual, cultural and epistemic heritage of Ethiopia. It is his birthright.

What is next for Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes?

For my next book, I plan to focus on the situation in Ethiopia over the last few years with the civil war and ongoing ethnic violence. I want to bear witness, to record what has been largely unrecorded, seen or felt by the western world. The atrocities are directed at the heart of Ethiopia, not only harming individuals and communities, but the webs of relations that bound Ethiopians together back home and here in the Australian diaspora. These records will be accompanied by poems and reflections.



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