



Measuring Time

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Mamo and LaMamo are twin brothers living in the small Nigerian village of Keti, where their domineering father controls their lives. With high hopes the twins attempt to flee from home, but only LaMamo escapes successfully and is able to live their dream of becoming a soldier who meets beautiful women. Mamo, the sickly, awkward twin, is doomed to remain in the village with his father. Gradually he comes out of his father's shadow and gains local fame as a historian, and, using Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* as his model, he embarks on the ambitious project of writing a "true" history of his people. But when the rains fail and famine rages, religious zealots incite the people to violence—and LaMamo returns to fight the enemy at home.

A novel of ardent loyalty, encroaching modernity, political desire, and personal liberation, *Measuring Time* is a heart-wrenching history of Nigeria, portrayed through the eyes of a single family.

Measuring Time Details

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Lisa says

I liked the characters and their relationships, and the political goings-on -- both the political-hopeful father and the government interference in the school intrigued me.

The language was pleasant and enjoyable to read, and the main story was interesting.

It was maybe 150 pages too long and could have used an editor with a more judicious eye.

Sophie Muller says

A remarkable book that resonated deeply with me regarding the value of culture and history. I'm using the passage about facial tribal marks and their lack of relevance nowadays with my Japanese students, to try and help them see how dated their main conception of tattoos (gangsters) is.

Geek Lee says

this was an interesting read but not quite what i expected. the characters were wonderful and one can't help but want the twins to succeed in their quest to become famous. i enjoyed the beginning of their tale the most - the young boys are very entertaining. i also enjoyed reading about their journeys and felt extremely sympathetic for mamo and his adventure, perhaps because the story is told from his perspective. still, i feel as though the story loses its way just as it is winding down and believe part four could have been tighter. still, it was an enjoyable read. most interesting was the frequent reminder that were it not for western influence, the twin boys would likely have been killed. also interesting was the importance of plans for water when it came up considering that it is usually not thought of when thinking of nigeria but is often associated with other parts of africa.

Samantha says

Really a 4.5. For all of what seem on the surface like "gimmicks," (Nigerian twins, the structure of the bildungsroman, etc) it adds up to a smart, elegant story. Mamo and LaMamo grow up neglected by their father and raised by their aunt. Mamo is physically weak from sickle-cell anemia; LaMamo is strong. They run away and LaMamo becomes a soldier; Mamo is forced to turn back and becomes a teacher and a historian. The pathos and boredom of Mamo's life is punctuated by LaMamo's letters from Liberia and Guinea, where he is a mercenary soldier cum assistant to Medecins Sans Frontieres. Mamo, by dint of his writing, is invited into the corridors of power, but at personal and moral cost. LaMamo's reappearance at the novel's end brings the story's action full-circle. The storytelling is graceful and economical. Concerned as the novel's protagonist is with writing, one is reminded that there are, in fact, good cliches.

Judith says

If I were still teaching, I would teach this book, not only for the questions it raises to which I do not know the answers (Nigerian history primary among them), but also because it is beautifully told, deceptively simple, and filled with love and wisdom, anger and illness, dishonesty and naive, hopeful belief. Mamo and LaMamo are twins who as children seek adventure and fame, and as adults realize the dark side of both ambitions.

Marcy says

Two twins, living in a small Nigerian village called Keti, measuring time, wondering how they will each achieve fame together. Mamo, the twin who has sickle cell anemia, measures his time as a child, sick in bed, while his twin colors and entertains him by his bedside. Mamo measures his time, waiting for his father's love. Mamo measures his time, waiting for his twin to come back from numerous rebel armies, trying to "save Africa" from the puppets of the Western Powers. Mamo measures his time, going to school and teaching at a school in Keti that the government will soon close. Mamo measures his time, waiting for Zara, the love of his life to come back to him. While he waits, he measures his time, hoping to achieve fame by writing a biography of the Mai, the leader of Keti. Mamo suffers loneliness, abandonment, and the disillusionment of Keti's corrupt government. Helon Habila's powerful words portray Mamo's acute feelings in detail throughout his childhood and adulthood. This is Mamo's story...

Dowell Oba says

The author's style of putting across the story is unique and wonderful. I love the characterization, particularly that of Mamo, the sickly twin. The author takes us carefully into his gentle and admirable character. He is a young man that speaks less and lives in much silence, from which he studies his environment very well, and becomes a historian determined to preserve his people's history and tell their story from different angles and from the point of view of several distinct individuals including Zara, the Mai, the Waziri, his father, his uncles as well as his brother. The author does a great job in the book by making us appreciate the varying and admirable qualities in individual characters, no matter how ordinary they may seem.

Titilayo says

reading this book was listening to my father talk about his life before immigration. i could easily see him and his mates living out their lives in this novel. it was realistic fiction, because it brought the Nigerian of my father's youth (and the Nigerian during the present elections) to life in a very subtle way. Helon Habila writes in a plain fashion. he puts me in the mind of Chinua Achebe. what you see is what the characters see. what you experience is what the characters experience. what you take from it is what you take from it.

Marvin says

A long & demanding novel, it's also a slow starter, & I kept being tempted to bail out until, at midpoint, I figured out what it was about, & that was two of my favorite topics: History & national identity. "A true history," the main character reflects, "is one that looks at the lives of individuals, ordinary people who toil and dream and suffer, who bear the brunt of whatever vicissitudes time inflicts on the nation. If a historian could capture these ordinary lives, including their recollections of their own family's past, then he might come close to writing a true 'biographical history' of a nation; for when we refer to a nation, are we not really referring to the people that inhabit that nation, and so isn't the story of a nation then really the story of the people who make up the nation?" And in a sense that's what this author does in telling the story of this amateur Nigerian historian of a sort. But it's a different Nigeria than one sees in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, though there are some similarities, too, in a story that covers some of the same years, but in a different part of Nigeria. But why do fictional missionaries to Africa always come from Iowa?

Laura says

A remarkable piece of work by Habila. His prose is lyrically attractive, poetic, a canvas of colours playing with some trompe l'oeil techniques and intertextual references from various authors. It's stories within a story. The twin fighter vs the academic twin, two sides of the same coin really, although the academic twin occupies much of the narrative there is always an implicit reference to the risk taker and fighter. Set in the Nigeria of the '60s to the 90's we witness through the characters an array of political events played out by local government representatives. The ending was the only part that let me down a little but all in all an excellent book

karen says

i wish i could have made a shelf called "books in which two twins set off to become soldiers together, only one has second thoughts, and turns back, and then they are separated," and then i could put this and *Gob's Grief* on it. however, that is too long a name to have, it seems...

Julia Grundling says

first time this has happened to me. i usually abandon a book early on, the most i will read is about 70 pages before i leave it. i enjoyed this book so much and then, when there were about 100 pages left, i didn't want to read anymore.

i think it is written very well and it is an interesting story, but i think the detail of the history got too much for me. i love historical novels, but this one was a tad too much. pity though, as it was really promising. i skimmed over the last 100 pages.

Stephanie says

I waffled back and forth over if this book was a four star or a three star...so it is getting a 3+ from me. I liked the book and found it very interesting. But the reason for the three stars and not four is because the most interesting part for me was "experiencing" life in an African village and how civil wars/any war affect the life of people living in the conflict areas. The author does an excellent job of painting the picture of African village life and giving depth to Mamo, the main character. But the storyline didn't really capture my attention. I enjoyed reading it but mainly because the background and setting kept me captured...not the story so much.

Overall, glad I read the book and it was better than I expected it to be, but the journey I went on through the book was not via the storyline, just the story setting and background.

Tinea says

I loved the sprawling tale of the brother who stayed behind in rural Northern Nigeria when I read it, but the story faded and was eclipsed by sharper, more urgent works (Born on a Tuesday, Season of Crimson Blossoms). A meandering deep dive into political corruption and local boss machinery, and how young men are woven in as bright threads-- actors-- but are not the loom or the weaver or the tapestry.

Friederike Knabe says

"Measuring Time" is the story of twin brothers, their family and the people that shaped them. Living in rural Nigeria, village life and the natural environment add atmosphere and context. Habila's story-telling talents are evident in numerous ways. His own narrative of people and events is interwoven with those of his protagonist Mamo, who in later years writes about the people around him and thereby becomes a recorder of the local history. Giving Mamo the dual voice of the growing boy/young adult of the story time line and the retrospective commentary of the future biographer, the author creates an even richer portrayal of the main characters and the times they live in.

Mamo, the first born of the twins, inherited sickle cell anemia from his mother, who died in child birth. From an early age Mamo, fragile and prone to health crises, does not expect to grow into adulthood. This makes him reflective and withdrawn, always waiting for something to happen: first death, later on fame, fortune or something else. Expectations and dreams change over time. The younger twin, LaMamo, on the other hand, is a rambunctious youth who "acts before he thinks". Together they make a complete person, one balancing the other's character.

Among the many things uniting them, hatred for their father stands above all else. They are convinced that he made their mother's life so miserable that she died at a young age. Fortunately, they are taken to their uncle Ilya for the first few years of their lives. Then auntie Marina, their father's sister, comes to live with them, dedicating her life to the well being of the boys. Eventually, the young men plan their escape: there are wars being fought in neighbouring countries and they believe that they can make their fortune...

Things don't work out as planned but Uncle Iliya takes Mamo under his intellectual and emotional wing. eventually, Mamo joins his uncle's community school as a history teacher. There he crosses paths with his childhood friend, Zara. His life takes a new turn as a result, in more ways than one. Meanwhile, LaMamo's progress or lack thereof in fighting other people's wars is conveyed through long letters to his brother that arrive sporadically. Will they ever meet again?

This is not just the story of one family, although the individuals stand in the centre of events. Uncle Ilija, who fought in several wars, has turned all his energy into maintaining the village school and to bring understanding and wisdom to those around him. The twin's father, a wealthy businessman, attempts a political career with mixed results, allowing the author to expose the many problems of the political system in the recently turned independent state of Nigeria. Habila has not only created vivid characters that stay in the reader's mind, he has skilfully broadened and deepened the narrative to include a rich account of Nigerian tradition and customs as they have evolved in this part of the country. Keeping his story personal and centred on a group of distinct characters, he finds a sensitive balance between the intimate and the historical context. His evocative power of description, whether of landscapes or human beings, is complemented by his skill as a story teller in the rich African tradition. As a human interest story it reaches audiences beyond those interested in Africa.
