

Book Review – A Moonless, Starless Sky by Alexis Okeowo

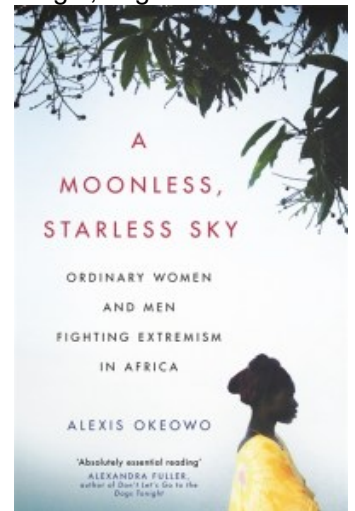
Grace Thompson says Okeowo's latest book is a compelling reminder of the lives of ordinary people that are hidden behind headlines of violence and war zones.

"There is never a single story about any place," stated the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in [a powerful Ted Talk](#) almost 10 years ago. The danger of having a single story of Africa, she argues, is that we lose the diversity and beauty of the many different people, situations, and stories. They are consumed by a single, negative narrative. That's why Alexis Okeowo's *A Moonless, Starless Sky* is so important. In this non-fiction book, Okeowo breaks down the media's single narrative of places like northern Nigeria by simply telling stories. She takes the readers into regions portrayed by news headlines as catastrophes and war zones, and tells us stories of love, courage, and faith.

Okeowo is a Nigerian-American journalist, who grew up in Alabama and moved to Uganda and then Nigeria as a young adult to experience her family's homeland. She is a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, and has spent years living and travelling extensively in the countries she writes about. As she spent time in Africa, she was captivated by the everyday ways that people dealt with and subverted violence and extremism. This, her first book, is a product of that curiosity, and it recently won her the [2018 PEN Open Book Award](#).

A Moonless, Starless Sky is about four different conflicts and the people affected by and engaged in them. In northern Uganda, Okeowo introduces us to Bosco and Eunice, who were abducted by the LRA and forced to be a soldier and a wife, and who then ran away and started a new life together. In Mauritania, she tells the stories of a woman who was enslaved and the man who helped free her, who went on to lead an anti-slavery movement. In northern Nigeria, we meet a man involved in the counter-insurgency and a girl, one of the many kidnapped by Boko Haram in an event that made headlines internationally, who managed to get away. In Somalia, Okeowo describes the lives of several girls who, against the background noise of constant threats from Muslim extremists, continue to play basketball. As the book develops, Okeowo also begins to weave in her own history as an underdeveloped, though interesting, fifth story of Africa.

These characters and their stories go far beyond headlines and stereotypes of Africa. They draw out the human complexities—the emotion, fear, anger and love—that inhabit research topics such as abduction, extremism, and reconciliation. Okeowo's skill at drawing readers into the subjects' worlds makes us understand in new ways why a slave would choose not to leave her master, or why a child abducted by the LRA would feel ambivalent about returning home. She brings to life countries which are primarily one-dimensional in Western conception—describing, for example, the illegal but vibrant night life of Mogadishu.





Alexis Okeowo, Photo Credit: New America//2017

At the same time, it is clear that Okeowo is a journalist and not a novelist—at times the descriptions are bare and the writing seems to lack artistry. But it is not a novel, and this has the effect of reminding us that these stories are, in fact, true. She doesn't tell us what to think, and that is the point. In the preface, Okeowo writes that with the ethics of resistance, *"answers are complex, possibly unknowable."* Throughout the book, she challenges us to ask questions and come to our own conclusions. Yet as she does so, Okeowo often loses her own voice as well. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish her own thoughts and observations from those of the characters. She writes as if she is largely unaware of her own presence, particularly in the first half of the book, when much could have been added by further reflection on her own place, emotions and biases as she engaged with the subjects.

A Moonless, Starless Sky is a gripping book, which tells intimate and underrepresented stories of Africa. Though it could have benefited from more reflexivity on the part of the author, overall it highlights the complexity and diversity of experiences, including those of Okeowo. I would recommend it to anyone as a vivid insight into the lives of people living in circumstances many of us in the West find difficult to comprehend. It is a compelling reminder that hidden behind the headlines are normal people figuring out how to go about life in exceptional circumstances.

[A Moonless, Starless, Sky by Alexis Okeowo, 2017](#)

Grace Thompson (@gracegoes2space) is a masters student in Conflict Studies at the London School of Economics.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.