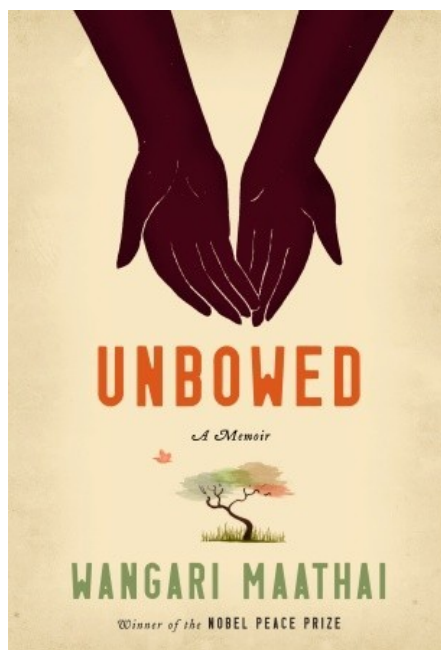




Unbowed: A Memoir

Wangari Maathai

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Hugely charismatic, humble, and possessed of preternatural luminosity of spirit, Wangari Maathai, the winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize and a single mother of three, recounts her extraordinary life as a political activist, feminist, and environmentalist in Kenya.

Born in a rural village in 1940, Wangari Maathai was already an iconoclast as a child, determined to get an education even though most girls were uneducated. We see her studying with Catholic missionaries, earning bachelor's and master's degrees in the United States, and becoming the first woman both to earn a PhD in East and Central Africa and to head a university department in Kenya. We witness her numerous run-ins with the brutal Moi government. She makes clear the political and personal reasons that compelled her, in 1977, to establish the Green Belt Movement, which spread from Kenya across Africa and which helps restore indigenous forests while assisting rural women by paying them to plant trees in their villages. We see how Maathai's extraordinary courage and determination helped transform Kenya's government into the democracy in which she now serves as assistant minister for the environment and as a member of Parliament. And we are with her as she accepts the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded in recognition of her "contribution to sustainable development, human rights, and peace."

In Unbowed, Wangari Maathai offers an inspiring message of hope and prosperity through self-sufficiency.

Unbowed: A Memoir Details

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Author : Wangari Maathai

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From Reader Review Unbowed: A Memoir for online ebook

Cheryl Olseth says

What an inspirational woman with a wonderful story to share. Ms. Maathai has demonstrated we all can make a difference. Fortunately most of us do not have to worry about violent thugs or dictatorial regimes trying to halt good works in their tracks. We just need to get out and fight for what we believe.

Ms. Maathai most certainly deserved the Nobel Peace prize for years of dedicated service to the people of Kenya and to all those she inspired to plant millions upon millions of trees throughout the world. Our planet is healthier because Ms. Maathai never gave up even when times appeared very bleak.

Manik Sukoco says

When Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, questions were raised regarding her choice by the Nobel Committee. Why should an environmentalist receive a prize that was identified with peace and human rights, voiced the critics. Reading Maathai's memoir sets the record straight, and justifying her selection for the award. In this fascinating and very personal account, she paints a vivid picture of her life, embedded in the realities of Kenya before and since independence. Her experiences during the Moi regime, in particular, demonstrate the challenges a young educated woman confronted in the face of traditional prejudice as well as political oppression.

Raised in rural Kenya, Wangari Maathai never lost the deep connection with the land and its the natural beauty. Over the years, she noticed the changes and the increasing fragility of the environment. Trees for her became a symbol and a tool for protecting the vulnerable ecosystem and assisting rural population to stem the growing poverty.

Thanks to the intervention of her older brother and the support of her mother, she was able to attend school beyond the primary level, which was all girls at the time could reach for. As luck had it and, being a bright student, her convent school was one of those selected to send graduates to the US under what became known as the Kennedy Airlift: a program to send young Africans to American colleges for further education. These young people were being primed to become future leaders of their societies in the soon to be independent African states. Maathai returned to Kenya with a Master's degree in biology, a subject that for her combined her scientific interests with her deep love for her natural environment. She was encouraged in her research and added a PhD in veterinary medicine to her record. Life should have been easy after that with a good husband, a blossoming academic career and three wonderful kids. But women in Kenya were not supposed to be independent and strong. Her fight for women's equal rights broadened her environmental commitments. Eventually she lost her academic position, her husband divorced her and she ended up as poor as she was a child. Not deterred by the adversities she was facing, she continued fighting on several fronts. She started the Greenbelt Movement to plant trees to reclaim the land as a campaign for and with rural women. Over time it gained such prominence that it was perceived as a threat by the authorities. Public show of opposition, such as the demonstrations to save Uhuru Park in Nairobi from President-friendly developers, increasingly identified Maathai and the Greenbelt Movement as a focus for opposition forces. They fought for human rights and dignity, anti-tribalism and democracy. The details of these struggles, the friendships and solidarity that Maathai experienced, both in Kenya in internationally, supported her morally and probably saved her life more than once.

Maathai's memoir is very personal and written from the heart. We get to know her thinking and feelings as well as a detailed description of the difficult life women and men who opposed the Moi regime faced. Her easygoing and conversational style softens the impact of her description of the arduous and sometimes even brutal experiences that she relays. At the same time, her story is a stirring example of how one person's

strength and perseverance can make a difference to a people and the world. The Greenbelt Movement is now a motor for tree planting around Africa and beyond. This is an inspirational book as well as a historical record. Reading it will make you feel enriched.

Eva says

She advocated for the environment especially tree planting, preventing public land grabbing, deforestation and for that her works shall forever be remembered. Like any other woman venturing into politics she received her fair share of jail time, crashed with the government severally but she stood rooted to even winning the Nobel prize. Her memoir is a clear example of what happens in today's society. I will just sum it up with something in the middle of those pages that captivated me: "A tree has roots in the soil yet reaches to the sky. It tells us that in order to aspire we need to be grounded and that no matter how high we go it is from our roots that we draw sustenance. It is a reminder to all of us who have had success that we cannot forget where we came from. It signifies that no matter how powerful we become in government or how many awards we receive, our power and strength and our ability to reach our goals depend on the people, those whose work remain unseen, who are the soil out of which we grow, the shoulders on which we stand."

Ravikiran Gunale says

During my school days, I read that Kenyan woman, Wangari Mathai, received Noble Peace prize for planting trees. I was puzzled, how would anyone get Noble Peace prize for planting trees, until I read her autobiography. The challenges she faced when working in authoritarian regime were extremely harsh. She had no idea when she could be arrested, killed. Its an uphill battle working for environmental restoration, poverty eradication and leading a mass movement, when dictator is against you. Her green belt movement planted 30 million trees with the help of hundred thousands of women, helped in restoring democracy in Kenya and poverty eradication. Many times running directly into thugs appointed by government, police and military.

During this time, her marriage failed, she supported 3 kids, govt made sure she lost her job as professor, she was jailed several times and injured multiple times. Inspiring story, well written, must read book. Lot of problems she fought still continue to plague our country like poverty, environmental degradation and women empowerment.

Claire McAlpine says

An astonishing recollection of the life and work of Wangari Maathai, a woman who applied herself to everything she did with vigour and heart, the opportunity to be educated was a major turning point and was the first of many open doorways she walked through and made the most of, not for own benefit, but always for the good of all.

Though she was a scientist and part of the University for years, the work that she started that would embrace entire communities and develop an awareness of sustainable living, was the Green Belt Movement, basically planting trees, collecting seedlings for replanting, developing seedling nurseries and empowering women to do the same in their villages and towns. She knew and practiced that one person can't change everything, it is through showing and empowering others that change happens.

The government for much of the 80's and 90's was against her, almost as if it were personal, she was an advocate for proper governance and management of public resources and as soon as she heard about abuses of powers that would remove public rights, she moved her supporters to action. Through perseverance she won many battles, to save the last big public park in the middle of Nairobi, Uhuru Park from urban development, preventing Karura Forest from being given to friends and political supporters of politicians, the release of political prisoners and even the lobbying of the World Bank to forgive national debt.

"When I see Uhuru Park and contemplate its meaning, I feel compelled to fight for it so that my grandchildren may share that dream and that joy of freedom as they one day walk there."

She was an amazing, inspirational and practical woman, who responded to the call for help on many significant issues that would benefit all Kenyan's and was an example to the world, rightfully acknowledged and awarded the Nobel Prize for peace in 2004. Sadly she passed away in 2011 due to complications arising from ovarian cancer.

"Throughout my life, I have never stopped to strategize about my next steps. I often just keep walking along, through whichever door opens. I have been on a journey and this journey has never stopped. When the journey is acknowledged and sustained by those I work with, they are a source of inspiration, energy and encouragement. They are the reasons I kept walking, and will keep walking, as long as my knees hold out."

My complete review here at Word by Word.

Mikey B. says

Wangari Maathai is certainly a commendable and tenacious woman who overcame many obstacles in Kenya to become an activist in ecology. This subsequently led to political agitation and imprisonment in attempts to make her country become more of a liberal democracy.

She could easily, during her upbringing in the 1940's and 1950's have remained illiterate in rural Kenya. She describes well her school attendance and her higher education in the United States. I found her stories about the relationship she had with her mother and family poignant.

This autobiography captures many instances of the struggle to overcome the corruption endemic to her native Kenya. She relates well how the relationship between ecological problems and poverty are entwined. I just wish at times there would have been more revealing observations and stories of the people she worked with in Kenya throughout those years. There was a tendency to veer off and describe conferences attended and the dignitaries she met around the world. This detracted from her Kenyan narrative.

Friederike Knabe says

When Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, questions were raised regarding her choice by the Nobel Committee. Why should an environmentalist receive a prize that was identified with peace and human rights, voiced the critics. Reading Maathai's memoir sets the record straight, and justifying her selection for the award. In this fascinating and very personal account, she paints a vivid picture of her life, embedded in the realities of Kenya before and since independence. Her experiences during the Moi regime, in particular, demonstrate the challenges a young educated woman confronted in the face of traditional prejudice as well as political oppression.

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Shomeret says

The date July 7 or 7/7 is a significant one for Maathai's movement. It's called Saba Saba in KiSwahili. I'd like to note here that I was reading this book on Saba Saba.

Before reading this, my only exposure to the Kikuyu was Mike Resnick's Kirinyaga: A Fable of Utopia.

Although I think that the Kirinyaga stories are powerful fiction, I am only now grasping that they are a dis-service to the Kikuyu in some important ways.

From a cultural standpoint, I appreciated learning that there are Kikuyu stories about dragons. I wondered what these dragons look like. I know that Chinese dragons are conceptually different from European dragons. Kikuyu dragons are shapechangers which is interesting, but I wonder what else they are that's different from European or Chinese folklore.

Wangari Maathai's approach to the environmental degradation that Kenya has suffered is so simple and effective. It's also so applicable to any geographical area that has become deforested. What isn't simple or easy is the challenge of standing firm against the powerful corporate and political interests that seek to continue pillaging the land. That's why Maathai got that Nobel Prize.

Margitte says

I started out writing a totally different review for this book while reading the text in 'Unbowed'. By the finish line I just sat gobsmacked, and robbed of words.

A few years ago I watched a program on conservation work done in Kenya and saw Prof. Wangari Maathai explain the power of trees to a BBC tv audience. That prompted me to find more information on her work. I was rendered speechless when I discovered the amazing person behind this effort.

I was therefor anxious and excited when I was given her book as gift in November 2013. It was one of those books lying here, begging to be read. I just finished. I wondered what happened to her and googled. Only to discover that she passed away in 2011.

This book is her autobiography and certainly one of the most inspirational reads in this genre that I have ever come across. A tribute in the **New York Times** stated:

"Dr. Maathai, one of the most widely respected women on the continent, played many roles — environmentalist, feminist, politician, professor, rabble-rouser, human rights advocate and head of the Green Belt Movement, which she founded in 1977. Its mission was to plant trees across Kenya to fight erosion and to create firewood for fuel and jobs for women.

Dr. Maathai was as comfortable in the gritty streets of Nairobi's slums or the muddy hillsides of central Kenya as she was hobnobbing with heads of state. She won the Peace Prize in 2004 for what the Nobel committee called "her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace." It was a moment of immense pride in Kenya and across Africa.

Her Green Belt Movement has planted more than 30 million trees in Africa and has helped nearly 900,000 women, according to the United Nations, while inspiring similar efforts in other African countries.

“Wangari Maathai was a force of nature,” said Achim Steiner, the executive director of the United Nations’ environmental program. He likened her to Africa’s ubiquitous acacia trees, “strong in character and able to survive sometimes the harshest of conditions.”

In one of her interviews she compared herself to a hummingbird who tried to stop a forest fire. All the big animals were just standing there, watching the little bird spit drops of water on the fire. When they asked the bird what the idea was, the bird replied "It doesn't matter how small or big I am. I can only try my best."

She was offered an opportunity to study in America. A humble village girl from a remote village in Kenya got a chance to broaden her world. It inspired her to do her doctorate and achieve all her dreams.

"It is fair to say that America transformed me. It made me into the person I am today. It taught me not to waste any opportunity and to do what can be done - and that there is a lot to do. The spirit of freedom and possibility that America nurtured in me made me want to foster the same in Kenya, and it was in this spirit that I returned home."

This book is not an autobiography of a egocentric praise-grabber lightly pirouetting through the alphabet. It is a fascinating story of a humble, intelligent woman who found the link between deforestation and poverty and decided to make a difference - one seed at a time. She has lived through the stages of environmental degradation in the area she grew up in. She discovered the relationship between African Wild Fig trees(cracking rocks to allow water to bubble to the surface and form rivers) and deforestation(when these trees were cut down, the water disappeared resulting in famine and disaster).

"These experiences of childhood are what mold us and make us who we are. How you translate the life you see, feel, smell, and touch as you grow up -the water you drink, the air you breathe, and the food you eat - are what you become. When what you remember disappear, you miss it and search for it, and so it was with me. When I was a child, my surroundings were alive, dynamic, and inspiring. Even though I was entering a world where there were books to read and facts to learn - the cultivation of the mind - I was still able to enjoy a world where there were no books to read, where children were told living stories about the world around them, and where you cultivated the soil and the imagination in equal measure."

This book is not just about her life. It serves as an inspiration to all people who had to endure abuse, discrimination, prosecution, and incredible odds to reach a goal. But it is also a testimony to the world we love in a practical, down-to-earth voice of reason.

So I was thinking about the unbelievable work she has done in her life, the numerous obstacles she had to overcome, and the thought came up that she was not only a force of nature, she was mother Africa. She showed the world what love is really all about.

I recommend this book to **EVERYONE!!!**

Watch this **tribute** to her. I cannot, for the life of me, express how I feel right now.

Just read the book.

Amelia says

Wow. Just wow. Wangari Maathai was the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel peace prize. But, that's not really what the book is about. The book is about Kenya and how it developed from a multi-tribal

area to a colonial outpost of the British and then how it finally gained independence, but then later moved toward totalitarianism, and then democracy - most all of which happened in the author's lifetime. And, of course, because it is the memoir of Maathai, two themes run through the entire book, women's rights (or lack of them) and the importance of care for the environment in an effort to avert the desertification of Kenya.

Mother lived through many tumultuous times in the history of Kenya. Her experiences and views are fascinating and at times terrifying. She's been arrested, beaten, threatened with assassination, and a whole list of other crazy stuff, well beyond the generally horrible things that were happening to the average educated African woman at the time (such as being paid less and treated as less worthy).

The lessons learned with regard to promoting peace in Kenya are applicable today even in other places. Lessons learned with regard to persistence, having important goals, and encouraging people to work together are also universal. We can all learn from Maathai.

I listened to this audiobook via Audible and the narrator, Chinasas Ogbuagu did a very good job.

Anna says

The first half, about her childhood and even her experience as a university student in the U.S., lacked depth. The book became more captivating as I read on, but only because the subject matter became more interesting (her experiences in Kenya after she returned from university, Kenya's recent political history). Unfortunately, her writing style throughout is pretty dry; she probably should have worked on the book with someone. She also appears self-congratulating at times, which is annoying but forgivable.

Her observations about international development were right on target, in my view. It was refreshing to see someone use their American higher education to make a difference in their country of origin. If only there were more people willing to do the same, and if only indigenous NGOs received as much if not more financial support from abroad as American NGOs.

Some gems from her story:

She struggled to maintain international support because the Kenyan government ordered all foreign assistance to go through them (p. 196), as well as approval for nominations to certain posts such as to spots within the United Nations. At one point CARE Austria was reluctant to help her purchase an office for her NGO (p. 201) because it was not officially recognized by the Kenyan government. This policy of using foreign assistance to prop up (malevolent) governments is stupid and it upsets me. You can't eliminate the risk of failed states, you only delay the collapse. And in delaying, you're creating conditions in which conflict will foment, making the inevitable collapse even worse. UGH

"Ethnicity is one of the major strategies that politicians have used to divide Africans." (p. 236)

"...the Kenyan government could be completely untouched by the complaints of its people; but the minute the international community caught wind of what elements in the government were doing, it could move quickly, because it depended so much on foreign aid, military training funds, and goodwill overseas." (p. 243)

"The Green Belt Movement had provided a laboratory of sorts to experiment with a holistic approach to development that dealt with problems on the ground but also examined and addressed their individual and systemic causes." (p. 255)

"What people see as fearlessness is really persistence. Because I am focused on the solution, I don't see danger. Because I don't see danger, I don't allow my mind to imagine what might happen to me, which is my definition of fear. If you don't see danger and see only the solution, then you can defy anyone and appear strong and fearless." (p. 272)

Recommended to anyone with an interest in Kenya, Africa, international development, etc.

Barry Morris says

Like most memoirs, it started strong then got more self-serving as the accolades piled up. Maathai led an extraordinary life and had a considerable influence in the environmental movement. She definitely deserved her Nobel Prize and out respect. However, many memoir writers would be better served by biographers. At one point she goes into great detail about how her life revolves around her children. Soon after that we learn that she has to travel Canada to attend a conference, so she arranges for them to spend some time with their father (from whom she is divorced). A few pages later she casually lets it slip that the kids spend almost the entire next six years living with dad. It's a minor point in the story, but the inequality of her emphases (the agony of letting them go versus the matter of factness of how long they were gone) throws the objectivity of many of her other anecdotes into doubt.

By far the most affective part of the text is the first few chapters. Therein she describes the brutal efficiency with which the Europeans came in and destroyed her homeland and the passivity of the natives who allowed them to. So much wrong was done to so many people that one runs pout of people to blame. And it is the strict reportorial precision with which she describes it that makes it so effective. As time goes on and the ratio of description to evaluation shifts, the narrative becomes less effective and more self-serving.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Wangari Maathai has an interesting story of growing from a Kikuyu child to a Nobel Peace Prize winner. I grew up surrounded by stories of the Swahili and Turkana peoples of Kenya because of friends we had living there, but I didn't know much about the Kikuyu or the forests. I learned a lot about the socio-political history of Kenya, how to work toward change (be "patient and committed," she would say), and how much one person can accomplish. I also feel like I saw education from a different perspective.

The rest, I'd rather Wangari Maathai said in her own words, so here are the places I marked:

"These experiences of childhood are what mold us and make us who we are. How you translate the life you see, feel, smell, and touch as you grow up - the water you drink, the air you breathe, and the food you eat - are what you become. When what you remember disappears, you miss it and search for it, and so it was with me. When I was a child, my surroundings were alive, dynamic, and inspiring. Even though I was entering a world where there were books to read and facts to learn - the cultivation of the mind - I was still able to enjoy a world where there were no books to read, where children were told living stories about the world around them, and where you cultivated the soil and the imagination in equal measure."

"A general orientation toward trusting people and a positive attitude toward life and fellow human beings is healthy - not only for one's peace of mind but also to bring about change."

"Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but instill in them even more

respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost."

"When we go through profound experiences, they change us. We risk our relationship with friends and family. They may not like the direction we have taken or may feel threatened or judged by our decisions. They may wonder what happened to the person they thought they once knew. There may not be enough space in a relationship for aspirations and beliefs or mutual interests and aims to unfold. For a couple, this is particularly so because most people marry young and are bound to grow and change in their perceptions and appreciation of life."

"Humanity needs to rethink peace and security and work toward cultures of peace by governing itself more democratically, respecting the rule of law and human rights, deliberately and consciously promoting justice and equity, and managing resources more responsibly and accountably - not only for the present but also for the future generations."

George Rife says

Maathai's autobiography tells her life story well, however I felt as though it didn't give me that much understanding of what went on inside, of how she changed from a nice Catholic school girl to a militant defender of the environment, democracy and women's rights who became a Nobel Peace Prize recipient. From her writing it was evidently a gradual process in which one thing led to another. It would be interesting now to read a biography of her by an unbiased journalist/ writer.

Alicia says

I have no doubt that Wangari accomplished a lot in a country that was determined to keep her in her place, however her memoir left me not particularly liking her as a person. She feigned humbleness and seemed to exaggerate her influence. One example: Wangari tells a short story of how she was not able to buy her children some chips at the hotel pool her family was at because she didn't have the money. Wangari said, "I can relate with those mothers that are not able to feed their children because of my experience." WHAT?

Lulu says

"As I swept the last bit of dust, I made a covenant with myself: I will accept. Whatever will be, will be. I have a life to lead. I recalled words a friend had told me, the philosophy of her faith. "Life is a journey and a struggle," she had said. "We cannot control it, but we can make the best of any situation." I was indeed in quite a situation. It was up to me to make the best of it."

Michel says

Unbowed is a book very interesant

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

My introduction to Wangari Maathai was through the children's books by Claire Nivola and Jeanette Winter, which focused on her tree planting efforts. However, once I began reading *Unbowed*, I realized that she is about so much more than that. Her life has involved her in politics, human rights, and women's rights, as well as environmentalism. I can't believe all that she has accomplished! One idea, one activity, led to another. She showed that when many people together do one small thing, they create something great. She showed that the people, if they care enough and work together, can make their government answerable to them. She never gave up, and always used peaceful methods and reason, even when the people she was dealing with were violent and unreasonable. I wish I could be like her.

The book also gave me insight into why there is so much turmoil in the countries of Africa today. The British, French, Portuguese, and whoever else colonized Africa drew boundaries for countries that cut across and divided tribes and grouped tribes together who were traditional enemies. The colonial governments tried to force western ways onto them and suppressed traditional ways, which had always kept them in balance with the environment. The colonial governments also persuaded them to see the natural resources around them not as something to live in harmony with, to use only as much as you need, but as something to be exploited and sold for money and not something to be protected. I see parallels with the Native Americans in the U.S.

I read this book for a faculty book discussion. One of our faculty commented that you could teach a whole course from this one book. I can't praise Wangari highly enough, and wish I could meet her some day. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the environment, trees, women's rights, human rights, and democracy.

William says

This is not the most artfully or lyrically written book but it deserves 5 stars for the tale it tells..It's a story of one of the few true heroes of our generation. And to overcome the formidable obstacles that are put in the path of an African woman from a developing nation, by men, culture, tradition and the vestiges of colonialism to reach the heights of leadership and effectiveness that she has is simply astounding. It is a story that needs to be shared with all that want to know what one person can contribute and make possible. Particularly for women and people of color around the world. Awarded the Nobel Peace prize for her efforts to reforest Kenya through the Green Belt program and working tirelessly for democracy and alleviation of poverty she was repeatedly jailed and censured. Over this she triumphed to win a seat in Kenya's Parliament to try and unite in peace the warring factions and tribes of Kenyan society. The book ends in 2006 on a hopeful note before the awful ethnic violence of 2007-8 in that country. One can only hope for other youth to read this book and give just half as much dedication and energy to the causes of environmentalism, peace, and poverty elimination as she has.

Tinea says

It was my professor of African American Women's History in college who taught me the lesson that one of the best ways to learn history is through studying the lived experiences of activists working in opposition to a system structured to oppress them-- a combination of Patricia Hill Collins's standpoint theory, which states

(simplified) that the oppressed must be able to navigate both the dominant paradigm and the inner workings of the cultures oppressed people create outside the realm of powerful people thereby giving oppressed people an epistemological advantage for understanding any given situation's power structure; and Forest Gump--activist lives map out their generation's greatest hits. Fantastic advice. Maathai's autobiography tells the story of British colonialism in Kenya, the Mau Mau rebellion and Britain's subsequent torture and repression, the liberation movement and the heady days following, the fall into corruption and neoliberal poverty, and the Kenyan democratic movement in the 90s and 2000s.

Unbowed is the story of Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan woman who founded the Green Belt Movement and won the Nobel Peace Prize, the first African woman and the first environmental activist to do so. And that's about all I knew of her-- somehow her tree planting organization was groundbreaking enough to merit a Nobel; ok, sounds cool. But Maathai and her work is so much bigger than this!! It's criminal it is "tree planting" that has become the word association with her name.

She was an incredibly courageous democracy and land rights activist who used trees as a symbolic and tactical weapon to defend people's land from corporate and government land grabs, as a way to bring witness to ethnic violence, and as a weapon of attack to force the Kenyan government to release victims of torture and disappearances. Maathai was a trained biologist, so her choice of trees was both scientific and symbolic; planting diverse native trees combats environmental injustices and hunger from drought, soil erosion, and climate change caused by deforestation; trees are a long-term method to solidly plant something tangible on the land that she and her fellow activists and farmers used their bodies to defend-- from severe physical attack, like clubs and machetes and sometimes bullets.

Maathai was a professor and a mother, so she carefully draws out the lessons she wants us to learn from her life. So much to learn in here. There is the scientific, ethnobotanical foundation that she links to women's rural cultural traditions that taught respect for the trees found near springs. There is the stubborn dedication to her own definitions of what is right, rooted in respect for land and people, and the constant decisions to act, to take the practical, logistical steps and personal sacrifices that enable a movement to commence and sustain itself. There is that nimble navigation of becoming a public figure-- claiming it, staking out her expertise and the legitimacy of her opinions in a white rich man's world that would silence them-- and using growing international renown to constantly channel power and resources to the grassroots activists working alongside her and their struggles. There is the weaving of privilege and lucky blessings of her life which are what enabled her to do what she did; the lesson being in how she embraced and fought to use these gifts: the recipient of one of very few scholarships to study in the US offered by President Kennedy at the lucky moment she graduated high school, after the chance privileges and connections that enabled her to go to school at all, Maathai was able to become an educated, multilingual woman despite a rural poverty background and fight her way into doctorates and professorship and (I think?) ministry appointments, becoming the first woman everything in science in East Africa.

Maathai passed away in 2011. I'm mourning the world's loss right now.

Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but instill in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost. (p.138)

On Direct Action and the importance of ecology as an intersection in social justice:

As long as the Green Belt Movement was perceived as just a few women raising seedlings, we didn't matter to the government. But as soon as we began to explain how trees disappear and why it is important for citizens to stand up for their rights-- whether environmental, women's, or human-- senior officials in the government and members of Parliament began to take notice. They soon realized that unlike some women's organizations in Kenya, the Green Belt Movement was not organizing women for the purposes of advancing the government's agenda, whatever that might be. We were organizing women (and men) to do things for themselves that, in most cases, the government had no interest in doing. That unsettled the authorities.

(p.180)

On courage:

We always encouraged people to run when they were attacked. It was one thing to shout, "Leave the forest alone;" it was another to nurse a wound in the hospital. Some of us who joined our campaign for Karura [Forest] and who were with us that day [hired thugs attacked the activists stood and blocked logging equipment] were also young, and we didn't want them to be so afraid that they wouldn't protest again. In all our campaigns it was our persistence that won the day more than our bravery. (p. 269)

On that day Maathai was beat so savagely that a doctor in the hospital told her that if she had sustained one more hit to the head she surely would have died.

Many people assume that I must have been inordinately brave to face down the thugs and police during the campaign for Karura Forest. ... For me, the destruction of Karura Forest, like [other campaigns Maathai led], were problems that needed to be solved, and the authorities were stopping me from finding a solution. What people see as fearlessness is really persistence. Because I am focused on the solution, I don't see danger. Because I don't see danger, I don't allow my mind to imagine what might happen to me, which is my definition of fear. If you don't foresee the danger and see only the solution, then you can defy anyone and appear strong and fearless.

This is not to say we were reckless. We found ways to protect ourselves. ... In the end, what was important was that we showed we were not intimidated. We were in the right and had stood up for what we believed in. We were making a statement that this was a public forest and no houses should be built there. ... How did we register our protest? Well, you can talk all day about how something is wrong, but how do you tell a government in this situation that it is violating your rights? Our answer was to plant trees. Today, that beautiful forest is still there, helping Nairobi breathe, and more trees are being planted to reseed what was lost and restore its biodiversity and beauty. (p. 272-3)
