

Travelling through Africa with a Salty Narrator

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Hardly Working: A Travel Memoir of Sorts by Zukiswa Wanner Black Letter Media

Travelling in Africa isn't for sissies, especially when you're a South African/Zambian/Zimbabwean married to a Kenyan, living in Kenya, and with an 11-year-old son in tow.

Writer Zukiswa Wanner decided to travel through Africa in 2016, using local land transport, attending book events and readings, a writers' symposium, celebrating a 40th birthday in Harare, and finally a residency, outside of the continent in Denmark. Her and her partner, Tchassa, wanted to show their 11-year-old son, Kwame, a bit of Africa – because although he was at school in Kenya, his British curriculum education left little room for African matters and stories.

Wanner was also celebrating a milestone birthday, her 40th, and it had been ten years since her first novel, *The Madams*, had been published and she wanted to give readings from the re-issue of that book. And the final reason was that it was an opportunity for the family to bond through travel on a trip that encompassed stops in Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Uganda, and ending at Kigali Airport in Rwanda.

So far, so good, but leaving home became a waiting game as visas were delayed, impossible to obtain and so on, for both Wanner and her husband. Once finally on the road, the difficulties with entering and leaving countries continued – so much so that I take my hat off to the trio. And it's not just the family that suffered border nightmares: "We suffered a slight delay at the border as one of our travelling companions, a Tanzanian citizen, had overstayed in Kenya and therefore needed to pay a 'fine'." The bureaucratic nightmares are mind-boggling.

And then she went to Europe – and yes, you guessed it... But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

Hardly Working is a travel memoir brimming with travel difficulties, humour, pithy observations on the countries Wanner, Tchassa and 11-year-old Kwame passed through; a salty, alive kind of story. A whirlwind of cities and places the trio traversed over the months, with an interlude at the end in Denmark and a race through Europe to the Ukraine, where, again, Wanner's bureaucratic nightmares reared their pesky heads. But Wanner is hardy, and a delightful companion on the journey – opinionated, yet witty and determined to take something from her travels, to see beyond the obvious, even when describing her home city.

Here she is describing Nairobi, where she lives: "The Jevanjee Gardens park always makes me smile when I pass through it as I read the quirky messages on park benches, I refuse to just sit here. I will make a difference. Even as one sits on them, the benches make a difference to travellers coming in from other countries in the region and to weary job-seekers."

Why so many problems with visas and such? Her late South African father gave her South African citizenship. Her mother was from Zimbabwe, she was born in Zambia, and now lives in Kenya. Moving on...

The trio set off, hoping to make a reading in Zambia, having already cancelled it once due to bureaucratic delays. Between not changing enough money at the border, and having to eke out their Tanzanian shillings for food and one bottle of water and sighing reluctantly as they fail to make the border by midnight, the journey progresses. The bus parks outside a tavern at a pit stop and all night long the music of Ali Kaba and Diamond Platinumz keeps Wanner up and bopping in her seat. Next day, still in Tanzania, Wanner attempts to change money at a bank and concludes that this can't be a common occurrence at that branch. She's directed to three counters, and finally has her money after verifying she doesn't have a Tanzanian bank account. She saltily and accurately remarks, "I couldn't help but make comparison between this and trying

to change small foreign currencies for survival in South Africa. Back home, it's easier for Eastern European and Chinese mafia to enter through the immigration at OR Tambo International Airport than it is for me to change \$200 without proof of address."

But it's all part of the process, and they are on their way again – although not having access to cash will be a recurring theme throughout their journey, and not due to lack of funds either. Phone batteries dying, Google research abandoned, she bleeps out a message that they won't make the rescheduled reading in Zambia. Plans changed again, they hop into Malawi – not having their passports stamped to leave Tanzania. You'd think the trio would have learned something from their previous difficulties...

But you're right with Wanner as they traverse borders, travel on a truck with maize, peel sugar cane with their teeth, and Kwame gets a taste of Africa he surely didn't know much about, slumming as he never has before. When the truck breaks down in the middle of the night, they resign themselves to sleeping as best they can, waiting for transport in the morning. But their luck holds out, another truck comes by and they hop onboard. And so it goes on – Wanner is a gifted storyteller and a tireless relater of their difficulties with trying to draw money.

But she is also an astute observer of political and social realities, pointing them out in her pithy style. Here they are, having checked into a hotel and eaten at a restaurant: "We finally left the restaurant to return for our final night at Executive Lodge. When we got there, there was a blackout. My Malawian friend and writer Stanley Kenani once said in criticising this state of electricity, "When you have less than ten percent of the nation on the electricity grid and somehow it's problematic to keep them lit, maybe you are doing something wrong"."

Heading back to Zambia, Wanner observes: "Leaving Chipata towards Lusaka, in a region known for honouring male children above their female siblings, I was pleasantly surprised to see small shops as we drove out with branding such as Phiri Family Shop as opposed to Phiri and Sons as I had become accustomed to growing up. It was also interesting to note that, at this stage, a few weeks before the Zambian election, from Chipata all the way to Lusaka, posters of the incumbent Edgar Lungu were all over the place. Despite challenging each other to do so, all three of us failed to spot a single poster of the leader of the opposition, Hakainde Hichilema. Make of it what you will, but after the closely contested election results afterwards, one wonders."

And power failures continue in Zambia. 'Electricity in Zambia is generated from Lake Kariba which is shared with Zimbabwe. I asked Jessie why the power was off so frequently given that communication with friends in Zimbabwe indicated that it had been a while since they had power cuts. From what she told me, the dam wall was collapsing so less power had to be used to avoid outright collapse. I admit I do not know how it all works but I wondered why, since Zimbabwe is not regulating electricity in the same way. "Why isn't the dam wall being repaired?" I asked. "A loan was procured from the Chinese to do just that but the money disappeared," she informed me. Ah yes.

"And Jessie was not hopeful. "We are lucky now because elections are coming. I suspect that after the elections, power cuts will be longer." What could be worse than power cuts that are longer than six hours on a daily basis, I wondered. I hoped she was wrong."

In South Africa, Tchassa finds he's in the middle of gunshots being fired in Small Street Mall, and when everyone gets up off the floor they are laughing. You're all mad, he tells Wanner, but she chuckles inwardly, writing that we are just pleased to find ourselves alive, hence the laughter.

Wanner also has some sharp criticisms for local South African publishers who push their titles to the overseas markets, but not in Africa, and says there are opportunities to gain new readers in Africa. Pertinent words.

Wanner is an engaging traveller and writer – the journey through Africa is a maelstrom of border difficulties, tasty food, warm hospitality from others, wry comments and sharp comments on things that don't work in Africa. She creates a picture of some of the continent, with all its good and bad, its ironies and inconsistencies, boosted and held together by the warmth of its people.