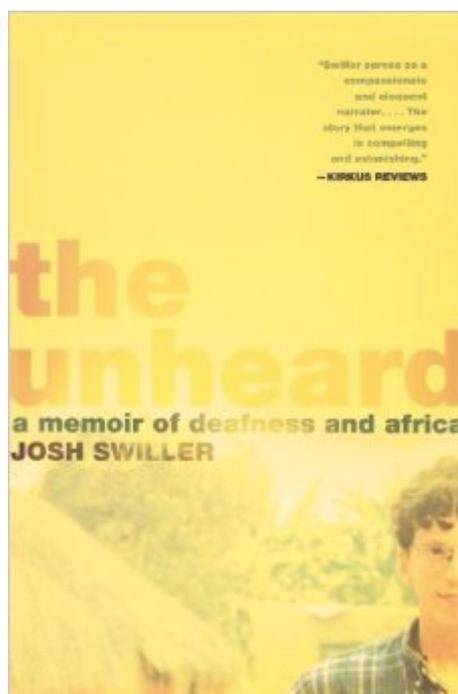


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The Unheard: A Memoir Of Deafness And Africa



Synopsis

A young man's quest to reconcile his deafness in an unforgiving world leads to a remarkable sojourn in a remote African village that pulsates with beauty and violence. These are hearing aids. They take the sounds of the world and amplify them." Josh Swiller recited this speech to himself on the day he arrived in Mununga, a dusty village on the shores of Lake Mweru. Deaf since a young age, Swiller spent his formative years in frustrated limbo on the sidelines of the hearing world, encouraged by his family to use lipreading and the strident approximations of hearing aids to blend in. It didn't work. So he decided to ditch the well-trodden path after college, setting out to find a place so far removed that his deafness would become irrelevant. That place turned out to be Zambia, where Swiller worked as a Peace Corps volunteer for two years. There he would encounter a world where violence, disease, and poverty were the mundane facts of life. But despite the culture shock, Swiller finally commanded attention—everyone always listened carefully to the white man, even if they didn't always follow his instruction. Spending his days working in the health clinic with Augustine Jere, a chubby, world-weary chess aficionado and a steadfast friend, Swiller had finally found, he believed, a place where his deafness didn't interfere, a place he could call home. Until, that is, a nightmarish incident blasted away his newfound convictions. At once a poignant account of friendship through adversity, a hilarious comedy of errors, and a gripping narrative of escalating violence, *The Unheard* is an unforgettable story from a noteworthy new talent.

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Customer Reviews

I was also a member of that first group of PCV's to serve in Zambia and Josh and I were two of the

eight who completed our commitments, although a couple of those who didn't complete their stint left for health reasons. I loved his book, and was unable to put it down once I started on it. I'm only mentioned in the book once, a bit out of character. Page 42: I'm the "middle-aged alcoholic from Michigan" (I object to the "middle-aged" part, as I was but a young lad of 39 at the time). The story of Josh's departure from Munungu was never fully revealed to me until reading the book. Like all government-related organizations, Peace Corps is great at keeping secrets and rumors always abound. Josh and I were not close but we did bond a bit after he returned to Kabwe and was once again teaching the deaf students. It was only upon reading the book that I gained an appreciation for his intellect and the really horrible experiences he had in Munungu. At Peace Corps meetings or functions, he always seemed distracted, not interested, withdrawn. After reading the book, my eyes are opened to what the guy endured up there in Munungu and what being deaf is really all about. I pre-ordered the book, with low expectations. Basically, I was concerned about what he may have said about me. What I did not expect was the clarity and smooth-flow of the narrative, the exceptional descriptors of characters ("voice like firecrackers" comes to mind), the entirely accurate descriptions of life in a bush village. A lot of what he wrote brought tears to my eyes, as I had experienced similar things in my own village of Lukwesa. Plus, I knew or had met a lot of the people he talks about in the book.

Working as a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote African village is not an easy undertaking in any situation. For an inexperienced, idealistic and, in addition, deaf person, such an adventure makes for an extraordinary story. Josh Swiller spent close to two years in northern Zambia in the village of Mununga, one of the most deprived villages in a poor region. Referred to by locals as "Gomorraah", a place with no hope and rumoured to have the most "ndoshi", witchdoctors, many wondered why this young American had come amongst them. His experiences and encounters, his learning by trial and error, and, most of all, his falling in love with the village and Africa, is the content of this unusual and highly readable memoir. Swiller was part of the first group of Volunteers to work in Zambia in 1994. Creating water and sanitation systems were the primary objective; educating and motivating the local people was the rationale. Getting villagers to dig wells turned out to be a bigger challenge than Swiller had anticipated. Local politics, tribal strife and natural distrust of outsiders undermined any initiative from the start. It did not help that the Peace Corps rules insisted on no money being brought into such a project. The local people who had never seen a white person, assumed "Ba Josh" to be wealthy but too mean spirited to share his money with them. Life for the villagers was hard. Periods of hunger during the dry season alternated with an onslaught of flooding and disease

during the rainy season. The small clinic was understaffed and completely inadequate in dealing even with the most basic services. Swiller's description of village life is vivid and his sensitive portrayal of the people he shares his time with is personal and realistic.

Review originally published in the Hipster Book Club, April 2008. Josh Swiller's memoir, *The Unheard*, tells the story of his two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mununga, a dusty Zambian village home to tribal factions and a host of refugees from neighboring Zaire. Deaf since childhood, Josh was raised by devoted parents who trained him to speak and lip-read with the assistance of hearing aids. Raised to fit into the hearing world, he attended Yale but encountered feelings of isolation and frustration toward heavily-accented professors who spoke into chalkboards. In graduate school at Gallaudet University, he attempted to immerse himself in a new Deaf community but discovered that he was just as isolated in a world that spoke exclusively American Sign Language. So Josh went to Africa to find "a place past deafness." After a ten-week training course, Josh was off to inspire a sense of community ownership in Mununga, with a charter to organize the villagers to build their first community infrastructure: wells to provide fresh water to the disease-ridden community. The villagers, led by politicians whose primary concern was getting their rake of the banana wine production, were perplexed that the white man didn't have the money and power to give them a well. Politicians had deep-seated tribal affairs to sort out and were suspicious of Josh's motives in offering "help" to the community without bringing along cash and resources. Josh writes of the plight of the Africans with a voice of introspection and humor. His teaching experience required navigating "an educational system based, apparently, on the principles of unlimited recess." By keeping the tone light, Josh conveys profound insights with nary a trace of pity for himself or the economically ravaged country.

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