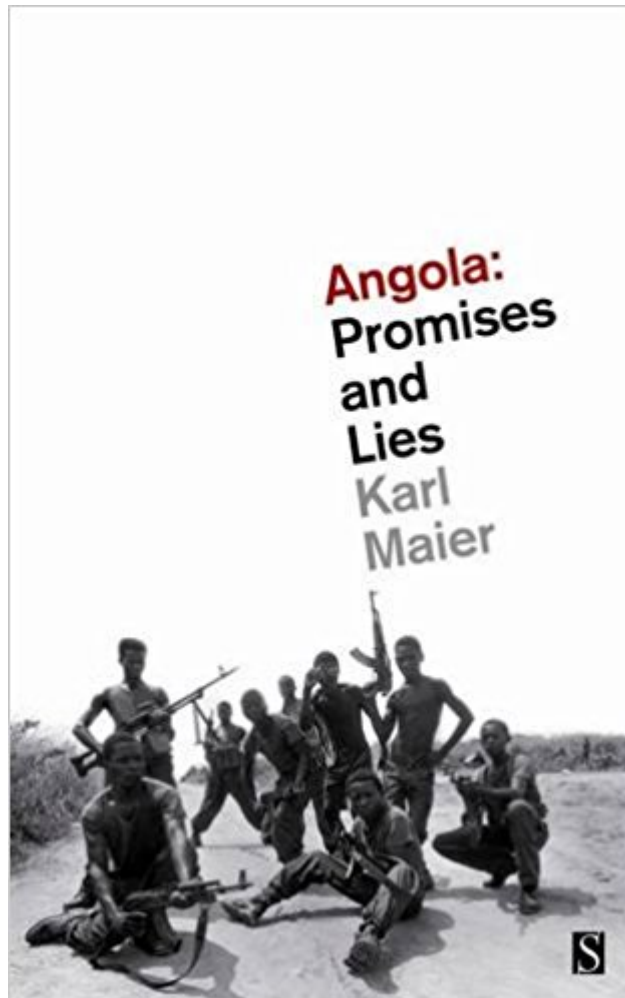




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# Angola: Promises And Lies



## Synopsis

A first-hand account of Angola's civil war.

## Book Information

Paperback: 224 pages

Publisher: Serif; 2nd edition (October 11, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1897959524

ISBN-13: 978-1897959527

Product Dimensions: 0.5 x 5.2 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #741,351 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #143 in Books > History > Africa > Southern Africa #163 in Books > History > Africa > Central Africa #28671 in Books > History > World

## Customer Reviews

Combining finely detailed reportage with anecdotal snapshots of the horrors of war, Maier, a correspondent for The Independent and the Washington Post who began reporting on Angola in 1986, offers an explanation of the Angolan civil war for the rest of us. His engrossing chronological account lays out the nearly two decades of conflict that have ripped apart the southern African nation. An inability to resolve differences rooted in race, political ideology and tribal ethnicity has set contemporary Angola on a highway to hell instead of the road to prosperity its vast reserves of natural resources promised. Maier notes with some irony that American oil companies have continued their drilling operations throughout the war. He also intelligently positions the conflict's historical import as one of the last battlegrounds for the combatants in the Cold War. Despite a glossary defining the plethora of acronyms that riddle the pages, some readers may have a hard time following which faction is fighting for what side during, first, Angola's war for independence from its colonial Portuguese rulers and, second, the lengthy civil war that continues today. Maier tells his story in the present tense, which makes the book read like dispatches from today's paper. The writer's sharp eye for detail catches a swarm of hungry Angolans falling upon a bag of maize that foreign aid workers have dropped onto an airport tarmac. The powder sifts through their emaciated fingers as they try to stash it in strips of fabric tied around their concave chests. More of this kind of personal observation and reflection would have added to the book's compelling

narrative. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Each of Angola's great political crises has attracted at least one sharp-eyed observer to disentangle the welter of mendacity and propaganda that cocoons a civil war. In 1961, the level-headed analysis was provided by John Marcum. In 1975, the grass-roots perspective was given by Ryszard Kapuscinski. Now the war of the 1990s has been written up with clarity and humanity by Karl Maier. No other book has attempted to explain the third Angolan civil war as dispassionately as this one. Few journalists have got so near the long-suffering people on the road-side. Few have been able to observe the machinations of the politicians and their puppet-masters at such close quarters. The author knows Angola intimately and loves its people, but his book, subtitled 'promises and lies', brooks no deviation from the truth as he perceives it. The result is elegant, compelling, tragic. It is a tour de force. -- Professor David Birmingham, *Journal of Southern African Studies* It makes a rivetting read and deserves to reach a wide public. With passionate eloquence Maier depicts the horrendous sufferings of ordinary Angolans, who have known nothing but war over thirty years - enduring constant bombardments from one side or the other, families divided and uprooted, many thousands mutilated for life by anti-personnel mines, many thousands more, mainly women, children and old people, dying of hunger and malnutrition. The author's moving account of his encounters with individual Angolans of all ethnic and political persuasions brings out the indomitable tenacity and courage of ordinary Angolans, especially the women, as well as the senseless stupidity of the conflict.... The other great strength of this book is that Maier sets the war in its historic and cultural context. -- Margaret Anstee, *International Relations*, August 1996 Karl Maier is an American journalist who has been wandering through the vastness of Angola for years, trying to make sense of the war. *Angola: Promises and Lies* is an accessible, balanced account which stems from his dispatches in *The Independent* and the *Washington Post*. Most books on Angola tend to be highly partisan, usually blaming UNITA or its leader Jonas Savimbi, for the enormous hardship the 10 million Angolans have endured. Maier eschews this temptation and is critical of all the major players on the scene... In their dealings with the South Africans and the Americans, many Angolan politicians have become quite fluent in English. Perhaps one of the most valuable acts they could perform would be to buy each other copies of Karl Maier's book. -- Sousa Jamba, *Times Literary Supplement*, January 1997 On a scale of 0 to 10 of sexy wars to cover, Angola scores a fat zero. it was dangerous, there were no good guys, and most newspaper editors couldn't have given a toss about it. The few journalists determined the report the war were not helped by over-priced hotels and a dogged determination by both sides to hinder the press whenever possible. So Africa's

longest, bloodiest war was hugely under-reported... It was left to a few individuals, mostly foreigners, to report the various stages of the war, the peace, and the final devastating chapter. American journalist Karl Maier was one of them - probably the most distinguished reporter and storyteller to cover wars in both Angola and Mozambique. Maier's book is a luminously accurate gem. He's wary of all the politicians and their rhetoric, and tender with ordinary people helpless against the murdering guns of both sides. No wars are sexy. Karl Maier's book underscores the point. *Angola: Promises and Lies* is compelling about war and peace, seen through the critical eye of a journalist and told with the heart of a writer. -- Peta Thornycroft, *The Mail & Guardian*, May 1996

Karl Maier has courage, moral fibre, and journalistic integrity as he writes about nearly three decades of on-again, off-again civil war in Angola. He tells the truth about superpower involvement, rebel objectives, manipulation of popular sentiments, the role of the South African apartheid government, oil interests, and the mercurial loyalties of so many Angolan factions (including many leading Angolan politicians themselves). It's hard to point a finger in any one direction, but it's also hard to overlook the fact that Angola, an oil-rich state with tremendous potential, is still an impoverished southern African state with millions of disenfranchised poor people, especially out in the countryside and a glittering elite living cheek-by-jowl in Luanda and other cities side-by-side with the desperate, uneducated, unemployed poor. This is a country with enormous potential and I hope to play a role in helping it achieve that potential.

## GREAT BACKGROUND READING

Reviewed by MARGARET ANSTEE in *International Relations*, Volume XIII, No 2, August 1996 - Karl Maier describes the long-running Angolan conflict as 'the worst war in the world'. During my tenure there in 1992-3 as Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Angolan Verification Mission (UNAVEM II) I also dubbed it 'the forgotten tragedy'. Although the horrific armed struggle that engulfed the country once again after Savimbi refused to accept the results of the September 1992 elections claimed more lives than the fighting in Bosnia - 1000 people were dying every day - Angola got scant attention from the media. The author was an exception and I respected him for his commitment and his objectivity. Even now it is difficult to lift the veil of silence. Both Karl Maier and I know how hard it is to persuade anyone to publish a book about Angola. The argument is that there is no public interest - and apparently no desire to awaken it either. This book is therefore all the more welcome, and Serif are to be congratulated for making it

possible. It makes a rivetting read and deserves to reach a wide public. With passionate eloquence Maier depicts the horrendous sufferings of ordinary Angolans, who have known nothing but war for over thirty years - enduring constant bombardments from one side or the other, families divided and uprooted, many thousands mutilated for life by anti-personnel mines, many thousands more, mainly women, children and old people, dying of hunger and malnutrition. The author's moving account of his encounters with individual Angolans of all ethnic and political persuasions brings out the indomitable tenacity and courage of ordinary Angolans, especially the women, as well as the senseless stupidity of the conflict. Maier describes it as 'a civil war fought primarily against innocent civilians, the povo (people), by armies of conscripted youngsters on behalf of power-mad politicians'. The other great strength of this book is that Maier sets the war in its historic and cultural context. His episodic technique does, however, make it more difficult for those unfamiliar with it, to trace the evolution of the conflict and the reasons for the failure of the various attempts to resolve it. Yet this also serves to underscore the futility of it all. No attempt at rational analysis can justify this degree of suffering. Understandably Maier is at his best when recounting his own experience. His attempt to recreate the sanguinary battle for Luanda during the last weekend of October 1992, when he was not in Angola, is less successful. There are errors of chronology and of fact, as well as some internal inconsistencies. This is not surprising since even for those of us who did live through those dreadful events, and were trying to negotiate a cease-fire, there are still mystifying aspects that may never be unravelled. Maier has some stern things to say about the United Nations, though he does recognize that the mandate and resources handed out to UNAVEM II as a result of the Bicesse Accords were pathetically inadequate to the enormity of the task, and that the powers for whom Angola had been a desirable pawn during the Cold War, now wanted to get shot of the problem as quickly and cheaply as possible. I agree with many of his comments but regret that he does not always distinguish between the Security Council, UN Headquarters, and the peace-keeping mission on the ground - and thus sometimes mistakenly apportions blame or overestimates what could in practice be done. He contends, for instance, that demobilization delays in the pre-election period could have been solved by UNAVEM threatening to withdraw but such threats could have achieved nothing: if UNAVEM's bluff had been called, the fighting would simply have started earlier. While he shows understanding of the difficulties of my situation he claims that, when the peace process began to crumble after the elections, 'she did not use the power she possessed as the focal point of world opinion'. What power? What focal point, given the indifference of world opinion? He himself appears to deny his own thesis by admitting, in the next breath, that 'the Western countries, especially the United States, did little to back her up'. There is a big difference between being an

onlooker and being a player. Cautious public utterances by senior UN officials - and here I refer to his almost contemptuous dismissal of Marrack Goulding's statement, at the end of his visit to Angola in November 1992, that the peace process was 'seriously threatened' - should not too easily be dismissed as naive or complacent. According to Mr. Maier, the peace process was already dead, but he gives no clue as to how it might have been revived. At that point, the United Nations, in contrast to the marginal role assigned to it in the pre-electoral period, was unceremoniously pushed to centre stage, and expected to resolve the crisis. There were three main options open: to mediate and try to persuade both sides to withdraw from the brink; to send in massive reinforcements - 'Blue Helmets' - to prevent the two sides from fighting; or to withdraw altogether. The last was unthinkable, the second impossible because the initial reluctance of the Security Council and the international community to commit any significant resources to resolve the Angolan issue had hardened even further as a result of the Bosnian experience and the growing crisis of peacekeeping in general. Neither the mandate nor the troops would have been forthcoming. Mediation was thus the only course. Even the possibility of bolstering the mediation efforts by sanctions was ruled out because the United States continued to cling to its mistaken belief that it still had influence over UNITA in Security Council resolutions. In any case, as Maier himself writes later, when partial sanctions were eventually applied against UNITA in September 1993, they proved ineffectual. Some remarks specific to UNAVEM also require elucidation. Maier's encounter with an American UN electoral observer in Kuito leads him to 'wonder where the United Nations finds such people for so important an assignment'. A few observers may not have had the required experience, but his sweeping comment takes no account of the outstanding performance of the majority, many of whom had had valuable experience in Namibia, Nicaragua and Haiti. Moreover, the United Nations had little time in which to mobilize this group and was obliged, because of budgetary constraints imposed by member states, to recruit all but a few from within the existing Secretariat. The author's description of myself as 'a United Nations diplomat' (whatever that is) and Under-Secretary-General gives the impression of someone who had been catapulted from a desk-bound Headquarters sinecure into this African maelstrom, rather than of someone who had worked in more than a dozen countries, including some of the most underdeveloped, in all regions of the world, among them Africa, had managed large-scale operations in all of them, and had had her (literal) baptism of fire in situations of civil strife in Colombia, Bolivia, Morocco and Chile. More seriously, the comment that UNAVEM 'voted with its feet' after the battle of Luanda (referring to the fact that UNAVEM military observers were among those leaving on the first plane) is inaccurate and grossly unfair. It implies that they went of their own volition (an impossibility) out of cowardice and a spirit of

self-preservation. It also overlooks that fact that UNAVEM's main mandate ran out on 31 October 1992, coincidentally the day the fighting broke out. While the Security Council had authorized the retention of a smaller mission until the end of the year, several contingents were to leave at the end of October and their routine departure had been held up by the closure of the airport. Contrary to the impression given, UNAVEM was still clinging tenaciously to its 67 team sites all over the country, admittedly in an increasingly thin blue line, but all its members were working tirelessly

Mr. Maier provides a basic education on the Angolan civil war of the 90's and the circumstances under which it came to be. He has done an admirable job of coupling historical fact and his own experiences into a easily readable memoir of less than 300 pages. However, it would be unfair to the author to compare his writing to that of Ryszard Kapucinski who's writings about Africa are presented in a style which is closer to poetry than non-fiction. I may have just got a bad copy, but it was all I could do to keep the book from disintegrating before I could finish reading it. Every time I opened it 2 or 3 pages would pop out of the binding.....Finally, I would like to put a caution out to the potential reader. Please be aware that I do not have the book in front of me at this time and the following quote may not be exact but I promise it is real close. In the closing pages of the book Mr. Maier writes (for reasons that I cannot remember) " the US's failed attempts to impose their new world order on Mogadishu".....and that was it....no mention of starving people...the UN...or warlords using food as tools of power. Clearly, Mr. Maier is entitled to his views and I would never condemn this well written book for a single misguided statement, but the reader is left wondering if the author may have left other vital pieces of info out of this book in order to further his political agenda.

While this is a better book than "This House Has Fallen" the author's most recent book about Nigeria, it suffers from the same problem of being a series of frequently random encounters with the country in question and the events in it over a period of several years. There is some attempt to give the readers a more structured understanding of the historical and political background, but at the end of the day it is a series of points on a timeline as experienced by the author. His experiences are very interesting, and he is a thoughtful and observant writer who feels an admirable degree of passion for those suffering from the ongoing conflict.

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