

# A Very Different Sort of Book

If you want sugar coating, go buy a doughnut.

So advises the introductory text of *Meanwhile in Zambia: A Graphic Novel*. Its author and illustrator, Manchester native Vincent Heselwood is very clear about what the book is and what it is not, and as you might expect from a graphic novelist, he pulls no punches.

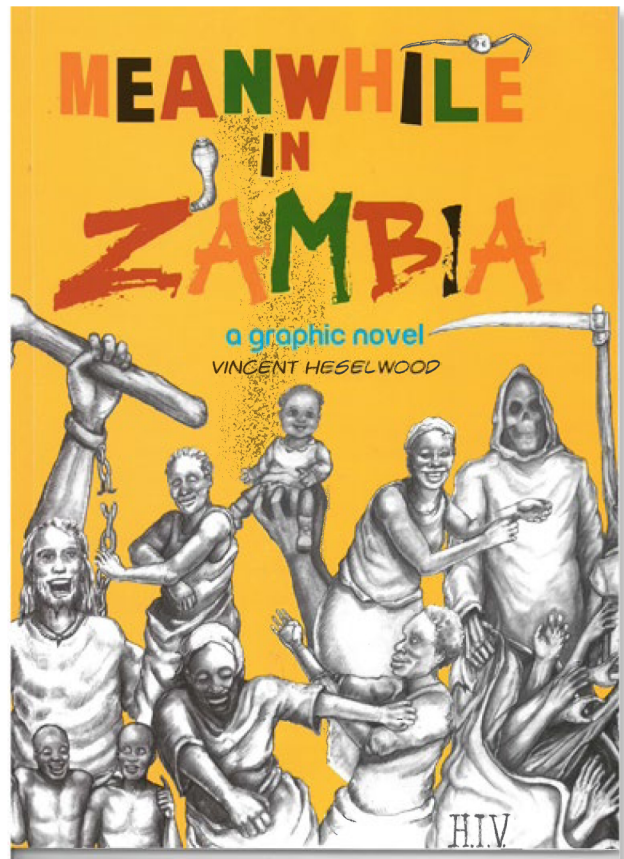
The book recounts the author's time spent in the country of Zambia, a place most of us would likely struggle to locate on a blank map. In telling his tale, Heselwood lays out the good, the bad, and the ugly, and makes no apologies for doing so. He has put together a marvellously illustrated collection of anecdotes and experiences gleaned from living in Zambia for over three years, and shares the stories from both his and his girlfriend Sasha's perspective.

Zambia only became an independent country in 1964, following – like many others – years of British colonial rule. The country is three times the size of the UK, but has only about a quarter of its population, so there's a lot of wide open spaces. But the author notes that, of the people who do live in Zambia, there is extraordinary ethnic diversity.

There are also a lot of idiosyncrasies and rituals and cultural markers that are perhaps unique to this African country, and Heselwood lays them all out. The book is part travelogue, part memoir, and part sheer entertainment – he writes with acerbic wit, for sure – and the illustrations are so detailed and good, that it's easy for readers to feel they've been transported to Zambia and are along for the ride.

Very different in content and presentation than most books we review here, *Meanwhile in Zambia* is a thoroughly engaging story. At times it's humorous, at times confusing, and at times even shocking, but it really presents Zambia as a vibrant and fascinating country. It never paints an overly rosy picture (at all), but rather recounts the daily struggles and small victories experienced, the encounters with Zambians – good and bad – and ultimately serves as a warts-and-all sort of memoir to which nearly all expats in any country can relate, at least in parts.

The book actually wraps up with one of Heselwood's sweetest memories, which came as he was packed into a minibus, which he writes about several times, always with disdain – until this time. Squeezed in among some 40 people on a vehicle made for less than half that number, he recalls the bus trundling along, its passengers hot and miserable, when the first rain of the wet season begins to fall. The temperature drops, and the world smells of fresh rain. He writes that he expected his fellow passengers to greet the rain – which had been eagerly anticipated for weeks – with cheers and happiness, but instead, a shared silence fell over the packed



bus. After two minutes of sitting in a collective hush, a tall man carrying a live chicken suddenly broke into song, and was nearly instantly joined by the entire bus, all singing along in “perfect unrehearsed harmony” a traditional hymn.

He concludes by acknowledging, “Writing this out now, reading back over it with my cynical Western eyes, it sounds trite, twee, and a bit cheesy. But I remember what it was like to be there at the time. It wasn't trite and wasn't cheesy.

“I went there, I did this, and it was wonderful.” ■

*Meanwhile in Zambia* is published by Akasaa, a boutique publisher and social enterprise. To aid in the region's recovery from Cyclones Idai and Kenneth, which caused catastrophic damage in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique in March and April 2019, 20% of the sales from all of Akasaa's books will go to the South African Development Community for disaster recovery efforts. Idai was noted as the deadliest and costliest storm to occur in the Southwest Indian Ocean. The UN estimates some three million people are still in need following the two cyclones. *Meanwhile in Zambia* is 92 pages, paperback, and retails for RM66. To purchase, or to see other books from Akasaa, visit their site at [akasaa.com](http://akasaa.com).