

A medical student's odyssey in 1990s Nigeria

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Some autobiographies tell a factual individual story, allowing focus and continuity, whereas others bring in wider contextual and social factors to create a relatable story. While the former provides room to be unique and interesting, the latter may draw in a broader audience. It can be challenging to write a wider human story that combines the specific and generic, especially on a subject such as medical education. What will ring true for most who have undergone medical training globally are the frequent challenges it presents, often pushing students to the limit.

However, over the course of training, there are opportunities to be exposed to inspiring people, gain insights into new ideas from biomedicine and other disciplines, and glean lessons from teachers, patients, and colleagues, creating lifelong memories. Despite the interminable hours of study, memorisation, and practice, most students manage to remain motivated, find a way through the challenges, and finally qualify as a doctor. However, what is easy to lose sight of is the beauty of this journey. This is something delightfully portrayed in Ike Anya's medical memoir *Small by Small: Becoming a Doctor in 1990s Nigeria*. Anya takes the reader from his early days as a young student with a single-minded goal of becoming a doctor to how he matured and reflected on the experience, giving him a wealth of life lessons. *Small by Small: Becoming a Doctor in 1990s Nigeria* is a rewarding read as Anya's prose blends eloquence and intimacy.

The memoir's seemingly disjointed short stories, which combine personal anecdotes, observations, and philosophical reflections, are cleverly connected through their exploration of gradual and cumulative life stages. These stories form the chapters of the book and achieve an unintentional small by small build-up so that the reader is invested in where the narrator will eventually end up. As Anya draws on a remarkably detailed recollection of events from some 30 years ago, he connects his personal experiences as a medical student to broader social and political themes, telling a relatable human story.

Anya captures the chaos and angst of medical school as he recalls the anxiety attached to the dreaded second MB examinations. Those who do not pass must repeat the year or ultimately give up their dream of becoming a doctor. For Anya, the stress surrounding the examinations is eased to some extent by his friendships. As they wait for results, he and his friends dine at a restaurant near the campus, indulging in stew, rice, and beans, desperate to soothe their nerves. Anya perfectly captures the pre-result apprehension, so much so that it no longer feels like his results but yours. This is one of the many examples of what Anya does with ease: he brings readers into his world, so rather than simply being observers, they experience it alongside him as he conveys the political and cultural landscape of 1990s Nigeria. Anya describes classmates singing haunting renditions of *Old Toy Trains*, student demonstrations to protest against the hardships caused by the government-introduced structural adjustment programme, and tensions during a national election when Anya and the rest of the country were desperate for a fair count of the votes.

The world of 1990s Nigeria is also vividly captured in Anya's descriptions of the people who pass through his life, animating his world. They bring in thought-provoking moments or laughs—the preventable death of a prisoner with hypoglycaemia while waiting for a life-saving malt drink; a woman at the housing office scarfing down rice, beans, and beef; posters from a young Nigerian American advertising his search for a medical student bride; and Paa-pa and Maa-ma, an old couple who run a kiosk providing toiletries and snacks to students, generously waiving payment at times. Humour is replete through *Small by Small: Becoming a Doctor in 1990s Nigeria*.

There are many amusing stories about supervising doctors and fellow students that any reader with or without prior knowledge of medicine can relate to. However, the absolute gems are the narratives that bring in the peculiarities of Nigeria and the vagaries of a post-colonial medical environment with limited resources. Anya recalls patients insisting on being seen by the Asian house officer instead of the Nigerian consultant, despite the best attempts by the nurse to explain the difference in seniority. Nigeria's different ethnic groups have a way of making fun of each other and Anya portrays the quirks and eccentricities of Nigerian culture such that they become endearingly relatable to an unfamiliar audience.

Anya's early roots in a vibrant Igbo culture within a wider Nigerian middle-class background sets the tone for a rich description of motivations to pursue a medical career, and the much harder task of reconciling the drudgeries of medical training with his wider interests in literature and the desire to enjoy life. He was fortunate that his family gave support and affirmation when he needed it.

Although Anya had to re-sit some of his medical school tests, his relatives toast him after he completes his final examinations, focusing on the positive and celebrating his hard work. In one beautiful vignette, Anya recounts how his grandmother, Mma, armed him with countless words of advice. As Anya recalls: "Indeed she always does tell us that everything worthwhile is achieved little by little, in small incremental steps. Then she continues in Abiriba, 'Okwa unu ndee osu bekee da si "smallu by smallu".' Mischief glints lighting up her rheumy eyes, as she repeats the last part again in her imitation of a refined English accent: 'Small by small'". The impact of his grandmother's love and wisdom on subsequent life events allows readers to understand Anya's motivation and drive.

The book also provides a candid account of the challenges of medicine. Despite the cultural and temporal differences between Anya's story and our own perspectives— as a medical student and a clinical academic with responsibility for medical education in the UK today— there are many moments in this memoir that resonated with both of us, for instance, the anticipation in seeing your first cadaver, trying to figure out how to revise effectively for examinations, and the difficult experience of losing your first patient.

Anya's story of resilience and failure will be familiar to many people in medicine. The archetype of a medical student is someone who has excelled at school and passed all their examinations. But once at medical school students are confronted with the reality that their classmates are just as academically successful as they are and failure no longer seems that far off after all. Learning from failure and not being afraid to fail are part of the process of

becoming a doctor. Anya embraces failure openly and his honesty is refreshing as he recalls his inability to excel in paediatrics and surgery.

The devastating feeling of trying your best and it not going your way is powerfully shared. Ultimately, the despair of failure is the one emotion that strikes a chord with all medical students globally, no matter the time. One of us (the clinical academic) felt transported back in time remembering the abject humiliation during ward rounds when he was unable to answer a series of questions. Meanwhile, the current student found a connection with Anya's narrative and her own mixed feelings of anxiety and exhilaration about the challenges ahead in medicine.

As with many memoirs during the formative stages of life, the book is also a journey of self-discovery. In an understated way, Anya examines his identity, beliefs, and values, contrasting these against moral principles. He remembers instances where he had to control his temper in the face of outright bullying by a supervising consultant or take the moral high ground when faced with a patient who had previously treated him awfully. Such moments highlight some of the ways many of us in medicine form our character and how we learn to define right from wrong.

Anya takes readers through a reflective journey, tackling major life decisions while highlighting the significance of small, everyday experiences. By the end of the book, the reader is left wondering whether there will be a sequel that describes the next chapter in his life—specialist training, migration to the UK, or indeed the remarkable absence of a love interest through these formative years. *Small by Small: Becoming a Doctor in 1990s Nigeria* is a compelling exploration of intricate facets of life, identity, and interconnectedness. We recommend this book to readers both for its entertainment value and its potential for personal growth and reflection. Anya's memoir offers a fresh perspective on the beauty and importance of the small moments that collectively define our lives.