

The Shadow of the Sun, by Ryszard Kapuscinski

reviewed by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

"I lived in Africa for several years . . ." The reader will think of Isak Dinesen or Beryl Markham, but these are the words of Polish correspondent Ryszard Kapuscinski, who spent 40 years reporting on a continent that is "too large to describe . . . a veritable ocean, a separate planet, a varied, immensely rich cosmos."

He recalls his first encounter with tropical odors: "Almonds, cloves, dates and cocoa. Vanilla and laurel leaves, oranges and bananas, cardamom and saffron. . . . It is the smell of a sweating body and drying fish, of spoiling meat and roasting cassava, of fresh flowers and putrid algae--in short, of everything that is at once pleasant and irritating, attracts and repels, seduces and disgusts."

Kapuscinski first visited Africa in 1957, when many Africans were rejoicing at the end of colonial rule. But violence soon racked Liberia, Rwanda, Angola and other countries, leaving citizens desperate for jobs, safety and food. Kapuscinski describes his risky adventures in and out of Zanzibar, and sketches a portrait of Idi Amin.

His previous books, including *The Soccer War* and *The Emperor*, have been translated into 19 languages. *The Shadow of the Sun* should catapult him to prominence in the U.S. He writes about Africa--and about his many close calls with desert heat, roving militia, and disease--with the stamina of a journalist and the spare elegance of a poet.

On his first bout with malaria, he writes:

The only thing that really helps is if someone covers you. But not simply throws a blanket or quilt over you. This thing . . . must crush you with its weight, squeeze you, flatten you . . . You dream of being pulverized . . . for a steamroller to pass over you. I once had a powerful malaria attack in a poor village, where there weren't any heavy coverings. The villagers placed the lid from some kind of wooden chest on top of me and then patiently sat on it, waiting for the worst

tremors to pass.

On another occasion he describes his encounter with a snake: "I saw that I was about to extinguish the cigarette on the head of a snake lying under the bed. I froze. Froze to such a degree that instead of quickly pulling back my hand, I left it suspended, cigarette burning, over the snake's head. Slowly, the reality of my position dawned on me. I was the prisoner of a deadly reptile."

Kapuscinski's close-ups of disease, starvation and predation are stark and arresting. At times, he takes readers to places that they might prefer to bypass. But, like Kapuscinski himself, the reader will find himself or herself enchanted by the "rich cosmos" and humbled by the struggle of people whose "strength, grace and endurance" complement the African terrain.