

An American childhood in Haiti

Apricot Irving writes with love—and hurt—about her father's misplaced desire to be a savior to others.

by [Elyse Nelson Winger](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue

In Review



The Gospel of Trees

A Memoir

By Apricot Anderson Irving
Simon & Schuster

Portland-based journalist Apricot Irving, who spent her formative childhood years in Haiti as the daughter of Baptist missionary parents, writes: “By the time I was in my twenties, a recovering missionary’s daughter, most of the stories I had read about missionaries seemed to fall into one of two categories: hagiography or exposé; the Sunday School version of *Lord of the Flies*.” But, she continues, “the missionaries I had grown up with were neither marauders nor saints; Haiti was neither savage nor noble. The truth was far more complicated.” Irving’s commitment to dwelling on the complicated makes her beautifully written memoir a compelling, absorbing read.

The Gospel of Trees is the story of a daughter making peace with her father, an agronomist whose mission to save Haiti through reforestation superseded any desires his daughters had for a typical American childhood. It’s the story of a child observing and becoming “the other,” and of a woman reckoning with the legacies of colonialism and Christian mission work. It’s the story of a journalist making a chorus of voices heard, and of a mother making meaning of her own growing up with her now growing-up sons. What it’s not is sentimental.

The memoir proceeds chronologically, taking us from Irving’s parents’ 1973 courtship in California to her own family’s 2016 visit to Haiti. At the same time, it is punctuated with vignettes of 1490s Ayiti, from Columbus’s first encounters with the island to its imminent unraveling as the slave trade and sugar plantations took root, eroding both the soil and the freedom of its people. Through these brief historical interludes, Irving is clear: there can be no understanding of her own experience in a missionary family without an honest reckoning with Haiti’s past, including the Christian imperialist project that swept the globe in the 19th century.

Irving engages these issues without disrespecting the good intentions of the missionary doctors, teachers, and agronomists who were committed to helping and working alongside the Haitian people. Most of them simply couldn’t recognize, or extricate themselves from, the colonial structures of power and privilege. In the throes of the Haitian coup d’état ousting President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991 and the ensuing *dechoukaj* (or “uprising”), Irving comes to a point of lasting clarity:

Our need to see ourselves as benefactors—without whom the Haitians, impoverished and hopeless, were doomed to live in darkness—was outdated at best. Why would Haitian visionaries and entrepreneurs settle for menial entry-level jobs in a missionary hierarchy that would never let them rise to the level of their giftedness? We, too, were responsible for their unraveling. . . . Always it was the same: we placed ourselves, like heroes, at the center of the story. As if it was our destiny to save Haiti. What we couldn't seem to understand was that Haiti needed our respect, not another failed rescue.

The misplaced desire to save is embodied by Irving's father, a man of great love for the earth, deep knowledge of trees, and imperfect love for his family. Irving writes from a stance of reconciliation with a father who she always loved but didn't always understand. Writing from this place frees her to express her disappointment and anger amid his rigid drive to be a savior to others—often at the expense of emotional availability toward his own family.

This daughter's hurt is poignantly rendered in her response to her father's care of a child abandoned at the missionary hospital. For a brief time, Ti Marcel becomes a regular guest of the family and the seemingly sole object of her father's affection. There is talk of adoption. But then Ti Marcel's father returns, ready to bring her home, leaving Irving's father in grief. Irving writes: "Even now, I can remember the texture and shape of my jealousy, wadded up like a loose sock under the heel of my roller skates, grating against my anklebone every time I rounded a corner." Simultaneously evoking a daughter's experience of invisibility *and* a father's missionary impulse to be a savior, Irving lets us absorb the brokenness of this situation without caricaturing anyone involved.

Irving is able to give us this rich field of characters because she did years of extensive research. She interviewed family members and missionary personnel, and she returned to Haiti several times as she worked on the book. In addition to her own diaries, which sweetly preserve her adolescent voice, Irving combed boxes of mildewed missionary reports, personal letters, cassette tapes, and private journals long stored in her parents' Oregon garage.

There are moments when Irving becomes an omniscient narrator of sorts, leaving the first-person narrative voice behind. For example, she describes a scene where

her sister Meadow is home alone, crafting a paper flower, and an explosive sound shocks her:

The rock clattered and bounced off the tin roof into the garden. She processed all of this in seconds. It was not gunshots, not this time. Her face was flushed, her heart hammering. . . . She picked up the ruined flower and tried to smooth out the paper, then set it down. Picked up the knife, held it in her fingers. A deep rattling breath. Slowly, everything became quiet again. Her fingers cut, curled, folded, glued, created. A stillness she could climb down into, hide in its ordered depths. This insignificant small loveliness, a paper-thin barrier of beauty to hold out the fear.

This prose is beautifully written. At the same time, I found myself wondering: Did Meadow tell her sister about this experience and all of her accompanying emotion? Did she describe the way her heart hammered and her breath rattled? This kind of foray into another person's emotional experience pushes the limits of memoir.

Nonetheless, the stories and artifacts given to Irving testify to her trustworthiness as a narrator, and I find myself invested in both her journey and in the many people—missionary and Haitian alike—whom she so honestly and graciously renders. I also find myself freshly aware of the living legacies of colonialism and Christian imperialism. While theologies of liberation and accompaniment these days shape the global mission relationships of many Protestant denominations, Irving reminds us that the work of justice and reconciliation is still needed.