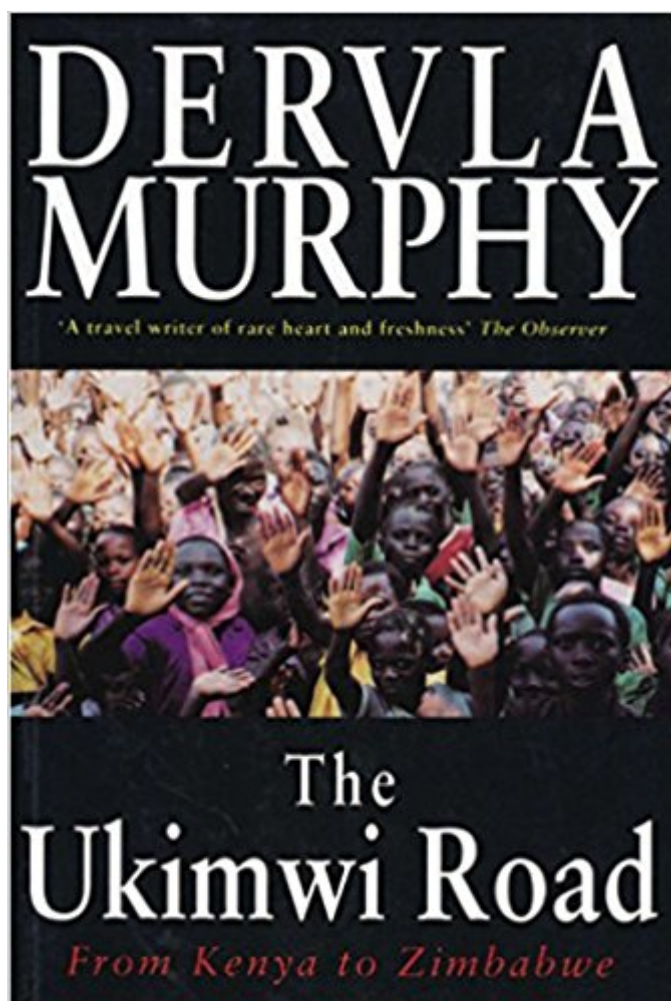


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# The Ukimwi Road: From Kenya To Zimbabwe



## Synopsis

Three thousand miles by bicycle through Africa. In January 1992, Dervla Murphy prescribed herself several carefree months and embarked on a cycle tour (pedaling and pushing) from Kenya to Zimbabwe via Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia on the cyclist's equivalent of a Rolls Royce called Lear. Before long, she realized that for travelers who wish to remain stress-free, Africa is the wrong continent. Inevitably she was caught up in the harrowing problems of the peoples she met; the devastating effects of AIDS (ukimwi is Swahili for AIDS), drought and economic collapse; skepticism about Western "aid schemes"; and corruption and incompetence, both white and black.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A brave and thoughtful Irishwoman, 60-ish Murphy (*Transylvania and Beyond*) specializes in treks through remote regions. Here she recounts a 3000-mile, four-month bicycle ride through southern Africa, at first seeking a "carefree ramble" but soon learning that most of her planned route included the region's ukimwi (AIDS) belt. Thus, Murphy's travelogue, which mixes her reflections on colonial legacies with well-etched encounters with border bureaucrats and generous locals, is shadowed by the specter of loss: a young prostitute, her siblings' sole support after their parents died of AIDS, struggles to make her clients use condoms; an expat doctor agonizes over the dilemmas of notifying the HIV-positive. Given her encounters with troubled Africans as well as her views of ineffective Western aid workers, Murphy concludes-a bit simplistically-that it's time for the West to withdraw, to leave Africans "to sort out their own future." Despite that, this book-first

published in the U.K. in 1993-remains resonant. Copyright 1995 Cahners Business Information, Inc.  
--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Dervla Murphy has written more than twenty books recounting her adventures all over the world on foot, mule, bicycle, and just about every other conveyance imaginable. Her books *Full Tilt, Eight Feet in the Andes*, *The Waiting Land*, *Muddling Through in Madagascar*, *On a Shoestring to Coorg*, *Cameroon with Egbert*, *Transylvannia and Beyond*, *The Ukimwi Road*, and *South from the Limpopo* are available from The Overlook Press.

Amazing read, especially given that she was 60 and went alone on a bicycle.

Remaining rather drained from one of her other recent trips (the trip to Transylvania, for D. Murphy fans), Murphy decides to take a trip just for fun (the fact that she decides to bike through several African countries alone at age 60ish for a relaxing break tells the reader a great deal both about her and about what the book will be like!). She isn't even planning on writing a book for this trip. Yet as she travels along, she sees the ravages of "the slim disease" (ukimwi, or AIDS) everywhere. She also sees some of the causes of this, such as the poor treatment of women, imported Western values that haven't meshed with local customs (leaving societies in a state of moral limbo), and so on. This prompts her to share some of her experiences with us. This book has many good qualities. The best is the author herself. She can describe her situations aptly; I greatly appreciate her language. She is genuinely interested in learning about the places she visits, and in meeting their people. She isn't afraid of new experiences, and knows how to laugh at mistakes that she makes, and be flexible when needed. Another likeable aspect of the book is the places she visits. Unlike many trips, which only visit big or well-known areas, Murphy makes a point of visiting non-touristy villages where she can actually see what African life is like. Lastly, while her discussions on AIDS are difficult to read, they seem more frank than could be found in most books. On the other hand, this book did have some weaknesses. The biggest weakness that I saw was her opinionated responses to situations. While her thoughts are certainly more likely to be accurate than those of many tourists who just go in, take some pictures of famous monuments, and take off again, she certainly has her own share of bias. It made me uneasy to read it. I've read some of her other books; I tend to admire her and think I have a fair clue of roughly how much to accept or reject from what she says. Yet in this book she spent far less time on observation and far more time (it seemed) on sharing opinions. She also didn't seem to know exactly what she thought. For example, she

criticized many missionaries for pushing abstinence, blithely ignoring the cultural ramifications of that. Yet at times she indicated that the solution was the current situation, except with more condoms, at times a return to polygamy was advised, and at times she thought the Africans should indeed go for sex with just one partner, their spouse. And would women best be helped by gaining more freedom, in a Western style which didn't fit with the rest of their culture? In sticking with African ideals that cruelly exploited them and left them extremely vulnerable to AIDS? Granted, no one knows the answers to these questions and so uncertainty is certainly okay; however, I felt that she overcriticized others who genuinely want to help. All in all, this book was a good book, and I would recommend reading it. It gives a great deal of information in an interesting way. However, I would caution all readers to take her comments with a grain of salt, and consider carefully her opinions.

Ms. Dervla Murphy, an intrepid and brave woman, takes us on a bicycle journey in Southeastern Africa (Kenya to Uganda to Tanzania to Malawi to Zambia and finally Zimbabwe). We experience these countries via her bicycle and her opinionated eyes. I did some cycling in North America when I was much younger; Ms. Murphy is doing this at the age of sixty on roads that are far tougher than anything here in North America. Many of her roads were unpaved. She definitely has an iron constitution! The vitality of this book is the many different encounters the author has with groups of people, many of them very poor. Her trajectory, which she did in the early 1990s, takes her through AIDS ravaged areas. She did not know at the beginning of her journey that AIDS was to dominate every conversation she had. There are remarkable discussions which ensue revolving around the epidemic, the role of women, the use (or non-use) of condoms, polygamy, and Africa's growing role in the world. Some of the people she meets have had their entire families lost (or in the process of) to the AIDS epidemic. Because she is cycling and a woman, she is an anomaly. The cycling puts her on an eye-level contact with everyone. What is very reassuring is the needed and unsolicited assistance she gets, now and then, from the most destitute of people, male and female. It is sad to think that since this book was written over twenty years ago, most of the people she met have likely died. This is a very worthwhile book for the diversity of encounters and the energy of Ms. Murphy. She must be high octane!

Page 235-36 (my book) Outside, the schoolboys came crowding around the window above the sink... to observe me sitting on the draining board, the only space available. "They are amazed," said the Chief, "because we talk together socially. Our tradition condemns this mixed-sex talking, we say it leads only to misbehaviour. Men and women have nothing in common to discuss, they live

in different worlds. But we know you have another tradition.  $\neg A \rightarrow A$ .

This book does many things well. At times it's a fascinating series of anthropological interviews. Then it's a sentimental travel guide: marvelling at landscapes. Or it's double barreled feminist advocacy. And it has good historical backdrops and provocative philosophical musings on development and politics in Africa. Dervla takes no prisoners in humorously highlighting flaws in herself, elitists, traditionalists, expat development bandits, and ambivalent White Africans. Having conducted research and travelled in Africa over many years, I found her questions, naive mistakes, and ability to adapt to situations amazing. I recalled learning to love nsima in Zambia in 1984, as there was seldom anything else to eat. I recalled being hassled by immigration officials for travelling with "too little foreign exchange to support myself." And I relived the horror of having a corrupt border patrol officer pocket my passport and walk away. Dervla had the fortitude and charm to come out on top every time: perhaps taking advantage of her privileged/vulnerable status as a woman tourist from Europe. I had to use different tactics as a long-term resident who's an African American man. I bought this book on a lark for \$3 at the World Bank Bookstore. I'll be back for more copies. It's a shame that it's out of print.

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