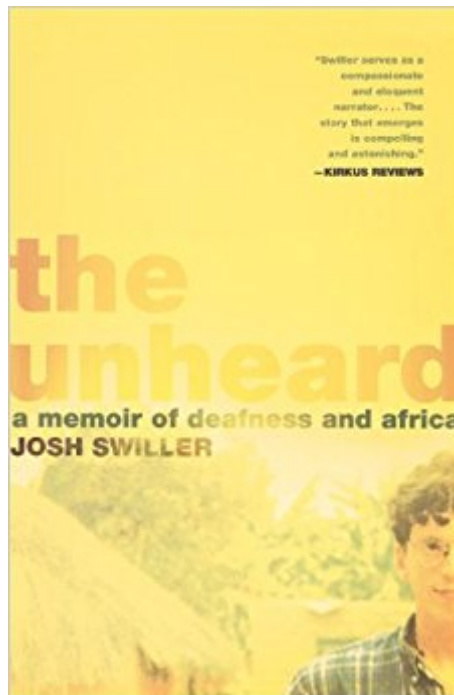




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# The Unheard: A Memoir Of Deafness And Africa



## Synopsis

A young man's quest to reconcile his deafness in an unforgiving world leads to a remarkable sojourn in a remote African village that pulsates with beauty and violence. These are hearing aids. They take the sounds of the world and amplify them." Josh Swiller recited this speech to himself on the day he arrived in Mununga, a dusty village on the shores of Lake Mweru. Deaf since a young age, Swiller spent his formative years in frustrated limbo on the sidelines of the hearing world, encouraged by his family to use lipreading and the strident approximations of hearing aids to blend in. It didn't work. So he decided to ditch the well-trodden path after college, setting out to find a place so far removed that his deafness would become irrelevant. That place turned out to be Zambia, where Swiller worked as a Peace Corps volunteer for two years. There he would encounter a world where violence, disease, and poverty were the mundane facts of life. But despite the culture shock, Swiller finally commanded attention—everyone always listened carefully to the white man, even if they didn't always follow his instruction. Spending his days working in the health clinic with Augustine Jere, a chubby, world-weary chess aficionado and a steadfast friend, Swiller had finally found, he believed, a place where his deafness didn't interfere, a place he could call home. Until, that is, a nightmarish incident blasted away his newfound convictions. At once a poignant account of friendship through adversity, a hilarious comedy of errors, and a gripping narrative of escalating violence, *The Unheard* is an unforgettable story from a noteworthy new talent.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Although doctors diagnosed Swiller's deafness early enough to fit him with hearing aids, the young

man from Manhattan's Upper West Side still felt different. As a young adult he drifted from college to college, job to job, relationship to relationship, never quite finding what he was looking for: a place beyond deafness. He found that place in the mid-1990s, when the Peace Corps posted him to a remote corner of Zambia. During his two-year stint working in a run-down health clinic in a rural village, he fought for irrigation projects and better AIDS facilities. He befriended a young local who played chess and provided constant counsel in the ways the young white American could "and did" run afoul of local tribesmen (and women) and their age-old ways. Deafness would have provided a unique sensory filter for anyone, yet while Swiller may have his particular aural capabilities, he also has literary talents "an eye, a voice and a narrative talent" in abundance. A story in any other Peace Corps volunteer's hands might have been humdrum, but in Swiller's becomes intensified, like the rigors of day-to-day Zambian life, through deprivation. (Sept.)

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I thought I knew about the Peace Corps until I read Josh Swiller's hilarious, troubling, and at times frightening recreation of his time in Zambia. His wit spares no one--least of all himself--and his generosity of spirit encompasses nearly everyone. His experiences in Africa transformed him, and this book will transform readers.

- Laurence Bergreen, author of *Over the Edge of the World: Magellan's Terrifying Circumnavigation of the Globe* "I was riveted by this book from page one. Swiller shouldn't have lived to tell this tale, much less been sent to a village in deepest Africa that the locals called 'Gomorra.' But he did, and he's returned with something priceless: a story suffused with humor and love about a place where corruption and death were regular visitors. Swiller hears the rhythms of language and life far better than most people with two normal ears."
- Michael Chorost, author of *Rebuilt: How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human* "As my mother used to say, 'You got your listening ears on, bub?' This is not gimp chic, nor misery memoir, but a book as deserving, funny and brave as a deaf man digging wells in hardest Africa. Hoo boy. And I thought being blind at the bus depot was harrowing. Yeesh."
- Ryan Knighton, author of *Cockeyed: A Memoir* "Josh Swiller was 22 and profoundly deaf when he applied to the Peace Corps in search of adventure. And indeed, adventure he found. His experiences in Zambia are eloquently recounted in his hard-to-put-down memoir of deafness and Africa, 'The Unheard'."
- The New York Times, Health section "Several ingredients are crucial in a memoir like this: humor, the ability to see enough details to make the scene come alive and a dispassionate compassion. Swiller has them all."
- Los Angeles Times "[Swiller's] appealing, intelligent narrative serves both as a coming of age story and as a penetrating light into one corner of a

tormented continent. • Washington Post • Josh Swiller rewrites the familiar African narrative with a purity that makes the tragic beauty of that devastated continent a stunning novelty for readers. We experience the rich, tangible passions of love, honor and revenge in Africa, amplified a thousandfold in the quiet world of the deaf. • New York Observer

What a beautiful book! I was so moved by the author's honesty, humor, insight... and grateful for the deeper understanding into what it means to be deaf. As someone who was raised in Africa, I'm grateful to Josh for the eloquence with which he articulates the strange mix of raw, often violent existence and what he calls Africa's grace; the same mix that opens your heart as it breaks it. This book brought to the surface again why I miss Africa so much and why I don't live there any more. I wish Josh had done consecutive stints as a Peace Corps volunteer in village after village so that we could have "The Unheard: A series." As an avid reader of all things African, the greatest compliment I can give Josh Swiller is to put him up alongside Alexandra Fuller. It's an accomplishment he deserves. Bravo!

A talented writer with an incredible story. This book will give you insight into an entirely new world, one most of us will never know. It will also make you laugh out loud, be grateful for where you live, and the friendships you have. A truly beautiful story and life well lived.

I was also a member of that first group of PCV's to serve in Zambia and Josh and I were two of the eight who completed our commitments, although a couple of those who didn't complete their stint left for health reasons. I loved his book, and was unable to put it down once I started on it. I'm only mentioned in the book once, a bit out of character. Page 42: I'm the "middle-aged alcoholic from Michigan" (I object to the "middle-aged" part, as I was but a young lad of 39 at the time). The story of Josh's departure from Munungu was never fully revealed to me until reading the book. Like all government-related organizations, Peace Corps is great at keeping secrets and rumors always abound. Josh and I were not close but we did bond a bit after he returned to Kabwe and was once again teaching the deaf students. It was only upon reading the book that I gained an appreciation for his intellect and the really horrible experiences he had in Munungu. At Peace Corps meetings or functions, he always seemed distracted, not interested, withdrawn. After reading the book, my eyes are opened to what the guy endured up there in Munungu and what being deaf is really all about. I pre-ordered the book, with low expectations. Basically, I was concerned about what he may have said about me. What I did not expect was the clarity and smooth-flow of the narrative, the

exceptional descriptors of characters ("voice like firecrackers" comes to mind), the entirely accurate descriptions of life in a bush village. A lot of what he wrote brought tears to my eyes, as I had experienced similar things in my own village of Lukwesa. Plus, I knew or had met a lot of the people he talks about in the book. After reading it, I was ashamed at myself for not getting to know him better while in Zambia those two years, for underestimating his abilities, for not have taken more time while there to help him with his problems instead of selfishly concentrating on my own. The book opened my eyes to a lot of things that were happening right under my nose, but in my hearing ignorance I was blind (equally handicapped) to events as they occurred in regards to brother Josh. My apologies, Josh. This is a great story written by a courageous young man who coped with a host of things (in Zambia as well as dealing with his own deafness) way better than those of us who are not so impaired. I vouch for its truthfulness and content and I know I will be reading it over and over again until the pages are frayed at the corners and the book will lie open voluntarily at whatever page number I'm on. Greg Irish Las Vegas, Nevada Member of Peace Corps Zambia One

I met Josh very briefly about 8 months ago at Gallaudet. One of the friends I was with had arranged to meet him; I just said hello, exchanged pleasantries and left, following the rest of my group. When my friend caught up with the group, she was not too happy because I guess she was expecting Josh to recount his entire time in Africa so she wouldn't have to read the book. After that, I decided that I would read "The Unheard" on the off chance that I would meet Josh and we could have a conversation without the major stumbling block of not having read his book. By the time I got around to reading it, my own hearing loss had recently been diagnosed. It wound up being the perfect timing. I was trying to figure out where I fit in and who I was. The thing that really made this book helpful and successful for me was that it wasn't trying to be more than a memoir. He wrote about his experiences and what it meant in the context of his life. Memoirs can sometimes be so full of delusions of grandeur that they're just not worth reading. The writing was clear and concise without being short or choppy. This book wasn't trying to spell out ways to fix the way the Peace Corps works in Africa or provide a dissertation on the hierarchy within the African diaspora or be a self-help book suggesting you spend two years in the Peace Corps to learn about yourself and fix your problems. I probably wouldn't have made it through the entire book if it had tried any of those things.

I worked with Josh Swiller this past year and it was only as I was leaving employment that another co-worker told me of this book Josh had written. I finally found time to do a little reading for pleasure

and I decided to read this book tonight. What a wonderful writer Josh is. I could see and hear him and live his experience vicariously through his words. He still has that introspection and now I understand how and why he can turn the outside world off. Sometimes life is just a lot of noise.

Josh Swiller tells the story of being deaf in a country of warfare, disease, corrupted government and a loving but very different community. Ultimately, he finds that for all the hardship deafness can give a person, the drama of it is something to be treasured. I loved this story, as a deaf person myself. I don't think the writing was as fine-tuned as it could have been (what was with all those similes?!), but the overall structure worked. In any case, I won't forget this story, and I feel that I'm better for it. Thanks, Josh!

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