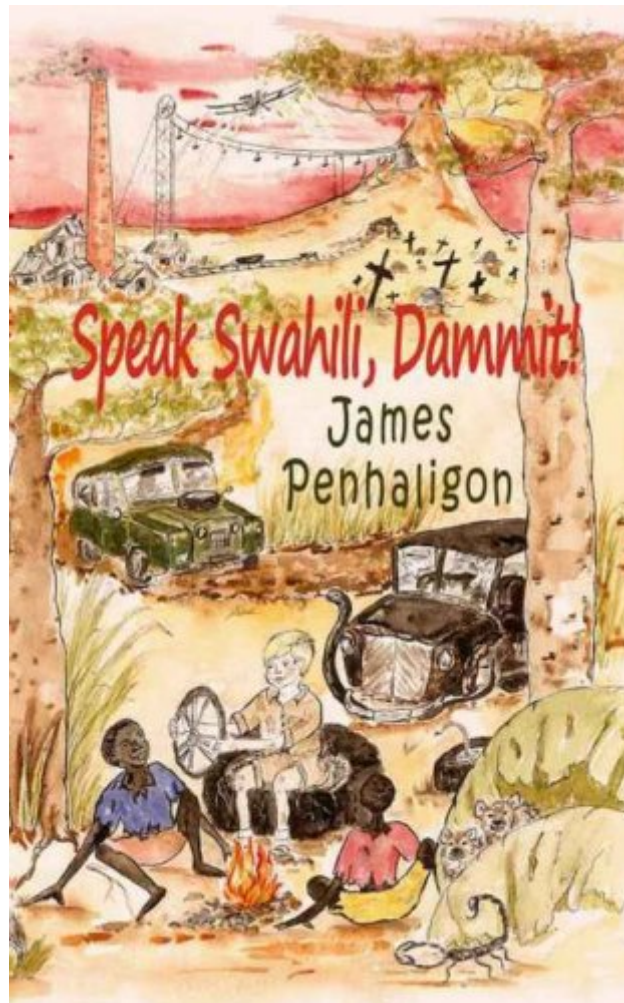


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# Speak Swahili, Dammit!: A Tragic, Funny African Childhood



## Synopsis

The inspiring true story of a young boy's chaotic life in a remote, wild, corner of East Africa. James's childhood is spent on an isolated gold-mine near Lake Victoria, Tanganyika, with just his sister and mother; his father tragically dying through injuries sustained from World War II. His upbringing is mainly left to a tribal ayah called Amina and an elderly Swahili man, and he learns to speak Swahili before English. In this unusual setting he soon discovers some stark facts about life through tragedy and danger, but it is the local watu, imbued with kindness and irrepressible humour, that save him from despair, and with whom he learns to fish with home-made lines, eat insects and famously abuse the European hierarchy in real Swahili! Known as a "Jimu" to his friends, he marks out his own country with a Sukuma boy named Lutoli, falls deeply in love with the beautiful, but older, German girl Gretchen and throws himself out of the back of a bus to avoid being sent away to school. Once at school, in Arusha, James tends to mix with other non-conformers and presents a dilemma to teachers – he is a white boy with a "black spirit". His gang gets up to nefarious enterprises, bringing them into a state of permanent conflict with the system. James is fascinated with the history of Tanganyika back to the time when it was a German Colony until 1918. The unparalleled courage of the German leader Paul von Lettow Vorbeck against the British is a beacon to the young boy of what can be accomplished against adversity. Above all James discovers the world, and life, a little by education, a lot by accident, but overwhelmingly by fate and happenstance, in circumstances few people in the developed world have experienced.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

OK, this book is not for everyone, but for those who have lived in, traveled in or are just interested in East Africa, this is a really fascinating and funny memoir of growing up in very rural northwestern Tanganika (now Tanzania) in the 1950s and 1960s. James Penhaligon's war-wounded English father and South African mother moved a few months after he was born in 1951 to a gold mine five hours by Land Rover and ferry from the nearest town (Mwanza). As both of his parents are working, he is raised largely by Africans and speaks Swahili before he speaks English. He moves easily between the two cultures, but he often feels most comfortable with his African friends. The usual childhood pranks take on a different dimension when a rogue lion or poisonous snake is involved.

I have read all the reviews - 9 of them - written before this one. I echo and concur with all of them. I wrote the following to the author: "James, Jim, Jimu... I have just finished reading 'Speak Swahili Dammit'. I finished it in tears along with Amina and Umali saying kwaheri. Congratulations for an outstanding book! For me, the reader, I am very glad that you persevered in the hardest thing you ever had to do." I should explain that James Penhaligon wrote that writing 'Speak Swahili Dammit' was, for him, an incredibly hard task. Also that I, too, grew up in the late Colonial days in East Africa (Kenya, in my case) speaking Swahili almost before I could walk. The parallels and also the stark differences between his story and my rather more protected existence as a child and teenager endeared 'Jimu' (Swahili pronunciation of Jim) to me. The book is well-written in a distinctive style with great cogency and economy of words in the descriptions. Swahili is widely used, and interpreted, throughout the book. I thoroughly recommend it to any reader, whether or not they have any knowledge of Africa or Tanganyika/Tanzania.

This was a great read, and I learned a bit of Swahili vocabulary while reading it. There are some laugh-so-hard-I-fell-out-of-the-chair moments and the author's writing style has a great flow to it.

I'm not normally a fan of autobiographies, but this book is the exception. This is a fascinating and absorbing read and it kept me turning the pages to see how the story developed. It tells of a young boy growing up in Tanganyika and spending more time in the African than the white community,

hence the title. It's a love story, it's funny and tragic and contains the elements of a thriller. James Penhaligan has the ability to use words in a way that paints pictures in my mind, and I when I read it, I was in Africa with him. I'm looking forward to the sequel.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book; perhaps it is because I also grew up in Tanganyika...from age 3 to 14. The author has his own style, which I like, and which gives the reader a feel for what life was really like. It took me back to my childhood...which is a good thing because my childhood was a happy one, thanks to the great people of Tanganyika/Tanzania and my parents. His description of events and people rings true and he has a keen memory for the sights, sound, smells and all of the rest of it! This book invites the reader to share the whole experience vicariously...a great adventure to be sure. I shared his sadness at having to leave Tanganyika at age 14, having to enter American society and experiencing reverse "culture shock". But times change and we all had to change with it. This book gives a "snapshot" of the mostly happy times of the pre-independence idyllic life for the children of expatriates, a rich experience that shaped us all for the rest of our lives. After reading this book one will understand why...

I could not put this book down. It is beautifully written, and takes the reader on a unique journey into Jimu's childhood in Africa, surrounded by the African bush, eccentric characters and wild animals. There is heartbreak, excitement, humour and compassion. The characters are extremely well portrayed, and the author's love of Africa and his love of animals shines through. There were many elements of this book that reminded me of Gerald Durrell's writing at it's best. James has done an excellent job of bringing a magical time in Africa back to life, and this book deserves it's place amongst the top shelf of African memoirs.

This was a great book. If you have ever lived in East Africa you will enjoy this read. I was born and raised in Kenya and left when I was fifteen. Kenya has always been on my mind. Africa is in my soul, this book really connected with me, because the author had the same experience. He loved Africa and through circumstances out of his control he had to leave with his family in his teens. Much like my experience. The book really touched my heart. It is also full of adventure and humor. Loved it and I think you will too.

Superb, funny book. I laughed till I cried, then just cried. What a wonderful insight into life of a European during the 'colonial' and 'post-colonial' era. I recommend it to anyone wanting to escape to

the savannas of Africa, even for a short time. Can't wait for your next one!

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