



## Isara

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In 1981, Wole Soyinka published a memoir of his boyhood in a Nigerian village, *AKE: THE YEARS OF CHILDHOOD*. *ISARA: A VOYAGE AROUND "ESSAY"* might be called a prequel to *AKE*, since it deals with Soyinka's father and his generation, avid for Western learning, hopeful about their country's future. In many ways, though, it is misleading to call *ISARA* a memoir. Soyinka himself notes that he has "ruptured" chronology and has used fictitious names throughout. More important, he has sought to re-create the thoughts, the inner experience, of the people he describes. This novelistic license is apparent not only in interior monologues but in Soyinka's very way of telling his story: deliberately fragmented, oblique.

*ISARA*, in short, is a strange book, defying expectations, and some readers, feeling lost, will be tempted to stop before they have really gotten underway. That would be a mistake, for *ISARA* is richly rewarding: diabolically funny, poignant, full of memorable characters.

At the center of the book is the figure based on Soyinka's father: the schoolmaster Soditan Akinyode, whose initials prompt the nickname "Essay." (Soyinka's subtitle, he acknowledges, is taken from John Mortimer's play *A VOYAGE AROUND MY FATHER*.) The intrepid Essay, whose infectious enthusiasm plays in the reader's mind against the troubled history of postcolonial Nigeria, corresponds with a fellow teacher in the United States: Wade Cudeback of Ashtabula, Ohio; their meeting in Essay's native village of Isara, after years of friendship via mail, concludes the narrative. Neither straight fiction nor straight memoir, *ISARA* is wholly successful, and not to be missed.

## Sources for Further Study

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