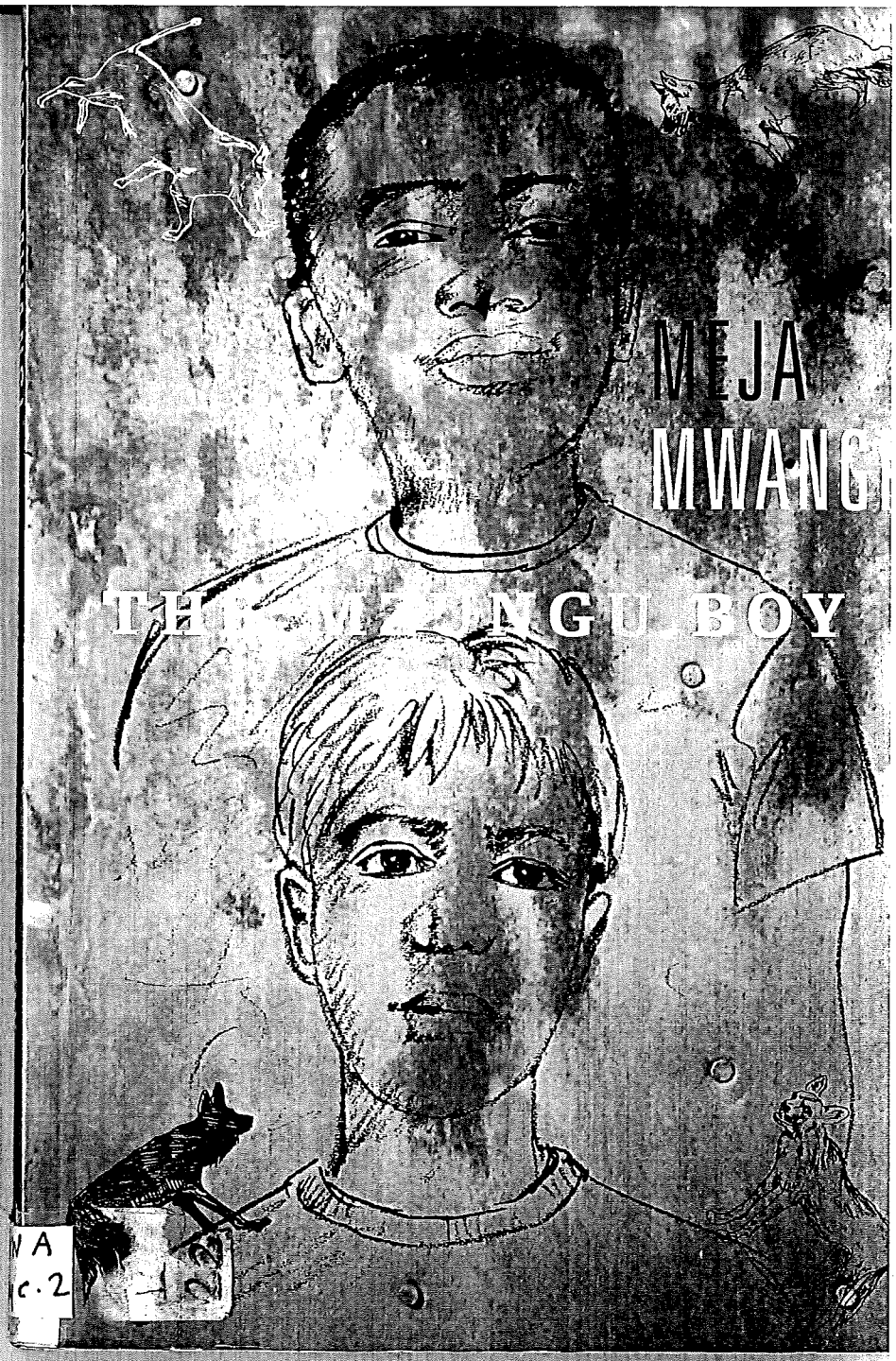

Groundwood Books / House of Anansi Press
720 Bathurst Street, Suite 500, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2R4

Distributed in the USA by Publishers Group West
1700 Fourth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710

We acknowledge for their financial support of our publishing program the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) and the Ontario Arts Council.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloging in Publication
Mwangi, Meja
The Mzungu Boy / Meja Mwangi.
Previously published under title: Little white man.
ISBN 0-88899-653-5 (bound). ISBN 0-88899-664-0 (pbk.)
I. Mwangi, Meja. Little white man. II. Title.
PZ7.M974Mz 2005 j823'.914 C2004-906454-1

Printed and bound in Canada

One

I AM NOT certain when I first heard the word mau-mau. It may have been during the first round-up, after Bwana Ruin's gun disappeared and was said to have been stolen by the mau-mau.

That fateful morning we had woken up to find our village surrounded by soldiers. Hundreds upon hundreds of heavily armed white soldiers. They rounded us all up — every man, woman and child — and herded us into the cattle auction pen outside the village. There they made us sit on fresh cow dung to wait for Bwana Ruin.

Meanwhile, they searched the village. They searched every single hut. They searched every nook and cranny. The villagers had received their monthly pay the night before. Many of them had hidden their money, but the soldiers unearthed it all. Later we learned that the soldiers had also stolen watches and jewelry.

They kept us in the cattle enclosure until the sun came up, bright and hot, and the children started to complain of hunger. Even then the soldiers would not let us go home or tell us what they wanted with us.

Then an angry soldier came and called out my father's name. My father rose, bowed his head and waited to be shot.

"Come," the angry soldier ordered.

Father said a quick farewell to us and stepped forward. They hurried him away in the direction of Bwana Ruin's house, and we waited to hear the gunshots. We waited a long time. He told us later that he too thought that the day of his death had come.

But that was not the reason the soldiers wanted him. Bwana Ruin was angry that his trusted cook had been rounded up along with the rest of his watu, his people. He had no hot water and no breakfast, and he was very angry.

By the time my father had lit the woodstove, heated the water and cooked breakfast for him, we in the cattle enclosure were cooking under the mid-morning sun. The children cried from hunger. The parents grumbled. No one had the courage to complain to the soldiers guarding us. They stood with their guns pointed at our heads while they smoked cigarettes, ate chocolate and drank Coca-Cola.

Bwana Ruin came at noon. He was a big man, bigger than any man in our village. He was dressed in his usual light green khaki and riding boots. He carried his riding whip wherever he went, even when he did not have the horse, and would sometimes use it to beat up workers who did not take off their hats when he passed by them.

He climbed on the auctioneer's platform and

addressed the workers. His voice was loud and more frightening than his whip when he was angry.

"*Watu,*" he said, tapping on the side of his boot with the riding crop. "You know me well. I'm a reasonable bwana, *aye*? *Kweli ama rongo?* True or false, *aye*?"

"*Kweli,*" the people said. We knew that other bwanas' watu lived much harder lives.

"When you steal milk from my dairy, do I send you to jail as they would, *aye*?" he asked us. "No, I do not. *Kweli rongo?*"

"*Kweli,*" the people said. Bwana Ruin whipped the hide off the culprits instead, and made them pay for the milk.

"When you stole my wheat last year, did I call the police on you, *aye*?" he asked.

He had whipped the thieves senseless and let them go. Everyone knew the men would never steal from him again after the beating they had received.

"When your *totos* steal fruit from my *shamba,*" he said, tapping at his boot. "When your children break into my orchard and take my fruit, do I set my dogs on them any more as other bwanas would, *aye*? No, I never do that. I send them to you to discipline yourselves. *Kweli rongo?*"

"*Kweli,*" the parents agreed.

He had set his dogs loose on us only once, with tragic results. Now he contented himself with whipping our bare buttocks raw with his riding crop, and then sending us to be properly thrashed by our parents. That did

not stop us going back to his orchard. It was the only fruit garden around.

"You know me well, *aye*?" he said. "I am the fairest bwana in the whole of Nanyuki, *aye*? But this time you have gone too far."

He struck at his boot so loud that those children who had fallen asleep woke up, startled.

Bwana Jack Ruin was a big man. He was taller than anyone I knew. Even taller than our headmaster, Lesson One, who we feared like death. Lesson One was so tall that he had to bend forward to enter our classrooms. But Bwana Ruin was taller and stronger. They said that he had once lifted the foreman, the largest worker on the farm, and thrown him right through the dairy — in at one door and out at the other — without touching the floor.

Bwana Ruin was from England. His hair was the color of wheat just before the harvest. He had dark brown spots on his fierce face and on his big hairy arms right down to his fingers. He had a thick wild moustache and hard eyes as green as a cat's. When he was angry, as he was now, his eyes glinted and sparkled and made everyone afraid.

He shook and roared with fury. He waved his fist and brandished his whip at us. Finally he stabbed an angry finger into our midst and swore that no one, not one of us, would leave the cattle pen before his rifle had been returned.

The people looked at one another and wondered who might have done this terrible deed. Bwana Ruin

waited for someone to step forward and confess. Standing on the platform high above our heads, he appeared to be the voice and the power of God. No one could defy his might. His all-seeing eyes would show him who the thief was. Then there would be hell to pay. I was a little angry myself when no one came forward to return the stolen gun.

I was twelve years old. I no more understood the frightful things that were going on in the country at large than I understood the things Bwana Ruin said. But the manner in which he spoke and the presence of the angry white soldiers left no doubt in my mind that something more serious than the theft of a single rifle had happened.

The soldiers had set up a big interrogation tent on the other side of the dairy, where they now took the men one by one for questioning. They were gone for a long time. When the men came back, they looked older and crushed. One by one they went, and one by one they came back, all quiet and afraid and unwilling to talk to anyone about it.

We sat in the cattle pen until sunset. We were not allowed to eat or to go to the toilet. Children cried themselves hoarse from hunger and thirst. Women fainted and their men grumbled. They talked and wondered what they should do.

Who could have taken the white man's rifle? Was he going to let their wives and children die for the sake of a gun?

But no one knew anything of the disappeared rifle. Nor of the people called mau-mau, who he said were out to rob and murder and cause chaos throughout the land.

I turned to Hari and asked him in a whisper, "What is mau-mau?"

He kicked me into silence. I did not know it at the time, but mau-mau were the same people we quietly referred to, in whispers, as *andu a mutitu*, the people of the forest. They sometimes came to our house late at night to eat and to talk to Hari in whispers. But I was not allowed to tell anyone about it.

At six o'clock the soldiers allowed us to go back home. They took away nine young men for further questioning. We never saw them again. We heard later that they had been taken for detention to faraway Manda Island. Still later, we heard that they had all died from malaria.

Apart from my father the cook, the houseboy, the herdsmen and the milkmen, no one had done any work that day. No one would get any pay that month. We all missed school that day too. But we got our pay all right when we turned up the following day, in uniform and on time.

The headmaster called us to his office, lined us up against the wall just like the soldiers had lined up the nine young men they had taken away, and demanded to know why we had missed school.

We called the headmaster Lesson One behind his

back. The rest of the time we called him sir. He was a famous terror with his cane and we dared not lie to him. We told him about the raid.

"So?" the headmaster said. "So the soldiers came to your village too?"

"Yes, sir!" we said in unison.

"Then?" he asked us. "Then what happened?"

We went through the whole terrible story once again, adding any little detail we considered sympathetic to our case, all of us talking at the same time. We told him how we had woken up in the night to find our doors broken down and angry white soldiers pointing their guns at our heads. How they had taken us out and threatened to shoot our fathers. We told him how we had spent the whole day in the cattle enclosure without food or water. We told him how the soldiers had taken away nine young men to shoot them dead. We told him everything.

When we had finished talking, the headmaster stopped nodding and asked us, "Then?"

That was when I realized we were in big trouble. The others realized it too, because they were suddenly all very quiet, holding their breath.

"Did the soldiers arrest you?" the headmaster asked.

"No, sir," we answered.

"Then?" he said.

I seriously considered jumping through the window and never coming back to school ever again. But where would I go? My father would tie me up and send

my body back to school as usual, in uniform and on time.

He had never been to school himself. He could neither read nor write. But he valued school in a way I would never understand. He often told me in his quiet, subdued way that he did not want me to grow up to be a farm donkey like himself.

Whack! The headmaster's cane came down on the desk so hard that we all jumped with fear.

"Lesson one!" he told us. "There was a raid here in Majengo too yesterday. But the Majengo boys came to school as usual, in uniform and on time."

Whack! Down came the cane on the desk.

"There was a raid at Bwana Hooks' farm too yesterday," the headmaster informed us. "Yet his boys came to school as usual, in uniform and on time."

Whack! came the cane again. A frightened boy wet himself loudly.

"*Bado*," the headmaster told him. "Not yet."

"Lesson one," he said to us. "There was a raid at Bwana Koro's farm yesterday as well. But his boys came to school as usual, in uniform and on time. Now then?"

He smiled at us and said, "Now, tell me again why you did not come to school yesterday."

No one dared. We looked down at our bare feet and waited for doomsday. He gave us time to consider our sin.

"Now then," he said finally. "Do I take it you had no real reason not to come to school yesterday?"

"Yes, sir," we said.

"That you did not come to school yesterday as usual simply because you are lazy, stupid boys?"

"Yes, sir," we agreed.

"Louder!" he ordered.

"Yes, sir," we shouted.

"Now then," he said, smiling in a fatherly way. "You have admitted that you are all sinners. Do you know the wages of sin?"

"Yes, sir." We all knew it.

"What are the wages of sin?" he asked us.

"Death," we told him.

"Again!" he ordered.

"Death," we screamed.

"Louder!"

"Death!"

"Good," he said. "Now you will all face the wall, drop your shorts and bend over for your wages."

He gave us four strokes of the cane each. We had to count the wages of our sin out loud as we received them. It was exactly like death.

Afterwards we stood before him, numb from head to toe with the shock and the pain, unable to think and unable to even shed the tears in our heart. And while pain ran up and down our backsides, the headmaster recited his famous creed.

"Lesson one," he started.

Whack! went the cane.

"It does not matter if you are raided by an army of

soldiers or an army of buffalos," he told us. "You come to school as usual, in uniform and on...?"

"Time!" we yelled.

"Lesson one!"

Whack! The cane again.

"It does not matter if your father's hut catches fire and burns to the ground with your books in it," he told us. "You come to school as usual, in uniform and on...?"

"Time!" we yelled.

"Again!"

"Time!"

"Always on...?"

"Time!"

"Because time is...?"

"Money!"

"Good," he told us. "Lesson one."

Whack!

"It does not matter if you are ill with a cold, stomach worms or diarrhea," he said to us. "You come to school as usual, in uniform and on...?"

"Time!" we yelled.

"And the only time I will excuse you from coming to school is if you are...?"

"Dead!" we yelled.

"Good," he said. "You may go to your classes."

And we rushed out of his office to our classrooms to face the class teachers.

Life at school was one long battle. But there was not much going on in class that day. It was closing day, and

the teachers were just as weary of school as we were. They left us to clean the classrooms and prepare them for when we came back after the holidays.

Closing day was also the day the boys settled old scores. The biggest group of boys was from Majengo, the sprawling slum village to which our school was attached. It was made up of the toughest orphans and street urchins and was the most feared. Every farm around Nanyuki had its own gang of rough boys, banding together to protect themselves and each other from the rest.

All the term's quarrels were settled on closing day. That way there was no headmaster to report to, and all would be forgotten by the time school reopened for the next term. The various groups would waylay one another on the way from school and battle it out for hours.

I did not belong to any of these gangs. I did not know how to fight without being hurt or hurting someone. If I hurt someone, and my father found out, he would hurt me worse himself. I dared not win and I could not afford to lose.

But that did not mean I did not get into trouble. From time to time the boys from one gang or the other would gang up and beat the hell out of me just for the fun of it. From time to time too, I would corner the weakest of them and rub his face in the dirt. Then it would start all over again, with me being warned to watch out for closing day.

When closing time came, I left school with a group of

boys from Koro's farm, hiding out in their midst while the boys from Majengo looked all over for me. The boys from Koro's were well known for their fierceness, but they traveled such a long distance to school and back that they had less time to get into fights.

Two

WHEN WE CAME to the log bridge over the river, I said goodbye to the boys from Koro's farm.

The farm was far out in the Loldaiga plain, another five miles away. They had to cross both the Nanyuki and the Liki to get home. I had often chased hares and hunted for warthogs on the grass plateau between the two rivers and on the Loldaiga plain, but I had never been to Koro's farm.

Swinging my school bag over my shoulder, I walked along the river bank toward home. It was dark and lonely along the fishermen's path. The sun never penetrated the old mokoe trees that grew thickly along the river.

But I was not scared. I had walked the forest paths many times before. Alone, I had explored all the forests and caves around Bwana Ruin's farm, and I had never come across anything that frightened me even a little.

I knew the forest very well. On weekends and school holidays I spent a lot of time walking the path between the log bridge and the fish pool near where the farm laborers drew their water. It was peaceful among the