

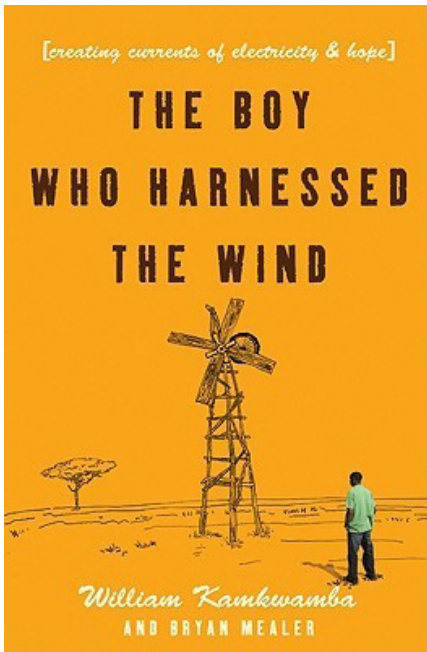


# ShelterBox

BOOK CLUB NORTH AMERICA

## The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind

William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer



William Kamkwamba was born in Malawi, a country where magic ruled and modern science was mystery. It was also a land withered by drought and hunger. But William had read about windmills, and he dreamed of building one that would bring to his small village a set of luxuries that only 2 percent of Malawians could enjoy: electricity and running water. His neighbors called him misala—crazy—but William refused to let go of his dreams. With a small pile of once-forgotten science textbooks; some scrap metal, tractor parts, and bicycle halves; and an armory of curiosity and determination, he embarked on a daring plan to forge an unlikely contraption and small miracle that would change the lives around him.

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind is a remarkable true story about human inventiveness and its power to overcome crippling adversity. It will inspire anyone who doubts the power of one individual's ability to change his community and better the lives of those around him.

---

### About the Author: William Kamkwamba

When William Kamkwamba was 14, Malawi suffered a severe famine. His family could no longer pay his school fees, and he was forced to drop out of high school. While staying home, William remained curious and inventive and worked with the village librarian to stay engaged with his studies, especially science. Working from just one photo in a U.S. junior high school textbook book called "Using Energy," he reasoned out how to build an electricity-producing windmill from spare parts and scrap, despite having no instructions.

After graduating from Dartmouth College in Environmental Studies, William began work as a Global Fellow for the design firm IDEO.org. William is an entrepreneur, TED Fellow, and has worked with the WiderNet Project to develop appropriate technologies curriculums focused on bridging the gap between "knowing" and "doing" for young people in Malawi and across the world.





# ShelterBox

BOOK CLUB NORTH AMERICA

## Grace's Story



45-year-old Grace used to live in a small village called Mwalija with her husband and four children. The village is situated in a very low-lying area of Chikwawa next to the Shire, Malawi's largest river. She said when the floods came, she tried to seek refuge at a nearby island. "It was around 3 am, we were asleep then we realized the water was coming inside the house. We all ran for our lives to the island, we left everything in the house."

When talking about receiving the aid she said: "We were very happy to now have our own place to stay". Not only did the ShelterKit give them back some privacy, but Grace also added that it made a difference to their family life, smiling broadly she said: "It means that my husband and I can live together as man and wife again."

As well as having shelter, Grace was also pleased with the other aid items she was given. She explained how the kitchen set now meant she had pots to cook with and warm water to wash the children. The area the family lives in is now on higher ground away from the river.

---

## ShelterBox in Malawi

In March 2019, Cyclone Idai tore through parts of South-East Africa leaving flooding and devastation ShelterBox decides where to deploy very carefully. That is why we have developed our response criteria to help us make those tough decisions. Most importantly, they help us prioritize the most vulnerable families around the world who may not otherwise receive the vital support they need.

Although Cyclone Idai caused much damage in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi, our response criteria determined that we could make the most impact on families in Malawi.

In the months that followed Cyclone Idai, we worked with our partner Habitat for Humanity to provide emergency shelter for families in Malawi who were affected



## Yi Shun's Discussion Questions

1. Magic and science exist in equal parts in Kamkwambe's life, if at different times. Where and when do you think each of these played a role in helping him to develop his windmill? What about Western religion?
2. In the last decade, ShelterBox has responded to Malawi four times. Drawing from the descriptions in this book, what role do you think economics plays in natural disaster, and vice versa?
3. What role do you think the government plays in Kamkwambe's wanting to make a better life?
4. In several places in this book Kamkwambe and his co-author Bryan Mealer describe Malawian customs that may seem strange to our Western ears. What customs do you have in your family that may seem strange to Malawians? What western customs might seem strange?
5. Kamkwambe is curious about electricity from a very young age. Was there anything you were curious about for as long as you can remember?
6. Creativity in a time of great crisis is a major theme throughout this book. How have you found yourselves getting creative in our time of self-isolation?
7. Throughout the book, money is a problem. Why do you think Kamkwambe doesn't think of using his windmill to make money?



### Yi Shun Lai

Yi Shun is one of ShelterBox's Response Team members and a dedicated volunteer. She is also a writer and editor and has been for the entirety of her professional life. She is a co-owner and editor of the Tahoma Literary Review and the author of *Not a Self-Help Book: The Misadventures of Marty Wu* (Shade Mountain Press, 2016). She writes, teaches, and speaks regularly on communication across the board, from business to literature.



**ShelterBox**  
BOOK CLUB NORTH AMERICA

## Q&A With Co-Author Bryan Mealer

There is a lot of cultural context the first half of the book. When you first met William to the time you finished the story, what do you think changed the most for you about the plot of the book?



Writing the book was rather straight forward because I was telling WK's story chronologically. There was a beginning, a middle, climax, and the end. But of course the challenge is to fill that narrative arch with an actual story. So I lived in Wimbe for several months to report and do research. WK and I hired an interpreter named Blessings Chikakula who once served as WK's teacher in school. Blessings and I would set out each morning and basically report WK's life. We spoke to friends, relatives, neighbors, pastors, teachers, anyone who knew WK or who'd also experienced the horrific famine that frames the book. And early on I realized we also needed to focus on magic, which was a major part of Malawian culture and even informed their devout Presbyterian faith. Africans beautifully mix their religious traditions. So for me, each day brought new learning and understanding. That's an essential part of being a reporter. Each day you need to learn something new. I walked away with an incredible respect and understanding for WK's culture, and also their fortitude and resilience.

You'd worked in the DRC before as a journalist; did learning William's story change your perception of Malawi and lives of some Malawian families?

I knew very little of Malawi when I began WK's story. Malawi is such a different country than Congo. For one, it doesn't have a history of war and degradation. People in Congo are living with trauma each and every day. The government has long been in disarray and sadly, disease and instability is fairly common in many parts of Congo. On the other hand, Malawi is a stable country with a mostly sound economy. There are good roads! And I found people in Malawi to be extremely friendly and welcoming. It's called "the warm heart of Africa" for a reason.



**ShelterBox**  
BOOK CLUB NORTH AMERICA

## Q&A With Co-Author Bryan Mealer

In your time doing book tours and speaking with readers, what has been the most surprising reaction to the book?

The most surprising and rewarding aspect was kids -- around 13 and 14 years old -- coming up to us and saying how much the book made them love science. At least once a week I get a message by email or social media of school kids making their own windmills. WK made science seem cool, and that's huge.



What's it like to work with someone to try and tell their story? What particular challenges did you have?

When telling someone's story you can't solely rely on their memories. Our memories trick us. Our brains don't like reliving traumatic experiences, for example. So you have to report around your subject -- interviewing friends and relatives and acquaintances. At the end of the day, you circle back to your subject and present what you've learned. This will usually jog loose memories and help correct other places where they may have misremembered. With WK there was also a language barrier. My job as cowriter was to essentially give him an English voice -- and to write from the perspective of a 14-year old William. But I realized he struggled with English (this was 2007), so I made the early decision to conduct our interviews solely in Chichewa, his native language. I would ask a question in English and WK would answer in Chichewa and Blessings would interpret. This way I was able to capture WK's natural speech patterns and also his boyishness and wonderful sense of humor.



**ShelterBox**  
BOOK CLUB NORTH AMERICA

## Q&A With Co-Author Bryan Mealer

How did you and William meet?

We met in January 2007 at the Manhattan office of my literary agent Heather Schroder. She had contacted Tom Reilly, who was acting as WK's mentor, and arranged a meeting for when WK came to the US for the first time. Heather had seen a story in the Wall Street Journal about WK's speaking at the TED Global conference in Tanzania and immediately thought of me. I was just finishing my book about the Congo war and looking for a new project. But I was also very discouraged and exhausted from covering war, and I was also struggling with my own post-traumatic stress. Meeting WK and being able to tell a positive and hopeful story from the continent was so important for me. I was tired of reporting only blood and death and in many ways perpetuating a stereotype of Africa.



What are you and William each up to these days? Do you still keep in touch?

I've since written two other books -- Muck City and The Kings of Big Spring, which is a history of my family in the West Texas oil fields that took me six years to write. I also write regularly for the Guardian, covering poverty, immigration, and America's political and religious divide. My wife and I have three children, ages 10, 8, and 4. For many years we were living in Austin, Texas, but last August we moved to NYC so I could enroll at Union Theological Seminary, where I'm currently pursuing a Master of Divinity. Since COVID-19 we're back in Texas but will hopefully return to New York soon.

WK and his wife Olivia live in North Carolina. Olivia just finished her doctorate in education. She's also seven months pregnant with their first baby, whom we lovingly refer to as Baby K. And as soon as Baby K comes into the world, WK and Olivia will move to Malawi where they're building a massive innovation center in the town of Kasungu. The architect firm MASS Design Group, who designed the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Birmingham, AL (also known as the lynching memorial) is helping to develop the innovation center in Kasungu.

[Shelterboxcanada.org/bookclub](https://shelterboxcanada.org/bookclub)