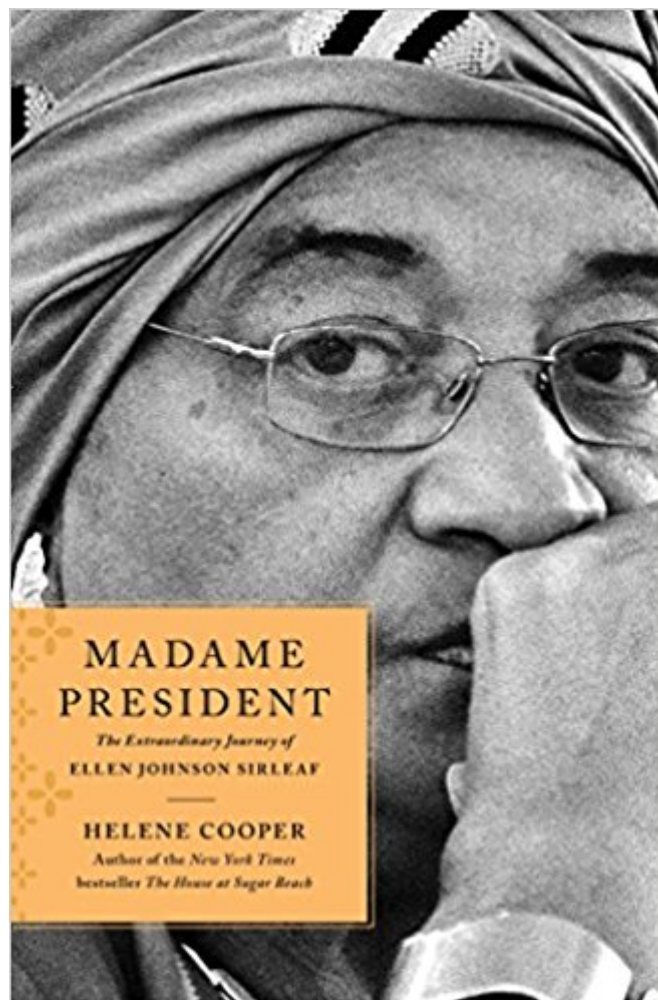




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# Madame President: The Extraordinary Journey Of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf



## Synopsis

The harrowing, but triumphant story of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, leader of the Liberian women's movement, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and the first democratically elected female president in African history. When Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won the 2005 Liberian presidential election, she demolished a barrier few thought possible, obliterating centuries of patriarchal rule to become the first female elected head of state in Africa's history. *Madame President* is the inspiring, often heartbreaking story of Sirleaf's evolution from an ordinary Liberian mother of four boys to international banking executive, from a victim of domestic violence to a political icon, from a post-war president to a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and bestselling author Helene Cooper deftly weaves Sirleaf's personal story into the larger narrative of the coming of age of Liberian women. The highs and lows of Sirleaf's life are filled with indelible images; from imprisonment in a jail cell for standing up to Liberia's military government to addressing the United States Congress, from reeling under the onslaught of the Ebola pandemic to signing a deal with Hillary Clinton when she was still Secretary of State that enshrined American support for Liberia's future. Sirleaf's personality shines throughout this riveting biography. Ultimately, *Madame President* is the story of Liberia's greatest daughter, and the universal lessons we can all learn from this "Oracle" of African women.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

PRAISE FOR MADAME PRESIDENT "Madame President is more than the life story of Ellen

Johnson Sirleaf, who broke political and cultural barriers in becoming the first woman to be elected president of an African nation. It is the expansive and penetrating narrative of a country, Liberia, that sweeps across continents and time...It moves swiftly through decades, eventually addressing the Ebola crisis that became the nadir of Sirleaf's two terms in office...[Cooper] writes vividly and with authority...her book is impressive for both its detail and the insight it provides into a historic figure. Throughout, she offers an unflinching look at the reserved Sirleaf's personal life and presidency, which comes to an end this year, while also telling of Liberia's pain and pride."

--Washington Post "Cooper, who grew up in Liberia, tells the Nobel Peace Prize winner's personal story and examines her leadership of the Liberian women's movement, promising a look at one of the few women to run a nation not only in Africa, but anywhere."

--Washington Post "Unspools like a novel, fitting for a life that is nothing short of mythic...filled with details that emerge from dogged reporting as well as an intimate understanding of Liberia's complexity and culture, which perhaps could come only from being a native daughter...Cooper's prose, witty, blunt and peppered with the Pidgin English spoken by the peoples of Liberia, immerses the reader in the fabric of that small, West African country...Madame President is a fascinating read to enlighten those who may know little about this woman and the nation she leads, and who will undoubtedly be left wanting to know much more."

--USA Today (3.5 stars) "A tour-de-force biography...a colorful and compelling portrait."

--Essence "A riveting tale of civil war, political corruption, and personal ambition. Like her memoir, *The House at Sugar Beach*, this biography delves into Liberia's modern-day travails. Its heroes are women not only Sirleaf, the first democratically elected female president of Liberia (and its current president), who earned a Nobel Peace Prize and handled the 2014 Ebola crisis, but the ordinary market women who threw their influence behind her."

--Publishers Weekly "A celebratory biography of Africa's first female president and 2011 Nobel Prize winner...a woman of spectacular political achievement...A brisk chronicle of a strong-willed, tireless, and determined leader."

--Kirkus Reviews "Cooper presents an eye-opening account, holding nothing back. Slipping in and out of Liberian English, she creates a vivid portrait of life in Liberia, illustrating the odds and struggles Sirleaf faced. Powerful and thoroughly researched, Cooper's narratives are haunting and cinematic in their level of detail. Recommended for readers who enjoy biographies of world leaders and African history."

--Library Journal "Cooper frankly describes Sirleaf's support for Taylor, her nepotism and other failings as president, while sympathetically laying out what she considers to be Sirleaf's extenuating circumstances. She regards Sirleaf

as a flawed but still heroic figure, and though her view is persuasive, she also makes it possible for readers to develop their own opinions. *Madame President* is a valuable addition to the history of an iconic world leader.

—Shelf Awareness "An accessible and valuable portrait of one of the most dynamic women on the world stage."

—Booklist "With compassion, a depth of research and stunning detail, Helene Cooper tells the riveting story of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first elected woman head of state on the African continent, who survived war and coup to lead Liberia through the Ebola crisis and who won a Nobel Peace Prize. *Madame President*'s universal themes of courage, resilience and fortitude are a wonder and an inspiration."

—Isabel Wilkerson, New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*

Helene Cooper is the Pulitzer Prize-winning Pentagon correspondent for The New York Times, having previously served as White House Correspondent, diplomatic correspondent, and the assistant editorial page editor. Prior to moving to the Times, Helene spent twelve years as a reporter and foreign correspondent at The Wall Street Journal. She is the author of the bestselling memoir, *The House at Sugar Beach*, and *Madame President*, a biography of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. She was born in Monrovia, Liberia, and lives in the Washington, DC area.

When I returned from living in Liberia in 1970, I remember telling people how gentle and kind the people were. I never saw anybody hit or physically threaten anybody else. The people did like to "palaver" though - endlessly palaver. There were stories about heart hunting, but I didn't know whether to believe them or not. When I read reports about all the violence from Samuel K. Doe onward, I was shocked and dismayed. Miss Cooper's book has filled in a lot of the blanks for me. We get such poor news coverage here about Africa. I did find it troubling that Miss Cooper spent so much time referring to the President as "monkey", even though it was meant to be a cute take off on a Liberian saying. All in all, though, a terrific and informative book that makes me glad I am reading it.

Book Review: Navigating Helene Cooper's fine art of *Madame President*

Helene Cooper's fascinating new book, *Madame President*, made me think of my friend, the global girl rights advocate Chernor Bah (Ceebah). Chernor recently waged a vigorous campaign calling on the government of Sierra Leone to overturn what he called "an unfair and unsound ban against pregnant girls from attending school. Thousands of girls had

become pregnant during the Ebola crisis that recently devastated Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea and as schools were reopening, the government of Sierra Leone announced that pregnant girls should stay home. Chornor's argument was that, apart from the injustice of banning victims of the Ebola epidemic from school, pregnancy was not a disease and that these girls had the right to remain in school and could still achieve their fullest potentials. He should probably have just bought Madam President for the officials in Sierra Leone- who unfortunately stuck to their position and refused to let pregnant girls attend school. They would have met a certain female, Baby Ellen, nicknamed Red Pumpkin who, at the age of 17, had her first child and by the time she was 24, she had added three more kids. Still, she did not drop out of school. Rather, she had an insatiable appetite for a better education. Unlike those girls who were denied the chance to return and complete their exams during the Ebola epidemic, Madame President reveals Ellen's motivation may have been derived from a prophesy by a man who once visited their Benson Street residence in the Liberian capital, Monrovia and announced that this child (Baby Ellen) would be great. Helene Cooper is Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and a native Liberian who expresses her fascination with Baby Ellen's childhood story. Ms. Cooper situates Madame President within Liberia's historical context particularly of the 80s. It is the story of a determined woman who got married at 17, and like many women in Africa, suffered domestic abuse but battled through the vicissitudes of life to become Africa's first democratically elected female President - the 24th President of the Republic of Liberia. Ms. Cooper took a break from covering Barack Obama's momentous presidency to chronicle what she described as a democratic coup orchestrated by women, many of them uneducated. The author once made Air Force One her thoroughfare, reporting on the activities of US Presidents and Secretaries of State. This time, her focus was on the woman Liberians call the O'Ma. President Johnson-Sirleaf first ascended to power in 2006, after a run-off election against internationally renowned soccer star, George Weah in November 2005. Madame President is the extraordinary journey of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf interwoven into a historical narration of how freed slaves from the Americas were sent back to Africa to be resettled in countries such as Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Liberia. In Sierra Leone, the Nova Scotians were transported from England in 1787 to form the Crown Colony in 1808. The Maroons and the Liberated Africans later followed. In Nigeria, the Saros or Creoles (freed slaves) migrated to that country in the beginning of the 1830s and in Liberia, the first set of freed slaves arrived in 1822. In Madame President, Ms. Cooper documents in detail President Johnson-Sirleaf's childhood adversities: the President defied the odds to secure

higher education on foreign soil, returned to her country only to be jailed, became a refugee following a devastating civil war and finally was elected to the Presidency after defeating a crowded presidential field dominated by men. I witnessed President Johnson-Sirleaf's inauguration on January 16, 2006. Standing in front of a Liberian flag with her left hand on the bible and her now trademark head-tie, the 67-year-old pledged to execute the functions of the office of the president. I also met her on a few occasions, including in 2007 at a dinner she hosted in honor of Ms. Zainab Bangura who had just been appointed Sierra Leone's Foreign Minister. The President was also heavily involved in the UN outreach activities, particularly the A Star is Born singing competition which I helped to organize. At several finals, she would get on stage and sing to the excitement of a jubilant audience. Madame President may not have captured such details of the President's interactions with the public but the book nonetheless portrays her as an astute politician without being overtly effusive in praise. Readers will have to debate and judge whether it is appropriate for the author to provide what appears to be too much information on Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's personal life. For example, she writes that when James "Doc" Sirleaf, her husband became abusive, Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf found comfort in the arms of a Chris Maxwell, a guy she had met at a party. Because the President was married at the time, that story hints at infidelity—an issue that is likely to be considered a recurring theme throughout the book. When Maxwell died, Ellen's own words were read as a Eulogy at the funeral. Madame President portrays Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf as ambitious, who, from an early age, had her sight set on the presidency. She initially supported Charles Taylor's rebellion. Both had met at a restaurant in a Paris Hotel she was staying. Later, she helped to raise funds to prosecute the war against then President Samuel K Doe. She also made a daring visit to Mr. Taylor in the jungle and on BBC, she once said that if the Executive Mansion was to be destroyed during Taylor's threat to invade Monrovia, it will be rebuilt. Many Liberians interpreted that statement as insensitive as well as one of the hallmarks of thirst for political power. Making sometimes very difficult decisions is another recurring theme in Madame President. On several occasions, the President left her children with her mum and other relatives while she travelled abroad to study. She did the same when she resigned her job with the World Bank. She parted ways with her husband having suffered abuse, left her plush jobs in the US to return and contribute to Liberia's development, once acted against the will of her relatives to contest for the Presidency and controversially worked with Samuel Doe who had just overthrown a government in which she was the Minister of Finance and had executed some of her colleagues. She once

refused to take up a Senate seat that she had clearly won. The core message in *Madame President* is that, a lifetime of travails was rewarded with the ultimate prize- the presidency! The author also echoes some of President Johnson-Sirleaf's challenges, including her efforts to get the market women off the streets, which was vigorously resisted. Challenges also include acute lack of jobs for the unemployed youth and having to deal with the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many of which did not flatter her. She has been accused of nepotism and her inability to tackle corruption, among others. Ms. Cooper writes: "Next up on the list of Mesdames' early-and -prevailing problems was corruption, an issue that would bedevil her for years to come." • *Madame President* is engaging and riveting, and the language is accessible. It will likely be a historical resource, providing a window into the extraordinary life of one of Africa's top leaders, and through her, a better appreciation of Liberia's sociopolitical story. Before making any judgment on the life and politics of President Johnson-Sirleaf, it is advisable to read Ms. Cooper's *Madame President*. By Osman Benk Sankoh

About the author: Osman Benk Sankoh is a Public Information Officer with the United Nations. He was previously the Editor of *Concord Times*, one of Sierra Leone's leading national newspapers. Sankoh has reported and written extensively on peace, conflict, politics and social issues in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Stay with Sierra Express Media, for your trusted place in news!

Wow. Two remarkable things about this book: the writing and the story. It takes a gifted and sensitive writer to capture the power and nuance of a life as grand as President Johnson Sirleaf's and Helene Cooper delivers! Moreover, it is impossible to extricate the history of Liberia from the life of President Johnson Sirleaf - so instead of just being a biography, it is in fact a history lesson on Liberia, politics, and the power of women to change the course of a nation. Then there is Madame President's life, it's almost like multiple lives all wrapped up into one wonderful person. Yet, it should be respectfully be noted that the praise of Madame President is due to her remarkable journey and effective leadership over and through some tumultuous times. Having previously read Leymah Gbowee's story, the resilience and strength of Liberian women is encapsulated within her's and Madame President's stories is magnificently inspiring.

This book is also an extraordinary journey for the reader! There were a few quips I remember in the news but I along with I believe most Americans had no clue of the atrocities that took place. The fortitude of all these women was something to behold. We all claim that after Nazism this type of

warfare would never happen again but there the world sat letting it happenD

There are so few great biographies of great women. This one tells her personal and professional stories, and the story of Africa at its worst. Don't understand these news stories of warlords? Read this. Don't understand bravery? Read this. Don't understand the art of governing? Read this. The art of persuasion? Endurance? Joy? Sacrifice? Read this.

Ms. Sirleaf has had an extraordinary life. Her traumas and tragedies could have stopped many women in her tracks, but not her. This is a compelling story of perseverance, vision, determination and faith in one's self and one's country. Helene Cooper is a captivating writer. Seldom are biographies page-turners, but this one is.

This is a devastating read. I lived in Liberia from 1967 to 1973. My memories were such happy ones of kind people who loved my children and Liberian friends I still see today. I do take exception to Cooper's perception of the Tubman presidency. Tubman never built up the Army, had an adequate system of roads, electricity throughout the country and was a very clever politician whose Presidency lasted for 25+ years. He died from complications of a prostate operation. I saw very little evidence of corruption during Tubman's term in office. Reading what these kind people did to each other makes me realize how fragile human relations can be.

This is a wonderful book to read when you're being criticized from all sides and then you read what Ellen Johnson Sirleaf dealt with and you think, 'If she can do it, I can.'" When we people get it that women just may be better able to handle power than men?

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