

HALF A KNIFE

An Amhara Resistance Writer's Reckoning

Baye Teshager Asmamaw

FOR EDUCATORS AND READING GROUPS

Teaching Half a Knife

Course fit, a context note for a class with no prior knowledge, how the book was written, ten discussion questions, a sixty-minute class plan, and everything needed to host a conversation of your own.

An honest reckoning. A wiser strategy.

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The book, in brief

For seven years, Baye Teshager Asmamaw wrote, organised, argued, and broadcast within the Amhara resistance from Ethiopia, Italy, and the United States. The cause he defended was just. The sacrifices were immense, and the movement achieved real gains. Yet its ultimate aims remained unfulfilled, and the Amhara people continued to suffer.

Half a Knife is his documented reckoning with that history. Drawing on memory and a dated archive of posts, essays, letters, and broadcasts, he places what he believed then beside what consequence taught him later. Where memory and the archive disagreed, the archive won.

Part testimony, part reckoning, and part warning, the book asks the question the movement can no longer evade: if the cause was just and the price so high, why did its strategic choices fall short of fulfilling its aims? No side is spared. Least of all the author's own.

The central question for a class

What is the difference between the justice of a cause and the wisdom of the strategy chosen in its name — and who pays for the gap between them?

Where it teaches well

African studies and Horn of Africa politics

Ethnic federalism, the 2016 protests, the wars in Tigray and the Amhara region, and diaspora political organisation, from a participant, with dated sources.

Peace and conflict studies

A case study in escalation and in the foreclosure of political options, and the argument for patient civic action made by someone who left that road and came back to it.

Memoir and life writing

How a writer uses his own archive to correct his memory and resist self-exoneration, and what happens to a narrator who does.

Media, disinformation, and digital politics

Political persuasion on Facebook in a low-connectivity country, the astroturfing economy, and one writer's reckoning with his own reach.

Ethics of testimony

What may be published from a private and political archive, what must be withheld, and who is endangered by the difference.

Book clubs and student associations

Built to hold a sixty to seventy-five minute conversation between readers who do not agree with each other.

The book does not claim neutrality and should not be assigned as a survey text. It is one participant's documented account, written from a stated political position that it also puts on trial. That is what makes it useful: students can test a first-person claim against the record it rests on. It contains descriptions of political killings and their aftermath, including lists of the dead. Nothing is gratuitous, but tell a class in advance.

A context note

Written for a class with no prior knowledge of Ethiopia. The chronology below is the book's own, set out in its note on the armed actors and the law.

The shape of the state

Ethiopia's federal constitution organises the country into regions drawn substantially along ethnic and linguistic lines, an arrangement usually called ethnic federalism. The book's argument turns on what that design does to political identity: it makes ethnicity the unit of political claim-making, so that grievances, protections, and territory are all argued for in ethnic terms. The Amhara are one of the country's largest peoples; the book is about how a political consciousness formed among them, what it demanded, and what it cost.

A chronology students can hold

2016	Protests spread across the Amhara region, with the town of Gondar and the question of Wolkait at their centre. The internet is cut. This is the uprising the book watches from Italy, and the point at which its author's writing turns.
2018	A change of federal government raises expectations of reform that the following years do not meet.
June 2019	Assassinations in Bahir Dar, the Amhara regional capital, and the disinformation that surrounds them. Chapter 11 is the book's longest and hardest chapter, and it is about this.
November 2020	War begins in northern Ethiopia. On the night of 9 November, seasonal workers are massacred at Mai-Kadra. Chapter 14 is about that night and about the contest to name what happened.
May 2021	The House of Peoples' Representatives designates the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the formation the federal government calls OLF-Shene as terrorist organisations.

2021	Advances into North Gondar; the town of Debark defends itself. Chapter 15 is about the relief effort organised there, and stands as the book's constructive counterpoint.
November 2022	A cessation-of-hostilities agreement is signed at Pretoria.
March 2023	The designation of the TPLF is revoked. The designation of OLF-Shene is not.
April 2023	The federal government orders the dissolution of all regional special forces, the Amhara Regional Special Force among them. Many members do not comply, and the war Chapter 17 describes follows.
August 2023 – June 2024	A state of emergency is in force in the Amhara region.

Terms worth defining before the first seminar

Amhara	One of Ethiopia's largest peoples, and the name of the region in the country's north-west. The book's author writes as an Ethiopian Amhara.
Fano	Not a single organisation but a name carried by many local formations. The book is careful about this, and a class should be too.
Wolkait	A contested area, and the slogan-anchor of the 2016 protests. The book uses the name as its participants used it.
Diaspora politics	The political work done from outside the country — fundraising, advocacy, broadcasting — and the distortions distance introduces. Roughly half the book takes place in Washington.
Neakutoleab	The author's pen name, given to him in the autumn of 2016 and laid down in June 2023. The name itself means, roughly, let us give thanks to the Father; it was given to him with a charge folded inside it — let it be proclaimed.

How the book was written

The method is the part of this book most useful to a classroom, and it can be taught on its own. The author kept, and did not curate, a long public record: 3,471 dated Facebook posts written between 2009 and 2025, alongside magazine essays, an op-ed, letters, broadcast segments, and screenshots, carried across Ethiopia, Italy, and the United States.

The working rule is that where memory and the archive disagreed, the archive won. Several of the book's own corrections began exactly there, and it prints them rather than smoothing them away.

Three corrections the archive forced

1. He remembered a January 2015 post as a reaction to that year's hundred-per-cent parliamentary sweep. The timestamp shows he wrote it four months before the vote. It was a prediction, not a response — and it was signed with his own name, before the pen name existed.
2. On the first anniversary of the August 2016 killings he published cards carrying the names of the dead that had reached him: seventy-three in all, one recorded only as somebody's brother. Two men he writes about by name are on neither card. The book keeps the gap rather than filling it.
3. He had placed his public turn against the rhetorical violence he helped normalise a year earlier than it happened. The dated archive moved it later — which means he went on writing in the old register for longer than he remembered. The book uses the later date.

Limits the author worked under

- Archive material is reproduced only where he owns it, has already made it public, or has cleared it.
- Private contact details, third-party messages, and anything that could expose or endanger another person are withheld.
- Where a person acted in public, in a public office, he is named. Where naming someone would wound a person who cannot answer, or dress a suspicion up as a fact, the name is held back — and the book says that it is being held back, and why.
- Where the record is thin or absent, the book says so rather than filling the gap from memory.

An exercise that works: give students one passage of recollection and the dated record it rests on, and ask what the record supports, what it does not, and what a reader is being asked to take on trust. It transfers to any memoir, and to any archive.

Ten discussion questions

They move from comprehension to analysis to evaluation. Any three will fill an hour.

1. What is the difference between the justice of a cause and the effectiveness of a strategy?
2. How does the author's archive constrain, challenge, or strengthen his memory?
3. When does testimony become confession, and what does confession require that testimony does not?
4. Can a writer acknowledge personal responsibility without falsely assuming responsibility for everything that happened?
5. What does exile change about political judgement, obligation, and helplessness?
6. Why does the author argue that writing only in Amharic creates a chamber? What is gained and lost by

writing in English?

7. How should a reader evaluate an account that explicitly refuses to flatter any side?
8. What are the ethical limits of publishing private or archived political material?
9. What makes peaceful civic action unglamorous, and why might that make it harder to sustain?
10. What would a truer map for the next generation need to contain?

Assignment options

- Evidence memo, 1,000 words. Take one claim from the book and assess what the cited record does and does not establish.
- Counter-reading, 1,500 words. Write the strongest good-faith case against the book's central argument, using the book's own evidence.
- Archive exercise. Students select ten dated items from their own public record and write what the record contradicts in their memory of the same period.
- Comparative essay. Place the book beside one other first-person account of a political movement and compare how each handles the author's own errors.

A sixty-minute class plan

1. Pre-reading

The preface and one chapter of your choosing. Students arrive with one sentence they resisted.

2. Opening prompt · 5 minutes

Name a cause you believe is just. Now name the strategy being used for it. Are they the same claim?

3. Small groups · 15 minutes

Three of the discussion questions, one per group.

4. Evidence exercise · 20 minutes

Put a passage of the author's recollection beside the dated record it rests on. What does the record support? What does it not?

5. Plenary · 15 minutes

Groups report. The class tries to state the book's argument in one sentence, then tries to state the strongest case against it.

6. Closing reflection · 5 minutes

One sentence each: what would you refuse to inherit?

Host a conversation

Everything below is free to adapt for a campus event, a reading group, or a library evening. It is built for a conversation, not a rally.

An event description you can paste

A moderated conversation on Half a Knife: An Amhara Resistance Writer's Reckoning, a documented political memoir from inside the Amhara resistance. The book asks why a just cause, immense sacrifice, and real gains still left a movement's aims unfulfilled. Serious disagreement is welcome. Attending signals nothing about anyone's politics.

Five questions for a moderator

1. What did the movement understand correctly that it still failed to act on effectively?
2. Which belief changed most when the archive was placed beside memory?
3. How do you defend a people's right to life without treating every strategy used in its defence as wise?
4. What did distance and exile make clearer, and what did they distort?
5. What should a twenty-five-year-old do differently after reading this?

Ground rules worth reading out

- Substantive disagreement is welcome and gets airtime.
- Personal attacks, ethnic slurs, and side-arguments are cut off.
- No chants, no calls to action, no fundraising.
- If the session is recorded, say so before it starts, and let people attend without a camera or a name.

A technical checklist

- A moderator who is not a political ally of the author, briefed a week ahead.
- Questions collected in advance as well as live; someone reading the chat.
- Seventy-five minutes, of which fifteen belong to the audience.
- One person watching for conduct, empowered to mute.
- A recording plan, and a decision about where it will be published, made in advance.

Copies, visits, and contact

Review and desk copies

Considering the book for a course? Write to educators@halfaknife.com with your name, institution, and the course. Requests are handled individually.

Libraries

A request sheet with ISBNs, formats, catalogue summary, subject headings, and ordering information is at halfaknife.com/educators.

An author conversation

Online or, where practical, in person: a class visit, a campus conversation, or a book-club call. Moderated, with real questions. Write to educators@halfaknife.com.

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