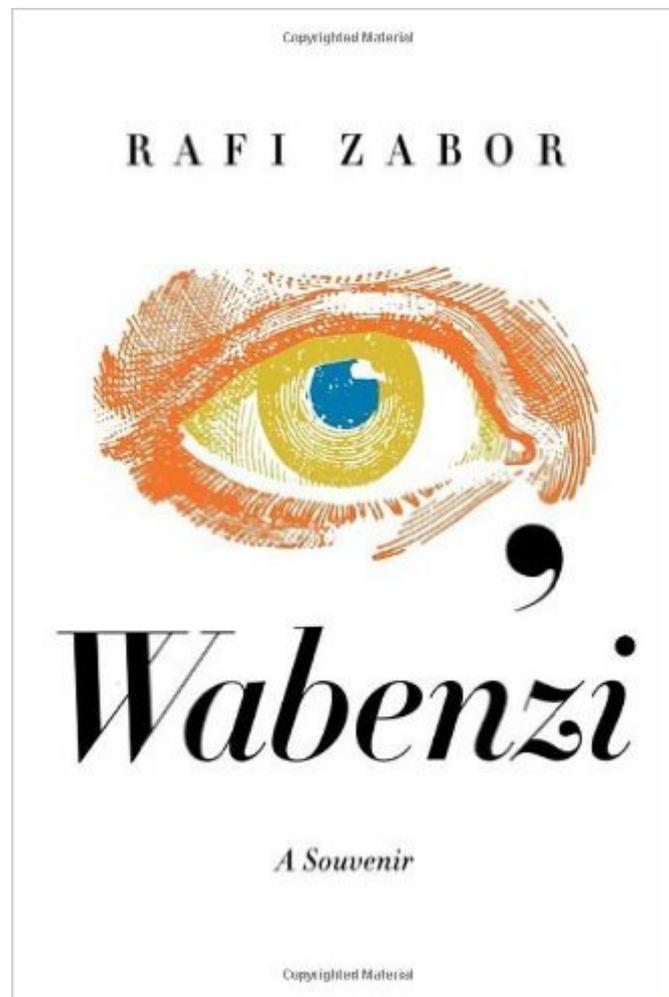


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# I, Wabenzi



## Synopsis

Some time ago Rafi Zabor sat down to write a brief narrative of the year 1986. That was the year he set out across two continents in a used Mercedes--"Wabenzi" is the Swahili word for a member of the Mercedes-owning class--to buy a grave stone for his friend Mahmoud Rauf and to outrun the shadow of his own parents' recent death. But like a boat against the current, the writer was drawn back into the past: his father's escape from the Nazis, Rafi's own Brooklyn boyhood surrounded by the fractious, Zabors and Zaborovskys, and the anguished--sometimes farcical--spiritual journey that led Zabor from Brooklyn to Turkey by way of Coltrane, the thirteenth-century mystic Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, the McGovern campaign, Gurdjieff, a shoe salesman named Gogol, and the cataclysmic months Zabor spent studying (and whirling) amid a band of Sufis in rural England. The result--the first of a projected four volumes--is one of the most original, capacious, and vivid narratives of the last few decades, a real-life Bildungsroman dealing with an expanded range of human experience, from matters of life and death to a piece of what lies beyond them. Straight from the uncharted territory between Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance and Tristram Shandy, *Wabenzi* lifts a corner of the known world as if it were the edge of a curtain, and begins to show a reality new to our literature gleaming on the other side.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 472 pages

Publisher: Farrar Straus & Giroux; 1st edition (October 12, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0865475830

ISBN-13: 978-0865475830

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.5 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #847,638 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #243 in [Books > Arts &](#)

[Photography > Music > Biographies > Jazz](#) #4866 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts &](#)

[Literature > Authors](#) #22015 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Memoirs](#)

## Customer Reviews

Intelligent and well written, *Wabenzi: A Souvenir* reveals the life of the author, Rafi Zabor, to readers. Zabor's words tell of incidents in his life- happenings - that affected him. The death of his parents, the memory of his, " . . . ghostly grandmother - with her salty fingers, claw-like hands,

sallow hollow cheeks, loose false teeth, . . ." The meeting of a girl friend's older brother who was named Jack Shema, but became to be known as Hakki Bey, the boy who was brilliant, artistic, self destructive and beat his sister from time-to-time. He tells of Sharon, the sister whom he took to Tokyo for an abortion. Zabor tells his experiences and memories lyrically and honestly. Many passages are compelling. Some of the writing is long winded, however, and my interest waned. but something always pulled me back into the story. Zabor shows readers the world as he sees it competently and interestingly. He admits that he does not clearly understand everything that happens in his life and this confession allows readers to identify with him. How many of us understand our lives? Through detailed and sensitive writing *Wabenzi: A Souvenir* allows readers to get inside his mind to see what he sees, feel what he feels and he lets readers contemplate his regrets along with him. Zabor is a jazz drummer and that's how he writes - with improvisation and a forceful rhythm. I enjoyed Zabor's writing most when he talked about his passion - music. That's where the best writing comes from, passion. Reading *Wabenzi: A Souvenir* will take some work. It is not an easy read, but it is worthwhile.

From the dust jacket, we learn that Rafi's autobiographical "Memoir" is planned to stretch to four volumes. Indeed, this volume gets him only as far as England in his planned trip to Turkey, and he never acquires the Mercedes Benz which inspires the book's title. But as with much travel, the enjoyment is in the sights and sounds while getting there. Rafi's at times dizzying prose has matured since his Pen Faulkner Award-winning "The Bear Comes Home," and I frequently found myself startled at the power of an image limned in a few deft words. At the same time, his emotional honesty is shocking and at times painful. The heart of the book is in two sustained flashbacks--one concerning his Jewish family, a tragicomic portrayal with depth and compassion, and the second concerning his participation in a Sufi spiritual community in rural England. Having some experience with this latter, I am startled by its accuracy, showing both flawed humans with good will and foibles and an environment that invites profound, life-changing experiences. Each part is a masterpiece, and I for one eagerly await the remaining volumes.

I thoroughly enjoyed Rafi's new book. I've loved Rafi's writing since reading some of his stuff in *Musician* in the 1970's, and I found it fascinating to learn more about his life. This book takes many interesting twists and turns, and I eagerly await the remaining volumes.

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