

FILM REVIEW

Edití Effiong, dir. *The Black Book*. 2023. 2 hours 4 minutes. English/Pidgin. Lagos Kaduna Nigeria Anakle Films. Streaming on Netflix. No price reported.


Edití Effiong is a burgeoning Nollywood director whose debut short, *Fishbone*—exploring drug counterfeiting and social injustice—established his interest in social issues. A graduate of environmental science turned tech guru, he adopts film and music as a vehicle for societal commentary. Effiong has been part of other creative teams which produced major Nigerian films such as *Up North* and *The Set Up*. His debut feature, *The Black Book*, is a movie about knock-off drugs and powerful corporations in cahoots with top government officials. In it, Edití Effiong creatively signifies hope as a crucible within reach of suppliants praying for justice. The film meticulously portrays Nigeria's reality, enlisting talented Nollywood artists like Richard Mofe-Damijo, Bimbo Akintola, Alex Usifo, Sam Dede, and others to bring this narrative to life.

The Black Book offers a profound exploration of contemporary issues prevalent in Nigeria, delving into issues of corruption, betrayal, power dynamics, jungle justice, and the influence of clandestine “cabals.” Kidnapping, once associated with small time ritual practitioners, is conceptualized in the movie as a vice that has morphed into a high-class syndicated enterprise managed by “cabals” and high-ranking government officials, who mine its economic depths to secure political positions. The narrative unfolds in Lagos and Kaduna, two of Nigeria's major commercial hubs. The abduction of Dotun—spouse to Professor Stella Craig of the Nigeria Energy & Oil Company—and their little child by the clandestine group, SAKS, initiates a sequence of events. Professor Craig's investigation into oil blocs managed by a cover of a corrupt cartel spearheaded by General Issa, culminates in the abduction of her family. Despite her voluntary resignation as a last resort to save her loved ones, the tragic fate of the Craig family is sealed.

The recurrent shootout between Nigerian law enforcement and kidnappers has come to form part of the bullet-riddled narrative of Nigeria's socio-economic existence. Tragically, this scenario has framed an environment where innocent characters like Damilola Edima, a young advertising strategy executive, have fallen victim to tragic circumstances based on their stereotyping found to fit that of perceived criminals. This cautionary tale mirrors the plight of many Nigerians such as the real-life example of Solomon Bawa, a farmer and truck driver who recently sought justice through a call-in program on Nigerian Human Rights Radio and Television, Bereketé (Ugwu Chinagorom, *Premium Times*, November 2023, n.p.). Bawa had suffered arrest, brutality, and wrongful imprisonment for four years while prison officials released the actual criminal after they were paid

off. Damilola's father, Paul Edima, a deacon and disavowed hitman, embarks on a quest for justice and retribution for his deceased child, unveiling past criminal activities orchestrated by cartels and high-ranking government officials. His sole strategy to obtain justice revolves around the acquisition of a black book containing damning evidence that could in a fell swoop expose the nefarious operations of the cartel. "The black book" represents Paul Edima's documentation of all the criminal activities he was involved in at the behest of the cartel leader General Issa, and exposes Issa's covert drug deals. Paul Edima had surrendered this record when he decided to withdraw from the cartel rather than hurt the little daughter of a journalist he was ordered to murder. Victoria grows to become a dedicated journalist like her late mother, persistently seeks evidence, despite always facing rejection from her editor-in-chief, who ironically warns her against the perils of genuine journalism, alluding to her mother's untimely demise in pursuit for truth.

Notably, the film portrays women in multifaceted roles challenging stereotypical portrayals. The character, "Big Daddy," widow of the late Richard's former hit man, defies traditional notions of female passivity, emerging as an assertive rounded character. However, the film takes a surprising turn as the vault containing the black book eludes General Issa and his men, in a craftily managed scheme by the women. The film ends with Paul Edima burying his son, an inevitable end he has long fought against. Released directly to Netflix, *The Black Book* became a runaway hit on Netflix and topped global charts with 5.6 million viewers in its first two days of release (Asadu Chinedu, "New Netflix Thriller Tackling Theme of Justice in Nigeria," [Ksat.com](https://www.ksat.com), October 22, 2023, n.p.).

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