

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood

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In *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, Alexandra Fuller remembers her African childhood with candor and sensitivity. Though it is a diary of an unruly life in an often inhospitable place, it is suffused with Fuller's endearing ability to find laughter, even when there is little to celebrate. Fuller's debut is unsentimental and unflinching but always captivating. In wry and sometimes hilarious prose, she stares down disaster and looks back with rage and love at the life of an extraordinary family in an extraordinary time.

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood Details


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Alexandra Fuller**

From Reader Review Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood for online ebook

Vicki Willis says

I enjoyed reading this book. It was the true story of a white girl growing up in Africa during the 70's and 80's. The description of Africa was very vivid and sensory. I could really feel what it was like. The book focused on her family and where they went and what they did. I especially liked the section about going to boarding school. The book however, wasn't so gripping for me that I couldn't put it down, like it was for others. I did also enjoy the ending and knowing where she ended up as an adult. A solid read I would recommend to people who enjoy memoirs and autobiographies.

Lyn Elliott says

Fuller's memoir has given me insight into the world of white colonialists in eastern Africa in a way that none of my previous reading has done. She has resisted the temptation to consciously discuss the racism that imbued every aspect of the world she grew up in. Instead, in writing the stories of her childhood and adolescence, she offers glimpses into that world, as she saw it herself at the time.

How does a child respond to the death of babies, living in violent war zones, a manic depressive mother? In this family, there was no falling down.

It took me a while to work out the title - I initially thought it must refer to somebody having a gambling problem and greyhound racing. But 'going to the dogs' also implies falling into a dissolute life of hard drinking and bad company. You could read the title as a plea.

Fuller's voice is clear, distinctive and memorable.

Blixen and Fuller would make an interesting comparative study, with Waugh's *Black Mischief* for good measure.

A book club read.

Judith E says

Alexandra (Bobo) and her sister, Vanessa, are some kick ass tough kids. Raised by their parents on farms in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi during the 1970's, they are white Africans, exposed to deeply ingrained racism from birth. They have free reign among scorpions, snakes, leopards, and baboons and they live in the middle of the Rhodesian war. The girls learn to load and shoot guns to protect themselves from terrorists in this long civil war. Mixed in with these geographical hardships is their family's struggle and acceptance of the loss of three other siblings (how could the reader not forgive Mum's love of gin and tonic?). An honest, humorous and endearing look at an unconventional upbringing in Africa.

Well written. The author did an excellent job of plucking out the most memorable moments to produce a flowing narrative. Recommended. 4.5 stars.

Sara Diane says

I read this book (well, most of it, I admit, I didn't finish and didn't want to) while in training as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Namibia, Africa. I found the writing to be disjointed and the colonial attitudes to be far too accurate. I might have liked it better before going to Africa, before seeing first-hand what various colonizing governments did to people, but maybe not. I might have liked it better if she told her memories in order, rather than jumping around so I had some clue as to where and when she was. When I left Africa, I left the book behind for someone else to read (reading material is in short supply for PCV's) and didn't mind a lick that I hadn't finished it.

Jessaka says

Her writing is beautiful, descriptive. You can smell and taste Africa; sometimes you can even smell and taste blood and liquor.

I would have never have dreamed of reading a book about Africa; the country just never appealed to me. But my friend, who is a teacher, and who lives part time in Africa teaching English at a school she had started, recommended it. It is a true story of a white girl growing up in Africa during the civil war, and it smacks of colonialism and racism, both of which I dislike. So I decided to give it a try, and I am glad that I did.

It begins in Rhodesia in 1976. Alexandra's parents go to bed at night with guns near their bed, the fear of terrorists is great. The girls take a flashlight to the loo in the night and have fears of snakes, scorpions, baboon spiders, and anything else that may be lurking.

Then when they rush back to their bed they take a flying leap from the floor onto the bed because of the fear that a terrorist might be hiding under the bed and just might grab their legs. In my childhood, when I got up in the middle of the night, I would run through the kitchen turning on the lights on the way to the bathroom, and when I returned to my room I would also take a flying leap onto my bed. My fears were not of terrorists but of the bogymen. I knew the bogymen wasn't real, but they knew the terrorist was.

The book was hard to enjoy at times since my mind was often on the children, and I kept questioning the parent's reason for bringing them to Africa during such a turbulent time. Then my mind would wander to America, and how parents took their kids across it in covered wagons, and how dangerous that was because sometimes entire families were killed or died from starvation or other causes. I justified Alexandra's parents in this way.

Alexandra's mother was an alcoholic, and in time she lost her mind slowly as she lost one child after another. The girls, even at a young age, lived in fear for their lives. It seemed that they were too young to even have to be thinking about death. But they all saw death in many different ways, some deaths being too horrible to have been inscribed into their minds. The slashing of bodies is not a pretty sight.

How much can a parent really protect their children? Life on this planet is never without dangers; some people are just more lucky than others to live a life where they have few fears. I look back on my life and realize that there were many times that I could have been killed by something I had done when I was young and wandering the countryside by myself. Life can be so horrible that it is no wonder that many dream of heaven, but Alexandra still dreams of Africa.

Juliefrick says

This is one of my top-ten favorite books of all time. An extremely compelling memoir, well-written, poignant but not maudlin or precious. I've read it twice and feel another reread coming on.

The brutal honesty in this story is startling, and Fuller does not set out to insert political or social critique into her story. This is probably unsettling for readers who come face-to-face with her family's colonialist attitudes and expect to hear her criticize and critique them. However, I prefer that Fuller let the story stand on its own. The book doesn't set out to dissect "Issues," but rather to tell one particular- and it is a particularly heartbreaking, frightening, disturbing, visceral, and funny one- story.

Brendan Detzner says

I read an article by a book reviewer a little while ago in which they talked about how sick they were of "growing up in fill-in-the-blank" books and wished people would be more original. I think that's incredibly misguided. Growing up isn't a cliché, it's just something that happens a lot that's important. So people are going to write about it, and good for them.

They don't usually write about it this well though. This is one of those books that tops out on many different levels at the same time- the language is beautiful, the dialogue is great, the people come alive for you, it's hilarious, it's sad, it's beautiful, and it deals with the subject of entrenched racism incredibly well, by simply telling the truth about how people were and what people did, without ever stretching to make a political point. It's fantastic, and I'd recommend it to anybody.

Lisa says

A well-written memoir that was fascinating if only because the author is exactly my age, born the year I was born, and lived a life so very different from my own. As she described each stage of her upbringing, I found myself thinking about what I had been doing at that same age and marveling that the two of us could possibly have occupied the same world at the same time. I envy her when I should probably not -- her life has clearly not been easy, but it has been rich with experiences. The other reason I really enjoyed this book was the sometimes startlingly candid and dispassionate voice of the narration. There's a lot of beauty in this prose...even the most terrible parts of her story are beautifully rendered. Her style shows a restraint that I fully appreciate (others may find it disquieting). She unflinchingly describes her life and does not apologize for it nor cheapen it by gaudily harping on lessons she has learned. She gives the reader credit for being able to figure it out. Sometimes quite funny. Often very sad. In the end, uplifting and powerful.

Good stuff.

Cecily says

The memoirs of the childhood of a white girl (Alexandra, known as Bobo), raised on African farms in the 1970s and 1980s, along with her sister, Van(essa). But it's not a gilded, ex-pat life: her parents lose their farm in forced land distribution, after which they are itinerant farm managers, who move where the work is, often to disease-ridden and war-torn areas. They also have their own problems with bereavement and alcohol. It is perhaps closer to misery lit, although the tone is mostly light, and the worst episodes glossed over.

It is told in a chatty and slightly childish and rambling style (she is a child for most of the book), mostly in the present tense. This means the precise sequence of events is not always clear, but overall, it is an endearing insight into some troubled lives and times. It does rather fizzle out at the end, though.

QUOTIDIAN DANGER

The opening is a startling demonstration of how mundane life-threatening danger can become. "Mum says, 'Don't come creeping into our room at night.' They sleep with loaded guns beside them... 'Why not?' 'We might shoot you.'" Not very reassuring to a small child who might want a parent at night. By the age of 5, all children are taught to handle a gun and shoot to kill. There are many more examples throughout the book. For instance, the parents buy a mine-proofed Land Rover with a siren "to scare terrorists", but actually its only use is "to announce their arrival at parties". At the airport, "officials wave their guns at me, casually hostile".

IDENTITY AND NOT BELONGING

The Fullers are white and apparently upper middle class, but heavily in debt (though they manage to pay school fees). Mum says "We have breeding... which is better than having money", and they're pretty bad at managing what little money they do have. Often, they live in homes that are really dilapidated and lacking basic facilities.

Bobo feels neither African (where she spends most of her childhood) nor British (where she was born). At a mixed race primary school, she is teased for being sunburnt and asked "Where are you from *originally*?" and when at a white school that then admits African children, learns what it is like to be excluded by language (they talk Shona to each other). She is also very aware of her family's thick lips, contrasting with their pale skin and blonde hair.

RACE

One aspect that some have objected to is the attitude and language relating to the Africans. However, as I read it, Fuller is merely describing how things really were: casual, and sometimes benevolent racism were the norm.

As a small child, she resists punishment by saying "Then I'll fire you", which is awful, but reflects a degree of truth, and similarly, her disgust at using a cup that might have been used by an African is a learned reaction. However, as she grows older and more questioning, it's clear she is no racist.

It would be very sad if fear of offence made it impossible to describe the past honestly, though the list of terms by which white Rhodesians referred to black ones might be unnecessary.

I suppose you could argue she should have done more to challenge the views around her, such as when Mum is bemoaning the fact that she wants just one country in Africa to stay white-run, but she was only a child at this point.

In her parents' defence, they treated their African staff pretty well, including providing free first aid help, despite the fact they were so short of money they had to pawn Mum's jewellery to buy seed each year, then claim it back if the harvest was good. "When our tobacco sells well, we are rich for a day." Only a day.

What to make of an observation like this? "Africans whose hatred reflects the sun like a mirror into our faces, impossible to ignore."

There is a beautifully written passage describing driving through a European settlement and then Tribal Trust Lands: "there are flowering shrubs and trees... planted at picturesque intervals. The verges of the road have been mown to reveal neat, upright barbed-wire fencing and fields of army-straight tobacco... or placidly grazing cattle shiny and plump with sweet pasture. In contrast, the tribal lands "are blown clear of vegetation. Spiky euphorbia hedges which bleed poisonous, burning milk when their stems are broken poke greenly out of otherwise barren, worn soil. The schools wear the blank faces of war buildings, their windows blown blind by rocks or guns or mortars. Their plaster is an acne of bullet marks. The huts and small houses crouch open and vulnerable... Children and chickens and dogs scratch in the red, raw soil and stare at us as we drive thought their open, eroding lives." Those are not the words of a racist.

DEPRESSION, TRAUMA, ALCOHOLISM

There are some very dark episodes (including deaths), and at one point, even the dogs are depressed, and yet the book itself is not depressing. For instance, the four stages of Mum's drunken behaviour in front of visitors is treated humourously.

More troublingly, a victim of a sexual assault is just told not to exaggerate, and the whole thing brushed away. There is equally casual acceptance of the children smoking and drinking from a young age.

There is fun, but also a lack of overt love, particularly touching (the many dogs are far luckier in this respect!); aged only 7, Bobo notes "Mum hardly even lets me hold her hand". That is a legacy of multiple hurt and grief - and the consequent problems.

Then there is a life-changing tragedy, for which Bobo feels responsible: "My life is sliced in half". Afterwards, "Mum and Dad's joyful careless embrace of life is sucked away, like water swirling down a drain."

A later tragedy has more severe consequences, and these passages are described more painfully:

* "In the morning, when she's just on the pills, she's very sleepy and calm and slow and deliberate, like someone who isn't sure where her body ends and the world starts."

* "When Mum is drugged and sad and singing... it is a contained, soggy madness" but then "it starts to get hard for me to know where Mum's madness ends and the world's madness begins."

* "She hardly bothers to blink, it's as if she's a fish in the dry season, in the dried-up bottom of a cracking river bed, waiting for rain to come and bring her to life."

* "Mum smiles, but... it's a slipping and damp thing she's doing with her lips which looks as much as if she's lost control of her mouth as anything else."

* "Her sentences and thoughts are interrupted by the cries of her dead babies."

* "To leave a child in an unmarked grave is asking for trouble."

* She is grieving "with her mind (which is unhinged) and her body (which is alarming and leaking)".

OTHER QUOTATIONS

* A new home "held a green-leafy lie of prosperity in its jewelled fist".

* When they stop a journey at a fancy hotels, the opulence is unfamiliar: "the chairs were swallowingly soft".

* "The first rains... were still deciding what sort of season to create."

* "It is so hot outside that the flamboyant tree outside cracks to itself, as if already anticipating how it will feel to be on fire... swollen clouds scrape purple fat bellies on the tops of the surrounding hills."

* Captured wild cattle give "reluctant milk" and even after adding Milo milkshake powder, "nothing can disguise the taste of the reluctant milk".

* A German aid worker "is keen on saving the environment, which, until then, I had not noticed needed saving".

* The ex-pat lives were typically "extra-marital, almost-incestuous affairs bred from heat and boredom and drink." When they go to England for good, they remember Africa with "a fondness born of distance and the tangy reminder of a gin-and-tonic evening".

Leah Polcar says

4.75

What makes *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* an outstanding memoir was Fuller's interesting choice to tell the story of growing up as an "expat-like-us" in Africa from a child's POV and the fact she did not tie herself to recounting her childhood in a linear manner. The latter was effective since Fuller doesn't get bogged down in the day-to-day mendacity that is life and she can focus on events and stories that give a full picture to growing up (white) in Africa. Her choice to use a child's POV is incredibly clever since it allows her to touch on issues like racism, post-colonialism, and dysfunctional family dynamics without needing to present apologies, excuses, or really any editorializing and that let's her experience shine through.

What makes *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* an outstanding book is Fuller's feel for language. Her feel for dialogue (naturally reconstructed, but incredibly realistic) is outstanding and her rendering of a child's understanding of language is superb. She is also a hell of a writer.

My only complaint was the ending -- it was far too abrupt. We suddenly jump ahead to her wedding, which wouldn't be horrible, except that suddenly 10 years (or something) have passed since the last event she recounts and since none of the memoir is written from an adult perspective, this relatively short portion is jarring.

Melki says

The first few lines are gripping, to say the least.

Mom says, "Don't come creeping into our room at night."

They sleep with loaded guns beside them on the bedside rugs.

She says, "Don't startle us when we're sleeping."

"Why not?"

"We might shoot you."

"Oh."

Just a taste of what life was like for young Alexandra "Bobo" Fuller.

Living in a house with no electricity, Fuller recounted how she and her sister employed the "buddy system" to use the bathroom at night. One girl used the toilet while the other held a candle high to check for "snakes and scorpions and baboon spiders."

"I have my feet off the floor when I pee."

Um...baboon spiders? Eek!

In 1974, when many white residents were fleeing Africa, Fuller's parents bought a farm smack dab in the middle of twin civil wars in Rhodesia and Mozambique. They erected a huge fence, topped by barbed wire, and adopted a pack of dogs. They drove around in mine-proofed Land Rovers. Mama was packin' an Uzi.

Fuller's Mum is really the star of this show. Alcoholic and racist, she bemoaned, *"Look, we fought to keep ONE country in Africa white-run..."* Her attitudes seem shocking today, but were sadly shared by many at the time. She had an abiding respect for Africa, but not its people.

This is a gritty, "warts and all" memoir. Fuller's early years were anything but dull. But be warned... if tales of irresponsible parenting and child endangerment drive you up a wall...you should probably stay FAR away from THIS book.

Nina says

"I am African by accident, not by birth. So while soul, heart, and the bent of my mind are African, my skin blaringly begs to differ and is resolutely white. And while I insist on my Africanness (if such a singular thing can exist on such a vast and varied continent), I am forced to acknowledge that almost half my life in Africa was realized in a bubble of Anglocentricity, as if black Africans had not culture worth noticing and as if they did not exist except as servants and (more dangerously) as terrorists."

I picked up this book several years ago with the hope that it might help me make sense of my own relationship to Africa – the strong but confusing bonds that arise from childhood immersion and are easily discounted among adults but can never quite be brushed aside. At first, it seemed that the entire book and the author herself would have laughed mockingly at that quaint desire for commonality. Alexandra Fuller's African childhood was *much* more eventful and harrowing than my own: growing up a desperately poor farmer's daughter in the epicenter of the Rhodesian war for independence, with Uzis a more common accessory than handbags, and a dysfunctional, alcoholic, supremacist, emotionally remote family, before bouncing around ex-British colonial East Africa as tenant farm managers. I don't enjoy immersing myself amid characters that are depressed, lost, or unmoored, so there were a couple of points where I might have abandoned the book had it not been for the funny, personable dialogue of the children trying to make sense of their conditions and the emotions of the adults.

But then I realized that the book is a love letter. By opting not to romanticize her family life, Fuller allowed

her Mum, Dad, and older sister to shine as “hard-living, glamorous, intemperate, intelligent, racist, ... taciturn, capable, [and] self-reliant.” Their frequent moves and their physical and racial isolation force the family to learn to accommodate each other’s flaws/quirks, and they become very tight-knit because of (not in spite of) their individual eccentricities. They love each other not because they as individuals are sympathetic, but because together they survived both Africa and a tumultuous family life. Had Fuller chosen to whitewash or idealize her family life, she would have deprived them of this shared experience and been left with a cardboard cutout of the real thing.

It’s also a love letter to the land, using words far more poignant and evocative than those that Margaret Mitchell puts in Scarlett O’Hara’s mouth. Given the surface-level dissonance of a white family claiming an African identity, Fuller works hard to demonstrate how their roots, their loyalty, even their identities are all inexorably bound to the earth. Her descriptions of sounds, smells, and miscellaneous details were truer than true and made me ache with memory. The rainy season that brought with it gray solid sheets of water which rendered roads as thick and sticky as porridge. Weekend holidays on the shores of Lake Malawi running wild with expats-like-us while burning to a crisp. The mosquito coils, the baobab trees, the explosion of day birds, the greasy fish stews over rice, the smells of black tea, cut tobacco, fresh fire, old sweat, young grass. Hauntingly evocative.

In her epilogue (well, the “Reader’s Guide” published at the end of the Random House edition), Fuller recounts how she repeatedly tried to write a fictionalized version of her childhood, failing in part because her adult values demanded that she “write into full life the voices of the black men, women, and children who had been silenced by years of oppression,” even though her childhood had included no such voices. In the end, she opted to write her life exactly as it had been, racist elements and all, and included a suggested reading list at the end for the “powerful, beautiful, often sly and funny literature of black Africa.” Though criticized by some other reviewers, this choice to consciously stare everyday white supremacy straight in the face, instead of caricaturizing it or demonizing it, strikes me both as brave and as an important contribution to post-colonial storytelling.

Badly Drawn Girl says

As an avid reader, it often surprises people when they learn that I rarely re-read books. I know that a lot of people find great enjoyment from repeat readings, discovering new layers to the story and gaining a better understanding of the book. I look at it a bit differently. There are so many wonderful books out there and I’ll never be able to read them all. Usually when I choose to re-read a book I feel like I’m wasting time that could be devoted to reading a new book.

My reason for sharing this is simple... I have read *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* not just once, not just twice, but three times! There is no stronger endorsement I personally can give. Alexander Fuller takes risks with her writing and grammar. I found myself marveling at her bravery. It's always risky to deviate from standard writing format. Some people can be put off immediately, but I found it charming.

The ingredients necessary for a great memoir are all present. The reader is transported back in time. I felt as if I were in Africa, experiencing Alexander's life for myself. She doesn't shy away from showing her family for who they are, warts and all. The book cycles from heartbreaking episodes to moments of crystal clear beauty and life affirming incidents. It's a very sensual book, her sharp prose conjuring up the sights and

smells of the African countryside so vividly that I actually missed it when the book was over. Hence the duplicate readings. I wanted to go back, even though I knew I'd have to experience the heartbreak again, because it was a place I wanted to visit one more time.

Debbie "DJ" says

What a fantastic read! Alexandra Fuller took me on an amazing journey through her younger years growing up in Africa as a poor white girl. Her parents are expats from Britain who moved in the late 60's to work as farm managers. This memoir details her life from that time right up to the late 90's, a time period when Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was at war fighting for independence from Britain. I found it fascinating to not only read of the hellish conditions, but also how this young girl named Bobo, deals with so many challenges. She brought me right into her world, one more concerned with family, and her daily life. Only a child can see the humor in situations that would scare the crap out of me. So this was not a somber read at all. As a kid, you have no idea your parents are racist, so it can be uncomfortable to read of this families ideas of blacks, but also deeply informing.

Truly, this memoir has it all, a family on the wrong side of history, a mothers mental health issues, constant loss, death, relocating, and a vivid picture of the land. The descriptions of the land were so dynamic and realistic I will never forget them. I became a part of this book, such a rare feeling!

Anna says

An autobiography about growing up in colonial Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe). Two things made me curious about this book: it's from the perspective of the child of colonialists, and the events are fairly recent as it takes place in the 1970's-1990's.

The voice is that of a relatively innocent young girl (as innocent as you can be in midst of war and dire economic circumstances) and she's allowed to tell her childhood as she saw it, good and bad.

I've had fairly mixed feelings about this book: I would like to know how she as an adult views her racist parents, who despite poverty and alcoholism still viewed themselves as superior purely based on their race, eg that it was natural and proper for them to have servants.

When did she come to realize that the rest of the world doesn't necessarily share that view? Did it ever occur to her while growing up?

On the other hand, I was pleased that she allowed any afterthoughts or afterconstructions to be kept out...it is meant to be a childhood memoir. I do hope she writes another, a more reflective book later on.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Whenever I read an autobiography, I compare my childhood experiences with those of the author. What was happening in my life at that age? How would I have behaved under those circumstances?

With this book, the comparisons were difficult to make. I can't imagine growing up amid so much tumult and violence and uncertainty. Not to mention numerous inconveniences and an abundance of creepy and

dangerous vermin.

I'm glad I didn't grow up in a place where terrorists were so common that they were referred to as "terrs." And scorpions were so common that they called them "scorps." And I'm quite grateful that my first day of school photo does not feature me clutching an Uzi for protection.

Alexandra "Bobo" Fuller writes about her experiences in a strangely unsentimental, matter-of-fact way. Be it fear, fun, or heartbreaking loss, all is recorded with equal detachment. Maybe it's just her writing style, but I wondered if a young life filled with danger and uncertainty and pain taught her not to feel anything too deeply.

If Fuller's family and friends are any indication, it would appear that white people can only cope with African life through heavy boozing. Full-grown adults with families drink like college boys on a bender! I guess it helps them handle the stress and loneliness and tolerate the intense heat. But it made me a little queasy thinking about the hangovers they must have suffered.

I did like the story about the exploding Christmas cake, though. Nothing like a little flambe to brighten your holiday. HA!

For me the book was both informative and entertaining. Also quite sad at times, but never melodramatically so. It opened my eyes to still more of the complexities that are the very definition of Africa. The residual colonial attitudes were also quite a revelation to me.

The writing is excellent, if a little disjointed at times. It's written mostly in present tense, the curse of my existence. If not for that, I might have gone with five stars.

Laurie Notaro says

An insanely good read that I had on my bookshelf since I bought it 14 years ago. A memoir about an African childhood--a white girl of low-income farmers that are determined to eek out a living because they love Africa. In the late seventies, early eighties, through much upheaval in several countries. Enjoyed it so much I bought another copy for my niece, who will be traveling to Africa next summer on a fellowship to treat diseases. Really loved it.

Rebecca Foster says

A classic memoir that conjures up all the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of an Africa on the cusp of a colonial to postcolonial transition. Fuller's family were struggling tobacco and cattle farmers in Rhodesia (what later became Zimbabwe), Malawi and Zambia. She had absorbed the notion that white people were there to benevolently shepherd the natives, but came to question it when she met Africans for herself. While giving a sense of the continent's political shifts, she mostly focuses on her own family: the four-person circus that was Bobo (that's her), Van (her older sister Vanessa), Dad, and Mum (an occasionally hospitalized manic-depressive alcoholic (view spoiler)) – not to mention an ever-changing menagerie of horses, dogs and other pets. This really takes you away to another place and time, as the best memoirs do, and the plentiful black-and-white photos are a great addition. (My free copy came from the Book Thing of Baltimore.)

A few favorite lines:

“My soul has no home. I am neither African nor English nor am I of the sea.”

“We eat impala at each meal. Fried, baked, broiled, mined. Impala and rice. Impala and potatoes. Impala and sadza.”

On her brief conversion: “Once (when drunk) at a neighbor’s house I take the conversation-chilling opportunity to profess to the collected company that I love Jesus. Mum decalres that I will get over it. Dad offers me another beer and tells me to cheer up. Vanessa hisses, ‘Shut up.’ And I tell them all that I will pray for them. Which gets a laugh.”

“Since October, Mum has been using a hypodermic needle to inject the Christmas cake (bought months ago in the U.K.) with brandy.”

Allie says

I almost gave this book four stars because it was very well-written and evocative. But I just never felt much of a connection to the book or to any of the characters. The author's writing skill made it a pleasant enough read - at least, pleasant enough to finish. But it definitely wasn't a can't-put-it-down kind of book.

If I had to give concrete criticisms of the book, the main one would be that she doesn't develop any characters outside of her immediately family (in fact, it seemed her family didn't have any substantial relationships with anyone, other than each other), and even those characters could use a bit more context. (Why were they in Africa? I mean, what really motivated them to keep slogging it out in Africa, really? Where did their racism come from? How did she feel about their racism? How did her parents meet and what ties did either of them have to Africa before deciding to raise their kids there? What motivated them to raise children in a country in which a civil war was raging?)

On the other hand, she writes terrific dialogue and her sensory descriptions of Africa made me feel like I was there.

Chrissie says

I totally, TOTALLY loved this book!!!! I know I tshould think a bit before I write something, but I am carried away by my emotions. I love the family, all of them. How can I love them, they are so very far from any way I could live my own life, but nevertheless I love them to pieces. Their lives are hard, but they get through, one step at a time. They know what is important. They don't demand too much. Oh the mother, my heart bled for her. I know she is manic, but who wouldn't be - living through what she does?! Africa is hard, but on the other side I grew to truly love it. OK, I couldn't live there but this author made me love Africa and that is strange because it has so many problems, there is so much wrong, so much that has to be fixed.

The dialog is beautiful:

Mum has been diagnosed with manic depression. She says. 'All of us are mad,' and then adds, smiling, 'but I am the only one with a certificate to prove it.'

The photos are straight from the family album. You see the kids, the one's that survive, growing up.

I dye Mum's hair a streaky porcupine blonde and shave my legs just to see if I need to. Vanessa experiments with eye shadow and looks as if she has been punched. I try and make meringues and the resulting glue is eaten clenched-jawed dutifulness by my family. Mum encourages me not to waste precious eggs on any more cooking projects. I learn what I hope are the words to Bizet's Carmen and sing the entire opera to the dogs. I smoke in front of the mirror and try to look like a hardened sex goddess. Vanessa declares, hopelessly that she is thinking of running away from home. I stare out at the nothingness into which she would run and say, 'I'll come with you.' Mum says, 'Me too.'

And then when the author gets married, on the way to the ceremony, sitting in the car with her father who is now driving and has just handed her a gin and tonic to combat both nerves and a persistent case of malaria, her father says, "You're not bad looking once they scrape the mud off you and put you in a dress."

This family is so real. You learn to love Africa, despite all its troubles. As the tension builds in the novel the author knows when it has reached the breaking point and throws in some humor. As in life, when times are bad, you pick up the pieces, take a deep breath and go on. What other choice do you have?

And of course you learn about Rhodesia, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi.
