

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight
An African Childhood
by Alexandra Fuller

About the Book

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.

Praise for the Book

"This is not a book you read just once, but a tale of terrible beauty to get lost in over and over."

— *Newsweek*

"By turns mischievous and openhearted, earthy and soaring . . . hair-raising, horrific, and thrilling."

— *The New Yorker*

"Ms. Fuller gives us . . . the Africa she knew as a girl, a place of cruel politics, violent heat and startling beauty, a land she makes vivid in all its 'incongruous, lawless, joyful, violent, upside-down, illogical certainty.'"

— *The New York Times*

"Vivid, insightful and sly . . . Bottom line: Out of Africa, brilliantly."

— *People*

Courtesy of Random House

About the Author

Alexandra Fuller

(1969–)

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Personal Information: Family: Born 1969, in England; immigrated to United States, 1994; daughter of Tim (a farmer) and Nicola (a farmer) Fuller; married Charlie Ross.

Education: Acadia University (Nova Scotia, Canada), B.A.

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Career: Writer.

WRITINGS

- *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (memoir), Random House (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Scribbling the Cat: Travels with an African Soldier*, Penguin Press (New York, NY), 2004.

Sidelights

Alexandra Fuller was born in England but grew up in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe since 1980) from the age of two, during the period of struggle between white settlers who were intent on retaining rule and the black Rhodesian nationalists fighting for independence. Like their parents, Tim and Nicola, the Fuller children, learned to strip, clean, load, and fire the guns in the house, including automatic weapons. They traveled in groups, always on the lookout for mines and booby traps, and at home they were alert for the natural hazards of the region, including the scorpions, snakes, and six-foot monitor lizards that often found their way into the house. Sheila Shoup commented in *School Library Journal* that “this was no ordinary childhood, and it makes a riveting story thanks to an extraordinary telling.”

In *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* Fuller writes about what it was like to be a privileged white child in a segregated society. Despite her privileged status, her life was extremely difficult. Three of her siblings are buried in Africa: one died of meningitis, one drowned, and one died at birth. The farm on which Fuller and her surviving sibling, Vanessa, lived as children was simple. The buildings, including the house, were crude, there was no indoor plumbing, and their parents were constantly trying to pay off their debts. Fuller writes that during droughts, crocodiles searched their fields for water. The family lived in extremely hot and humid conditions, and slept surrounded by the humming of mosquitoes.

Fuller provides a history of Rhodesia, from its naming by Cecil Rhodes through Ian Smith's declaration of independence from Britain in 1965 to the continuing crises that followed the ascent to power of President Robert Mugabe in 1980.

One of Fuller's most vivid memories is one of her mother, on horseback and pregnant, singlehandedly fighting off squatters attempting to take over their land. Fuller's mother drank heavily and suffered from manic depression. "Like the formidable parents of other memoirs . . . Fuller's mother qualifies for the rogue's gallery of unforgettable antagonists," wrote Gail Caldwell in the *Boston Globe*. "The family story within *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* is all the more remarkable for the complexity it contains, rendered here, like Fuller's Africa, with startling, laconic passion." *Spectator* contributor Robert Oakeshott noted of Fuller's mother that "she survives, and my guess is that most readers will find themselves feeling a good deal of sympathy for her and admiring her courage." Writing in the *New York Times Book Review* Stephen Clingman called Nicola Fuller "surely one of the most memorable characters of African memoir."

Clingman felt that "a number of things save all this from the maudlin. One is the way in which Fuller tells a story that follows its own reality, no matter what the usual prescriptions. . . . And there is, of course, the comedy, often involving copious amounts of alcohol — not least at a totally drink-sodden Christmas party where a brandy-soaked cake explodes."

Oakeshott wrote, "I have not the space to offer examples of . . . [Fuller's] unforgettable descriptions of Africa's sights, sounds, and smells. But they are most striking. On the other hand . . . readers must be warned to expect explicitly racist language. Mum . . . has no qualms about using the phrase 'fucking Kaffir,' whether in the singular or plural. And early on, the author offers a glossary of terms for the blacks in common use among the then (1970s) white Rhodesians."

"What sustains the Fullers through these difficulties and what lends this book its power is the family's unaccommodated love for Africa," wrote Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, "a love untainted, perhaps even galvanized, by their isolation and travails. In their arduous efforts to farm the land — to plant and harvest a crop of tobacco and see it safely to market; to reclaim a farmhouse from termites and rats and the encroaching jungle — there is a hard-won respect for nature and Africa's tropical defiance of human order."

In a *Times Literary Supplement* review, Deborah L. Manzillo called Fuller "a funny and brilliant writer. . . . Her book is humorous and evenhanded; it displays a wealth of understanding and sympathy for both sides of one of the continent's most bitter conflicts." *Africana.com* writer Cynthia R. Greenlee concluded her review by saying that *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* "is a courageous memoir about complicated times and an equally complicated family. You may not want to know them, may even despise them at times, but you never doubt that they're real."

Richard Dowden wrote in *New Statesman* that “you put down Alexandra Fuller’s account of her childhood in Ian Smith’s Rhodesia and wonder how anyone could make the period of the vicious war for white supremacy so moving and funny.” Dowden noted that Fuller’s parents “worked hard, cared for the land, but were poor. Yet, while they shared all the prejudices of other white colonialists about Africans in general, they loved and cared for the Africans who worked from them. They and their workers respected each other. This is a paradox that I have never been able to resolve, and Fuller’s book only makes it starker.”

“This is not a book you read just once,” said Malcolm Jones in *Newsweek*, “but a tale of terrible beauty to get lost in over and over.” Fuller writes from the point of view of a child when she describes her childhood, and *Booklist*’s Kristine Huntley said that her “young viewpoint will engross teens interested in the white experience in southern Africa.” “The narrative seems complicated . . . but its emotional core remains honest, playful, and unapologetic,” wrote Rachel Collins in *Library Journal*. “A classic is born in this tender, intensely moving, and even delightful journey,” commented a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer. In a *Kirkus Reviews* article, the writer commented that “Fuller loved and loves her Africa; in the final analysis that passion takes a bright and vivid story to the next level, and even further.”

Fuller now lives in Wyoming with her husband, an American who once ran a safari company in Zambia. Her parents and sister remain in Zambia, where they moved after many years in Zimbabwe and then Malawi.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS

- Fuller, Alexandra, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*, Random House (New York, NY), 2001.

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, November 1, 2002, Kristine Huntley, review of *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*, p. 1087.
- *Boston Globe*, January 13, 2002, Gail Caldwell, review of *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, October 1, 2001, review of *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 1401.
- *Library Journal*, November 1, 2001, Rachel Collins, review of *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 101.
- *Maclean’s*, March 25, 2002, review of *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 58.
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- *New York Times*, December 21, 2001, Michiko Kakutani, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. E51.
- *New York Times Book Review*, January 27, 2002, Stephen Clingman, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 26.
- *Publishers Weekly*, October 22, 2001, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 60.
- *Queen's Quarterly*, spring, 2002, Kate Sterns, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 87.
- *School Library Journal*, July, 2002, Sheila Shoup, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 145.
- *Spectator*, June 8, 2002, Robert Oakeshott, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 52.
- *Times Literary Supplement*, April 19, 2002, Deborah L. Manzollilo, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, p. 28.

ONLINE

- *Africana.com*, <http://www.africana.com/> (August 31, 2002), Cynthia R. Greenlee, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*.
- *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/> (August 31, 2002), Alexandra Fuller, "The Bitter Harvest."
- *World and I*, <http://www.worldandi.com/> (August 31, 2002), Judith Chettle, review of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2004.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: What are your thoughts on Zimbabwe's last election and the recent Actions of Robert Mugabe? What do your friends who stayed think about the future of Zimbabwe — specifically land re-distribution and the white farmers who remain?

Alexandra Fuller: Mugabe has become what V.S. Naipaul most eloquently calls one of 'the mimic men'. Instead of leading his people with initiative and with the kind of imagination and wisdom that it would take to govern a country with such a troubled history, Mugabe has let his own greed and his own hunger for power swallow even the slightest regard for the people who fought to put him where he is today and who believed in his integrity and ability to lead them wisely. That is to say, he has followed in the steps of the so-called big men of Africa. These are the men who bring their country to independence and within a decade or so of stuffing their own foreign bank accounts full have gutted their country to the bone.

It is nauseating to hear Mugabe blame his country's woes on the British and on white farmers and on everything but his own corrupt government. Of course we cannot ignore the past and we cannot ignore that we live in the shadow of the past, but we also need to see Africans and African leaders taking responsibility for the present and their (our) own future.

Unfortunately, Mugabe's propaganda machine and his tactics of intimidation have been quite effective at keeping Zimbabwean oppressed and silenced. Interestingly, Mugabe's colleagues in other parts of Africa have been correspondingly close-mouthed and slow to condemn Mugabe's obviously tyrannical rule — one wonders what they are afraid of? This solidarity among despots is not the kind of brotherhood that Africa needs. For me, perhaps the most devastating aspect of Mugabe's recent behavior is that, when he came to power he behaved, initially at any rate, with the largesse and wisdom that we now associate with Mandela's leadership style. If only, like Mandela, he had seen that his task was to assist Zimbabwe at her birth, and then leave the stage with grace and honor so that some of the other great thinkers and leaders in Zimbabwe could take the helm and lead the country out of the war, out of the war for independence and toward true economic and social independence.

Q: In recent years Africa has seen brutal civil wars and unspeakable human rights abuses, an HIV explosion, and increases in crime so violent as to be almost incomprehensible. Is there any cause for optimism?

AF: If one gives up hope, it is the next best thing to giving up life. I am very optimistic that the African people are fed up with the corrupt governments and the cronyism which has devastated the systems that would allow for infrastructure, health care, education and law and order. We have had democratic elections in several African countries in recent years and this has led, in those countries, to an increase in foreign trade and spending and to a corresponding upswing in the economies of those countries. Uganda has had some considerable success in slowing the AIDS epidemic within her borders and the American government as well as some private philanthropists are starting to realize the importance of helping Africa with her aids problem. The greatest poison in all of Africa — and its single greatest danger — is corruption within its governments. If this can be eradicated then the funds would be available for education, health care, and the expansion of job opportunities all of which would decrease the incidences of war, aids, and crime.

Q: You're going back to Africa on a writing assignment in a few days. What kind of thoughts and memories does this impending trip stir? Have you been back often?

AF: I have lived in the United States for nearly ten years and have been home often in that time; at least eight or nine times. This trip to Mozambique will be the fourth time I have been back to Africa in a year. I am not sentimental about Africa as a place of memories — and I use the word 'Africa', knowing that I speak of only a tiny fraction of the continent — so for me, I am not stirred up with old emotions when I go home. When I get off the airplane in Lusaka, I feel at home. The smells and sights and sounds of the part of Africa that I come from are not memories, but a continuing reality. This is what is familiar to me. There is something very reassuring about being picked up at the airport by a sun-beaten old man (my father), being thrown in the back of a pick-up with the dogs and the farm shopping and being carted unceremoniously back to the farm where I still have to compete with several Jack Russells for a space in my bed. Nothing much changes on the farm, in that there is always some fresh drama. The last time I was home a four-foot long monitor lizard managed to squeeze into the pantry which was fine with mum ('isn't he handsome,' she said proudly) until the lizard broke a bottle of brandy. 'Now that, I really cannot allow,' said mum, and the monitor lizard was chased back into the garden, 'Stay there, you naughty boy!'

Q: I've heard that you wrote fiction before writing *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, what was initial motivation to try the memoir and what are your thoughts on the two forms?

AF: I think I had written close to a million words by the time 'Dogs' came to me. I had written around the subject of my life ("write what you know") for about eight years but I had struggled with so many aspects of my stories — how to explain racism (if it can be explained and, because I don't think that there are racial, but only cultural differences, I don't think it can be), how to write about a woman whom I love while not necessarily loving everything about her (my mother), how to write the humor and passion of a place into a story (Africa) while at the same time showing her at war. My novels were spectacularly rejected by several publishing houses and the agent that I had at the time finally threw in the towel and told me she could do no more for me. I felt as if I had been left alone in a leaking boat in a sea of words a long, long way from shore and that my only way back to land was to finally pluck up the courage to tell the truth — the whole, unblinking, inexplicable, funny, horrible truth. I wrote the story of my childhood without trying to explain or excuse or defend anything or anyone — it was very liberating, if a little frightening, to make the decision to allow the reader to make up his or her mind about how to judge my family and our lives. I have to admit, though, that after years of being rejected, I did not actually expect the book to be published and I think that was liberating too because I was completely unselfconscious about what I said.

Q: You're unsparingly honest in the book. Has your family read it, and if so, what did they have to say about it?

AF: Dad won't read it on the grounds that he's 'an illiterate old goat' and anyway (he adds), 'I lived it. Why do I have to read about it?' My sister didn't read it for a long time on the grounds that she was also illiterate. When the book came out on tape, I told her that she had no excuse now (Dad is quite deaf, so he has managed to sneak out of listening to it). Vanessa was very moved by the book on tape. She found it brave, and honest but ultimately very loving. Mum was initially terribly hurt by the way she was portrayed in the book. I think it was very hard for her to see herself through the eyes of her daughter, and I can understand that. I have a daughter too, and I have wondered how I would feel if she published a portrait of me from her point-of-view.

Q: You write with such startling detail, you must have in incredible memory. Is there one memory or image that most stands out when you think of your childhood?

AF: When you live such a chaotic life as we did, and the odds of getting hurt or killed at any moment seem pretty high, even day-to-day activities become blaringly memorable. During the war, I think we all lived as if it might be our last day on earth. Oddly enough, it's not what I remember that stands out, but what I don't remember. For instance, the years of boarding school all merge into a homogenous blob in my mind and I have a hard time remembering distinct incidents. In contrast, I can reconstruct entire days of being at home on the various farms that we lived on. Whole memories come back to me in full color, with smells and soundtrack and with a corresponding memory of how I was feeling and what I was thinking at the time.

Q: How do you think of yourself — as a Rhodesian, Zimbabwean, American, Global Expat?

AF: I am an African first and foremost. How can I pinpoint it further? My skin is mostly white (a pale shade of brown?), but that is an accident of genetics. I have British parents, but that is an accident of geography. I have an American husband — but that is an accident of love. I have an African mind and soul — that seems to me the important distinction.

Q: Aside from the obvious, how did your expat childhood impact your development as a writer?

AF: My childhood was African not expat. Expat implies that your sense of being is beyond the borders of the country in which you live. When I was a child, I thought the whole world was Zimbabwe (or, as it was then known Rhodesia). England was a far off distant place that I read about in books but about which I had no real feeling or attachment. I think it is precisely this that influenced my writing — that I was forging a new voice for a new definition of Africa. I was not one of the old, picnic-on-the-lawn empire builders but yet I was not a black African. I was an African born of a different culture and a different tongue, but an African nonetheless.

Q: You have two young children, what kind of childhood do you hope to provide for them and how does your own childhood inform those aspirations?

AF: I hope to take them back to Africa soon. I want them to grow up knowing it and loving it as I do. I dread to think that they might view Africa as a place (depicted in the foreign press so often) of HIV/AIDS, crime and war or of (the opposite extreme) giraffes, Land Rovers and luxury tents. It is so much more than either of those extremes.

Q: As a witness to a civil war and close observer of racial divisions in Africa, and having now lived in the United States for a number of years, what do you think of America's politics of race past, present and future?

AF: Americans have learned to contain their racist language and their bigotry in devious ways. They are shocked when a public figure is exposed as racist, but I don't think they should be. No matter how much they pretend otherwise, racism is a disease that plague's America's culture. I would hope that an honest look at race relations and some real dialogue about the issue might make for a less racist future in the United States. I think it is going to take a few generations, but I hope that, in time, Americans (the World) can stop being so dishonest and describing themselves as a color. The only honest way to define ourselves (if we must) is in terms of our culture or cultural preferences. My white skin does not make me British. An American's black skin does not necessarily make him or her African. It's way past our time to move away from this crippling world view onto something more positive.

Q: How did you end up in Wyoming, which seem so different from Africa in just about every way? Is it where you wrote the book?

AF: My husband is an American whose grandmother had a ranch in Wyoming — so he spent all his summers out in Jackson Hole as a child. He has always loved the mountains and rivers around the western edge of Wyoming, and his love of the outdoors and of rivers in particular took him around the world as a whitewater river guide. When I met him, he was in Zambia rafting the Zambezi. He had been in Zambia on and off for ten years and loved the country and the people and really felt as if he could make Africa his home. After we were married, we lived in Zambia together for a couple of years before moving to Wyoming — a difficult decision for both of us, I think but both of us felt that it was necessary for personal reasons. I wrote about Africa right from the start — I mean as soon as we landed here — and I think living in such a different climate and culture made Africa stand out for me in even greater, starker detail than it would have had I been sitting on the banks of the Zambezi sweating over an old portable typewriter. I wrote 'Dogs' in the dead of a Wyoming winter and in a fit of fearful homesickness so I think I wrote some of my longing for Africa into its pages.

Q: Who are some authors that you admire, and what are some of the books that have had a big impact upon your life?

AF: A list starting with some of the Africans: Nega Mezlekia: *Notes from a Hyena's Belly*; Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*; *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah*; J.M. Coetzee: *The Life and Times of Michael K*; Dorris Lessing: *The Grass is Singing* *Bessie Head*, *A Question of Power*; *When Rain Clouds Gather*; Ngugi Wa Thiong O: *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*; Ferdinando Oyono: *Houseboy*, *The Old Man and the Medal*; Mongane Serote: *To Every Birth Its Blood*; Bernardo Honwana: *We Killed Mangy Dog and Other Stories*; Nelson Mandela: *Long Walk to Freedom*. Tsitsi Dumerenga: *Nervous Conditions*; Alexander Kanengoni: *Echoing Silences*; Yvonne Burgess: *Measure of the Night Wind*. Other writers include Micheal Ondaatje: *Running in the Family*; V.S. Naipaul: *The Mimic Men*, *A House for Mr Biswas*, *A Bend in the River*; *In a Free State*; John Berger: *To the Wedding*; James Galvin: *The Meadow*; Mary Karr: *The Liar's Club*; Graham Greene: *The Heart of the Matter*; *A Burnt Out Case*; Somerset Maugham (almost everything he ever wrote); Gabriel Garcia Marquez; *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

Q: What's next for you?

AF: I have been saying, almost since the day I left the place, that I hope to go back to Africa soon and then we shall see. I have always written and I will continue to write, and I have lots of ideas I want to work on. I think part of my desire to go back to Africa is that the place is such an enormous part of what inspires me that I need to go back to have my muse replenished. I also believe that if Africa is to have a future, then we Africans need to be committed to living and working on African soil. There are far too many of us that have become refugees, fleeing war, political oppression or economic difficulties. I think it is time for all of us that can to reclaim our African voices.

— interview by Larry Weissman

Courtesy of Random House

Discussion Questions

1. Fuller compares the smell of Africa to “black tea, cut tobacco, fresh fire, old sweat, young grass.” She describes “an explosion of day birds . . . a crashing of wings” and “the sound of heat. The grasshoppers and crickets sing and whine. Drying grass crackles. Dogs pant.” How effective is the author in drawing the reader into her world with the senses of sound, and smell, and taste? Can you find other examples of her ability to evoke a physical and emotional landscape that pulses with life? What else makes her writing style unique?
2. Given their dangerous surroundings in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia and a long streak of what young Bobo describes as “bad, bad luck,” why does the Fuller family remain in Africa?
3. Drawing on specific examples, such as Nicola Fuller’s desire to “live in a country where white men still ruled” and the Fuller family’s dramatic interactions with African squatters, soldiers, classmates, neighbors, and servants, how would you describe the racial tensions and cultural differences portrayed in *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, particularly between black Africans and white Africans?
4. *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* is rich with humorous scenes and dialogue, such as the visit by two missionaries who are chased away by the family’s overfriendly dogs, a bevy of ferocious fleas, and the worst tea they have ever tasted. What other examples of comedy can you recall, and what purpose do you think they serve in this serious memoir?
5. Fuller describes the family’s move to Burma Valley as landing them “right [in] the middle, the very birthplace and epicenter, of the civil war in Rhodesia.” Do her youthful impressions give a realistic portrait of the violent conflict?
6. *The New York Times Book Review* described Nicola as “one of the most memorable characters of African memoir.” What makes the author’s portrait of her mother so vivid? How would you describe Bobo’s father?
7. Define the complex relationship between Bobo and Vanessa. How do the two sisters differ in the ways that they relate to their parents?
8. Animals are ever present in the book. How do the Fullers view their domesticated animals, as compared to the wild creatures that populate their world?
9. Of five children born to Nicola Fuller, only two survive. “All people know that in one way or the other the dead must be laid to rest properly,” Alexandra Fuller writes. Discuss how her family deals with the devastating loss of Adrian, Olivia, and Richard. Are they successful in laying their ghosts to rest?

10. According to Bobo, “Some Africans believe that if your baby dies, you must bury it far away from your house, with proper magic and incantations and gifts for the gods, so that the baby does not come back.” Later, at Devuli Ranch, soon after the narrator and her sister have horrified Thompson, the cook, by disturbing an old gravesite, Bobo’s father announces that he is going fishing: “If the fishing is good, we’ll stay here and make a go of it. If the fishing is bad, we’ll leave.” What role does superstition play in this book? Look for examples in the behavior and beliefs of both black and white Africans.
11. Consider Fuller’s interactions with black Africans, including her nanny in Rhodesia and the children she plays “boss and boys” with, as well as with Cephas the tracker and, later, the first black African to invite her into his home. Over the course of *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, how does the narrator change and grow?
12. By the end of the narrative, how do you think the author feels about Africa? Has the book changed your own perceptions about this part of the world?

Courtesy of Random House