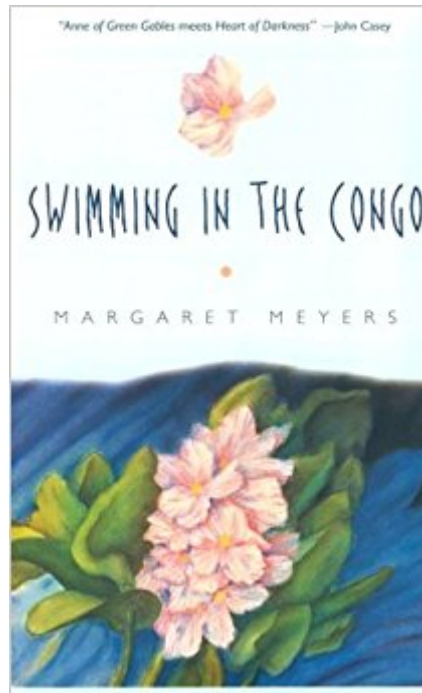




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Swimming In The Congo



Book Information

Paperback: 261 pages

Publisher: Milkweed Editions; 1st edition (September 18, 1995)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1571310061

ISBN-13: 978-1571310064

Product Dimensions: 8.5 x 5.4 x 0.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 13 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #2,495,791 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #25 inÂ Books > Travel > Africa >

Democratic Republic of Congo #1939 inÂ Books > Travel > Africa > General #2758 inÂ Books >

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Customer Reviews

In this enjoyable first novel Grace Berggren, the daughter of an agricultural missionary, lives with her parents and sister in the Belgian Congo (now Zaire), where she experiences the curious blend of European Protestantism and African native beliefs. As a seven-year-old, Grace searches the jungle behind her house, hoping to sneak up on the elusive equator her father is always talking about. On the way to boarding school she confronts racism in its uncensored state. When her father contracts jungle fever, Grace barter for a fetish with which she can protect him. The author's flowing prose vividly presents the conflicts and struggles of a complex childhood against an exotic tropical backdrop. The book is thought-provoking and delightful. Highly recommended. ?Joanna M. Burkhardt, Univ. of Rhode Island Coll. of Continuing Education Lib., Providence Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Lovely, lovely story.

A wonderful book, for all the reasons previous reviewers give. My own children spent some growing-up years on the Kasai, a large tributary of the Congo and had some lazy afternoons in a swim hole where we were pretty sure there were no crocs due to the fast running water. Our time in Congo/Zaire began a few years after the moon landing, after Mobutu changed the names of cities and rivers. Fortunately, I cannot think of any missionaries in our area who fit the "Madame of the Hard Mouth"! She would not have lasted long where we were--at the invitation and supervision of

the national church. But no doubt this may have been a true experience in other mission enclaves in earlier years. It is interesting that the author places this story toward the end of the 60s, that period following national independence when the power gradually shifted and Hard Mouths were no longer tolerated. Interesting also that she places one of her first childhood stories, of daydreaming of being Henry Morton Stanley's Girl Friday ("I recognized the devoutly Christian soul beneath his cruelties, his grandiose boastings, and in return he trusted me.") in contrast to one of her last, of the 75-yr-old gardener, Wizamo, who had his hand sawed off as a teenage slave by King Leopold's enforcers on the rubber plantations. Stanley was Leopold's right-hand gunman in opening up the Congo River basin to Leopold's reign of terror. (see *King Leopold's Ghost* by Adam Hochschild) Grace's coming of age when she leaves childhood behind is also in Wizamo's story, her enlightenment of the real history. Wizamo tells a frightened Grace: "They paid no price for almost killing me, you understand, but I have paid for sixty years because I didn't work hard enough as slave labor on the mondele's [white's] rubber plantation. I have pulled weeds from your mindele [whites'] gardens and thought of murder. It is well for you, all of you, that you are too powerful to be touched." I look forward to reading her 2014 book.

Margaret Meyers, the daughter of a missionary family, grew up in The Congo in the 1960s, and this 1995 collection of short stories was part of her later MFA Thesis at the University of Virginia. Through them, she introduces her lead character, Grace, who views the world with the freshness of childhood and shares her experiences with the reader. Her father tells her the equator goes right through their property and, at the age of six, she searches for it as if it would be a clearly marked path. Her favorite pastime is swimming in the river, a river she will miss terribly when she is sent off to boarding school a few years later. Her protestant Christianity is unquestioned and she's always exploring her own spirituality as well as making keen observations about the people around her. There are some memorable characters here, from her loving parents to the native Congolese who laugh at the foibles of the missionary families. There are the two spinster women with a secret, an unhappy former ballerina who has trouble adapting to her life in Africa, and a Frenchman who loves his garden almost as much as he loves his constantly changing women. Through Grace's young eyes we see the cruelty of racism and the stirrings of independence as political changes are happening in the country. At 261 pages this is a fast and enjoyable read, one that I gobbled up in two sittings, letting myself travel to the lush world of Grace's Congo and view it through her child's eyes. Mainly, it's about the people and she stays away from political analysis. She tells her stories simply and creates an atmosphere, and brings the reader right into her world. If I have any criticism at all, it

is that some of the characters appear in just one of the short stories and I wanted to hear more about them as the book went on. But, alas, this is a book of stories, not a novel. I loved this book; it was a small trip into a world that is now gone and which I will never get to know except for my reading. And it sure was an enjoyable journey. Recommended.

SWIMMING IN THE CONGO is a stunning story cycle about a missionary girl growing up in the Congo. While the collection is not autobiographical, Margaret Meyers, like her protagonist Grace, did spend her childhood in the Congo, and SWIMMING IN THE CONGO is replete with carefully-observed and lovingly-rendered details that absolutely convince the reader of its authenticity. But more vivid than the milieu in which it is set are the characters--missionaries, servants, lovers--particularly the narrator who moves in the course of these stories from childhood to adolescence. Funny, poignant, often heartbreakingly beautiful, these stories reveal the life of a woman whose early life was Africa and the Lord God and who now cannot live in an Africa which does not recognize her Africaness nor with the God of her fathers, but who will never escape either. This is the first book of a writer whom we will be reading a long time

"Swimming in the Congo" by Margaret Meyers is a very good novel that reads like a collection of short stories. It is told in the first-person by a girl, daughter of missionary parents, growing up in the Belgian Congo, circa 1960. The stories are focused on the narrator and her memories of her parents and the local people (Congolese and ex-pats) in and near missionary communities. Issues the seven-year narrator deals with include the mix of American Protestant and African traditional beliefs she encounters; the meaning of the equator and scientific reality; and White racism towards the Congolese. Meyers' writing reads well and is easy to like. It would be interesting to see her story continued.

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