

There is the adage involving things that have stood the test of time, I am delighted how this is true for both Stegner's *Crossing to Safety*, our November selection and *Poisonwood Bible* our December choice which are as engrossing if not more so on the second read. I had hoped to do a critical essay on the former but have been equally absorbed in the latter book. Although I feel the novel could have ended with the departure from the Congo subsequent to the death of Ruth May, it was gratifying to spend more time with the remaining characters and their travails. Having recently completed reading *The African Trilogy* by Chinua Achebe and viewed a Great Courses survey of African history, I have had good exposure to this distressing subject. My only travel in Africa was to Egypt in the 1960s when it was under the rule of Nassar a very different environment from the Congo yet still an eye-opener for "provincial" me. As a freshman in college in the early 60's, I was totally confused regarding the major players in the Congo Crisis and was certainly not confronted at that time with the rhapsodic assessment of Patrice Lumumba as presented by Kingsolver. Another dark shadow of the early Cold war "we – they" environment.

In light of my limited exposure to Africa in the late 50's (my major source being National Geographic) it is not surprising how ill prepared were the Prices for their journey to the Congo. It reminds me of how little Americans knew about the culture and history of Vietnam when we embarked on that unfortunate episode. The primitive conditions The Prices encountered upon their arrival as well as their limited resources and naivete were extreme. In addition their living expenses were cut in half because of changing political circumstances in the Congo. It appears that Nathan Price did not even receive official endorsement for the job.

As you know the story is narrated by Orleanna Price and her four daughters, each with a strikingly different perspective on the unfolding events. They are hardly a close-knit family to be living in such tight quarters when they got to Africa. Orleanna grew up in the outskirts of Jackson, Mississippi, the daughter of a middle income ophthalmologist who was a widower. They lived with an aunt and several cousins. At the time, Orleanna was beautiful and vivacious but not remotely worldly. At age 17 she was swept off her feet by a young and ambitious revivalist Baptist preacher whom she reflects, "fell on my unclaimed soul like a dog on a bone" They married shortly thereafter. With outbreak of our involvement in WW11 Nathan Price found himself drafted into the infantry and was sent to the Philippines, and subsequently wounded near Luzon. He was then miraculously spotted on the beach by a PT boat and brought to a hospital bunker in Corregidor island. Nathan was then sent back to America having received a Purple Heart for being wound in battle but not for exceptional bravery. The rest of his company perished to a man in the horrific Bataan March. In high school he was admired for his athletic prowess and ruggedness. Apparently for the rest of his life Nathan was tortured for abandoning his platoon and surviving the war. To deal with his guilt, he became obsessed in saving souls for his unforgiving God. From then on Orleanna recalls, "I was married to his plan." She concluded, "like Methuselah (the parrot) I cowered beside my cage and found I had no wings."

Within two years, Orleanna had 3 daughters, Rachel and the twins, Leah and Adah, who suffered paralysis on one side and speech disorder from Hemiplegia. Adah's condition was not resolved until later life with surgery when she had returned to Atlanta. Throughout her life Orleanna is consumed by guilt for causing this birth defect with a difficult delivery and allowing her fourth daughter Ruth May to die later from a poisonous snake bite, none of which she could have prevented.

The bulk of the book traces the family's move to the Congo in the fall of 1960 for Nathan to take charge of a Baptist Mission there. In Orleanna's words, "I had washed up there on the riptide of my husband's confidence and the undertow of my children's needs." It is hard to imagine how different was the environment into which they now entered. They were the only whites present for the most of their time with encroaching tropical vegetation, minimal amenities, no plumbing, limited drinking or bathing water, wild animals, tribal religion, men with large families and multiple wives, no working roads, unusual food and devastating droughts followed by torrential rains. This on top of witchcraft, plagues and killer disease like malaria. Clothing was either exotic and colorful or non-existent. The church was not covered and not conducive to Western style worship. Furthermore, Nathan's baptism obsession is thwarted by local rivers being alligator infested. On top of all this, the name for bible in the local dialect when mispronounced by Father Nathan meant Poisonwood, hence the Poisonwood Bible.

Much of the book focuses on the relationship between the members of the Price family. Orleanna is the beleaguered spouse and mother responsible for family survival. She has to soothe her increasingly discouraged husband who is encountering resistance to his missionary pursuits from the village chieftain, Tata Ndu and the increasing resistance to baptism. The tenor of Nathan's sermons was increasingly threatening and unwelcoming. He is combating an ocean of disbelief from the natives whose religious beliefs are so intertwined with the natural surroundings. Nathan is clueless and insensitive to the culture.

Rachel the oldest daughter and least intelligent member of the family does very little housework and is not close to her sisters. Of all the Prices she embodies the increasing superficiality and materialism of suburban America and is extremely self-centered and vain. She happens to be quite glamorous and an oddity in the Congo community with her long blond hair and light complexion. She clearly does not fit in. The living conditions are very challenging especially to a princess.

Leah the healthy twin is very smart, quite the tomboy and fascinated by nature. Of the four girls, she is the one who worships her father, until they split over his refusal to permit her to partake in a hunting expedition. Prior to this, she had sought his approval and interacted willingly on projects including gardening. Leah is quite tomboyish and athletic, including mastering the bow and arrow.

As the book evolves, Leah hangs out with Anatole Ngemba who has been hired as a teacher of boys in the community. He respects Leah and calls her Beanie, which means exceedingly truthful. He is liberal politically and a great admirer of Patrice Lumumba who was perceived to be Communist leaning and supported by the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and is subsequently murdered, an earlier victim of the Cold War. Leah and Anatole eventually marry and live in different parts of Africa. The two represent the best amalgamation of racial couples in the book and provide hope for the institution of marriage represented badly by Rachel and her husbands as well as

Nathan and Orleanna. Leah is courageous and committed to a better world, the antithesis to Rachel.

Adah, the disabled twin, is very smart in spite of her handicaps. She is cynical and quite judgmental and seems to really grasp what is going on. She is somewhat bitter about her physical handicap and is an avowed atheist until perhaps the end of the book. Adah ultimately goes to medical school and has a successful career, but does not have a family of her own. She is very skeptical of her father's obsessive religiosity and sees through most pretense. She writes backward and often forms opinions contrary to others, which usually turn out to be right. Leah and Adah have always been quite competitive with one another in light of their being twins with one having a severe physical handicap. Leah goes on to have four sons.

Finally Ruth May is the youngest child who is adventurous and slightly naughty in the way she tried to see Nelson their native helper undressed. She liked to spy and was nearly devoured by a lion and later tragically killed by a poisonous snakebite. For a large part of the book, she was sick with malaria largely because she willfully discarded her pills. Ruth May's death was the last straw which caused Orleanna to leave Africa and return to Georgia, emotionally damaged but more independent. The author does a good job in representing their respective voices. As the youngest of four, myself, I could relate to her outlook and was devastated by her death.

There are several intense episodes in the book which stand out as particularly important. These include the election in the church, when Nathan and his bible are outvoted, the ant attack which nearly destroys the village, hard to imagine, but extremely vivid, the antelope hunt where Leah defies a male who claims possession of her fallen prey, and the scene in which Ruth May was killed by the mamba snake bite followed by the long trek out of Africa, where Orleanna exhibited superhuman tenacity and determination to salvage her chicks. Another painful scene was in the aftermath of their lunch discussion with Anatole when Nathan called his wife a nitwit and proceeded to smash her valuable plate, her favorite possession. He was a very insecure person.

As one critic remarked, the inclusion of Congolese politics in this family saga perhaps made them more memorable than perusing a basic history book. I came away with great respect for Lumumba and dislike of Mobutu who was a figure like Mugabe in Rhodesia. It appears that the U.S backed the wrong side. We can pursue this later during discussion. I am looking forward to reading Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, which is a highly recommended analysis of the evolution of the Belgian Congo which for nearly 30 years was Leopold's private fiefdom.

The Poisonwood Bible presents widely divergent account of marriage in her novel. Orleanna Price refers to hers as an invasion like an occupied territory such as the states of Africa. For many years her existence was solely to serve Nathan as a sexual partner and cook. The children were incidental and to him an embarrassment as a signal of his excessive promiscuity on his part. He also resented her glamour which tempted outsiders and he was entirely dismissive of her thoughts or wishes including the yearning for what many would consider minimal possessions. Back in Georgia he belatedly supplied a washing machine. She was not consulted in the move to Africa or the disastrous decision to stay there after independence. Orleanna She remained the dutiful wife until things fell apart after the death of Ruth May when she resolved to leave him behind in Africa.

Next, the eldest daughter Rachel who had prepared a hope chest at an early age and was anticipating a successful conventional marriage where she would be treated like a princess. Rachael went through several marriages, relationships and liaisons including the conniving Eeban Axelroot who helps her retreat from the

Congo but is a scoundrel and womanizer. She was briefly linked to the village chieftain, which did not materialize. Even her marriage to a French ambassador was terminated by his infidelity. At least unlike her mother Orleanna, Rachel was left a wealthy woman and enjoyed her lifestyle. running a resort hotel.

On the other hand, daughter Leah who also became disillusioned with "Our Father" as he was called, Leah, as previously mentioned, became enamored of Anatole Ngemba, the young African male imported to Kingala as a school teacher and an interpreter for Nathan. They spent a lot of time together and were finally married during which time he was incarcerated during the Mobutu regime for several years. He was very much an activist and an early supporter of Lumumba. While living in extreme poverty, they clearly respected each other, with his calling her Beenie or "truest of truths". They went on to have four sons and stayed together in spite of the difficulties imposed by their racial differences in that society. Their union was one of the most uplifting parts of the book.

Her twin Adah resolved not to get married, although she had some close relationships.

To Kingsolver's credit in spite of the disturbing issues raised in the book, her novel is filled with humor, exemplified by Ruth May's spying expeditions and undaunted curiosity along with Adah's individualistic approach to life with her penetrating wit and observations. In addition, there was Rachel's extreme unwillingness to adapt to the vast cultural change of the move and her obsession with her appearance. There were also droll anecdotes involving their interaction with animals, Ruth May's pet mongoose and the sassy parrot, Methuselah, whom they inherited from their predecessor Brother Fowles. There were, in addition, some very amusing episodes depicting the church meetings where Nathan was abusing the local language, embarrassing yet funny. Kingsolver is a gifted writer who vividly captures exotic nature as well as terrifying drama. Her depiction of the ant attack is masterful in its probing the limit of imagination and horror.

The book is filled with high drama moments. These include the incredible ant invasion which nearly destroyed the village, an event totally alien to Americans from Georgia yet possible in the Congo. This reminds me of Garcia Marquez' *100 Years of Solitude* when three years of drought were succeeded by three of massive flooding and other natural disasters you would only find in Magical Realism. Other memorable scenes included the election in the church when missionary Christianity was voted down by the natives, and the controversial community hunt where thousands of beasts were trapped by fire and then shot by bow and arrow. Leah Prices' determination to hunt which violated a gender code was followed by bitter fighting over who gets what meat. This resulted in a death threat to Nelson, the Prices' house boy and ultimately to the death of Ruth May who was bitten by a poisonous snake intended for Nelson. Equally gripping was Orleanna and the living daughters (excluding Rachel) departure from Kilanga on foot, slogging through mud and cold. With superhuman resolve, Orleanna dragged crippled Adah over impenetrable terrain, raging waters and dangerous combat zones. Ravaged with

guilt from her daughters hemiplegia during the birth of her twins and the loss of her youngest daughter (which was not her fault) she mustered extraordinary grit to get her daughter safely home. .

Finally, I want to mention the number of memorable minor characters in the book including Mama Tataba, Ruth May's mongoose, Methuselah the inherited parrot known for his frequent expletives. Eeban Axelroot who rescued Rachel from the Congo, having exacted the price of their cohabitation. There was Mama Tatuba, who taught Nathan how to garden to his embarrassment, and Brother Fowles and his African wife who were spreading the gospel in many ways more successfully than Nathan. Tata Nadu, the village chieftain posed a real threat to Nathans baptismal crusade. Mama Mwanza was a good neighbors. Tata Kuvundu the witch doctor posed a challenge to his Christian Crusade . The Underdowns were good meeters and greeters from the church in Leopoldville and provided Leah with a gourmet meal as well as communicating political news. Finally Dwight Eisenhower smiled down benignly from a photo on the kitchen house wall.

In all kudos for Poisonwood. I have very much enjoyed our first 3 novels. Thank you selection committee.

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