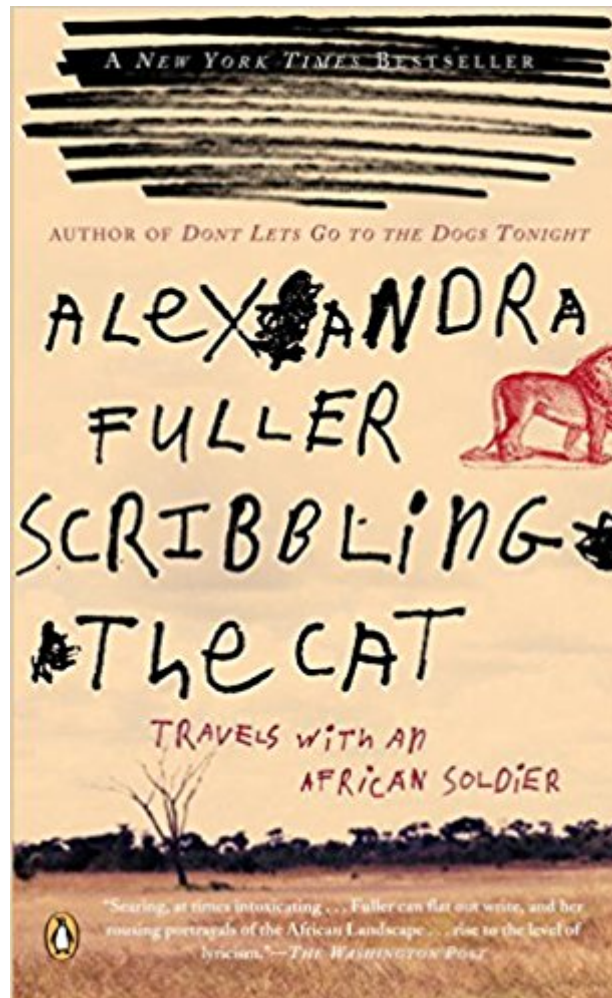




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Scribbling The Cat: Travels With An African Soldier



Synopsis

When Alexandra ("Bo") Fuller was home in Zambia a few years ago, visiting her parents for Christmas, she asked her father about a nearby banana farmer who was known for being a "tough bugger." Her father's response was a warning to steer clear of him; he told Bo: "Curiosity scribbled the cat." Nonetheless, Fuller began her strange friendship with the man she calls K, a white African and veteran of the Rhodesian war. With the same fiercely beautiful prose that won her acclaim for *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, Fuller here recounts her friendship with K. K is, seemingly, a man of contradictions: tattooed, battle scarred, and weathered by farm work, he is a lion of a man, feral and bulletproof. Yet he is also a born-again Christian, given to weeping when he recollects his failed romantic life, and more than anything else welling up inside with memories of battle. For his war, like all wars, was a brutal one, marked by racial strife, jungle battles, unimaginable tortures, and the murdering of innocent civilians—and K, like all the veterans of the war, has blood on his hands. Driven by K's memories, Fuller and K decide to enter the heart of darkness in the most literal way—by traveling from Zambia through Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) and Mozambique to visit the scenes of the war and to meet other veterans. It is a strange journey into the past, one marked at once by somber reflections and odd humor and featuring characters such as Mapenga, a fellow veteran who lives with his pet lion on a little island in the middle of a lake and is known to cope with his personal demons by refusing to speak for days on end. What results from Fuller's journey is a remarkably unbiased and unsentimental glimpse of men who have killed, mutilated, tortured, and scrambled to survive during wartime and who now must attempt to live with their past and live past their sins. In these men, too, we get a glimpse of life in Africa, a land that besets its creatures with pests, plagues, and natural disasters, making the people there at once more hardened and more vulnerable than elsewhere. *Scribbling the Cat* is an engrossing and haunting look at war, Africa, and the lines of sanity.

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Customer Reviews

Thomas Wolfe's trusted axiom about not being able to go home again gets a compelling spin through the African veldt in Alexandra Fuller's *Scribbling the Cat: Travels with an African Soldier*. Fuller (*Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*) journeys through modern Zambia, to battlefields in Zimbabwe and Mozambique with the scarred veteran of the Rhodesian Wars she identifies only as "K." Intrigued by the mysterious neighbor of her parent's Zambian fish farm and further enticed by her father's warning that "curiosity scribbled the cat" ("scribbling" is Afrikaans slang for "killing"), Fuller embarks on a journey that covers as much cratered psychic landscape as it does African bush country. Though she and "K" are both African by family roots rather than blood, she quickly discovers that 30 years of civil war have scarred them--and the indigenous peoples they encounter--in markedly different ways. "K" is a figure of monumental tragedy, a decent man torn by war-fueled rage, a failed marriage, and painful memories of an only son lost to tropical disease. His adopted Christianity offers him only partial absolution, and Fuller details his gut-wrenching confessions of quarter-century old atrocities with compassion and rare insight. Her prose liberally salted with a rich, melange of Afrikaans and local Shona slang, Fuller nonetheless struggles with a narrative whose turns are often unexpected, yet driven by humanity. There's a clear sense that the author's fitful journey into the past with "K" has opened as many wounds as it has healed, and spawned more questions than it has answered. It's that discomfort and frustration that often reinforces the honesty of her prose--and reinforces Thomas Wolfe's adage yet again. --Jerry McCulley --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Memoirist Fuller (*Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*) describes this book, about her friendship with a Rhodesian war veteran, as "a slither of a slither of a much greater story." This disclaimer doesn't excuse the book's thinness, as it traces Fuller's journey with the white ex-soldier, K, from his farm in Zambia through Zimbabwe and into Mozambique, to the battlefields of more than two decades ago. Fuller evokes place and character with the vivid prose that distinguished her unflinching memoir of growing up in Africa, but here she handles subject matter that warrants more than artful word painting and soul-searching. Writing about war--its scarred participants, victims and

territory." Fuller skimps on the history and politics that have shaped her and her subjects. Her personal enmeshment with K is the story's core. She's enamored of his physical beauty and power, and transfixed by his contradictions: K's capacity for both violence and emotional vulnerability, his anger and generosity, the blood on his hands and the faith he relies on (he's a born-again Christian) to cope with his demons. Fuller becomes K's confessor, and the journey turns into a kind of penance for her complicity, as a white girl in the 1970s, in a war of white supremacy. When K recounts how he tortured an African girl, Fuller swallows nausea and thinks, "I am every bit that woman's murderer." Fuller and K embark on their road trip ostensibly for the shell-shocked man to get beyond his "spooks" and for Fuller to write about it, but this motivation makes for a rather static journey. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Scribbling the Cat is a strange and unsettling book. Like Fuller's two other Rhodesian memoirs, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* and *Cocktail Hour Under the Tree of Forgetfulness*, it's hauntingly evocative and elegantly written. Once more, I was effortlessly transported to Southern Africa, "a land of almost breath-taking beauty or of savage poverty; a land of screaming ghosts or of sun-flung possibilities; a land of inviting warmth or of desperate drought" (143). But unlike the other two Rhodesian memoirs, *Scribbling the Cat* is elusive and dark and ultimately it loses its momentum. Fuller's charming sense of humor and endearing optimism are largely absent here, replaced, instead, by meandering reflections and a sense of foreboding that is never truly resolved. When reading fiction, I normally try very hard to separate my feelings about the author from my attitudes about the book. With memoir, however, that's a little bit harder to do, because the author is selling not just her story, but also herself, to some extent - her values, impressions and presuppositions. And while I had started to develop a sort of benign "girl crush" on Fuller after reading her two other memoirs, this one left me questioning her character a little bit, and the book as a whole. Instead of focusing on her childhood and family life growing up in Rhodesia, this memoir centers on Fuller's friendship and travels with a man whom she calls "K," an ex-soldier who fought on the losing side of the Rhodesian war. She meets "K" while visiting her parents' fish and banana farm in Zambia, and despite her father's warnings to steer clear of him, Fuller, who seems to be suffering from a kind of spiritual malaise, quickly develops a kindred connection with the man as they travel together alone, often in very intimate settings, through Zimbabwe and Mozambique. "K" is very much reminiscent of Stanley Kowalski, a volatile, choleric soul trapped in a shell of hyper masculinity. It's clear throughout the memoir that Fuller finds herself both repulsed by and strangely

attracted to "K", which is problematic, since she is married with two children. Throughout the book, Fuller, who is so transparent in her other memoirs, remains silent on the appropriateness of this arrangement. Fuller probably wouldn't have been able to write this book had "K" not developed romantic feelings for her shortly after their first meeting. And more than a few readers, myself probably included, seem to think that Fuller exploits "K's" feelings order to get the goods---that is, the material she needs to write a compelling story. She's also on a kind of spiritual journey herself, and she thinks that if she can just figure out "K", then she might be able to make sense of her family's own involvement in the war. She expresses her desire to "label ["K"] and write him into coherence," and, by extension, herself. But "K" is a complex person, a professing "born again" Christian who is tormented by the ghosts of his past and driven by an unpredictable brew of sincere faith, erratic superstition, debilitating guilt and blind rage. By the end of both her literal and metaphorical journeys, we know very little about "K," and very little about Fuller and only a little bit more about Africa. Her goal - "to patch together enough words to make sense of [their] lives" (239) - is never realized, and only two major insights are communicated: that war indiscriminately breaks people's bodies and souls and that Fuller indiscriminately breaks men's hearts. The first insight I already suspected before reading this book and the second one I was sad to discover.

I read Ms. Fuller's first book strictly by accident. I thought *Don't Lets Go to the Dogs Tonight* would have been a political view of the struggle in Rhodesia between the white settlers and the indigenous people. It wasn't, however, and while at first I was disappointed as I kept reading I found a brilliantly told tale of a family that lived in Rhodesia that is very similar to many families I know all over America. *Scribbling the Cat* is another Fuller memoir set in Africa, and this one is even more personal. The first book tells the story of the Fuller family, and as the mother is the focus of the family the story is truly a mother daughter tale. This book is a story about who Alexandra Fuller became, not how she grew up, and I love it. Just as in the first book, this is a story that is distinctly rooted in Africa, but if you change some of the names and some of the locations, it truly has played out in America as well. Fuller meets a former Rhodesian soldier, warrior more like it, and is awestruck by his lifestyle. He is now a gentleman farmer living in an area that doesn't have many white gentleman farmers, especially ones who in the past were killing their African gentleman farmer counterparts. Fuller does a great job of bringing the reader along on the journey. Her writing style reminds me in a way of Hemingway. Hemingway had a way of making me feel the heat in Key Largo, feeling the strength of the fish in Old Man. Fuller really made me feel the mud on the trail to the farm, the smell of the fruit bearing trees she passes, the heat from the African sun, and most

important I felt the affection that the old soldier began to feel for Ms. Fuller, and the confusion Ms. Fuller felt for him. All in all a great book by a great writer. Alexandra Fuller is one of the truly great writers alive today and while she lives in America her heart still resides in the Africa of her childhood. She seems keenly aware of the problems the white Rhodesians inflicted upon their native residents. I definitely feel her sense of, I hate to say it because it is far more complex, but guilt for what happened to the Africans subject to white Rhodesian rule. Her escort, the former Rhodesian soldier, was part of the problem, a very bloody part of the problem, and she truly struggles to get past the things he did. She doesn't make him a villain, but she doesn't deify him either. I can also feel that she would take issue with my use of African in that last paragraph. When I say Rhodesian I am thinking of them as white European settlers. In Ms. Fuller's case, however, she is just as African as any black African subject to Rhodesian rule. Reading between the lines Ms. Fuller is in many ways a victim of the same colonialism many black Africans suffered from. She was white, but hardly wealthy. Throughout this journey I truly had a sense that I am seeing Africa through the eyes of an African, something that Ms. Fuller can't shake, because it is who she is. One great thing I got from this book was fair notice that my simple categorization of the problem, this is white, this is black, this is African, this is European, the European whites were oppressive, the Africans are the victims, speaks to my ignorance of the reality many people are living in these former colonial areas that can't be categorized. Good people had to do bad things to become free, good people did bad things to serve a belief they later realized was wrong.

This is a very well-crafted book from the point of view of a young woman growing up in Rhodesia with her parents and sister. This book chronicles her friendship and travels with a somewhat rebellious and broken-down African soldier, the unnamed K, as they journey through his life and her insight. It touches her life in a very spiritual and emotionally informed way. It is not mushy emotional but insightful in a way that becomes a mirror for the reader as is all of her work. It is a terrific read as are all of her books and is sprinkled with African colloquial slang. Don't worry, a small lexicon in the back defines her terms. (And don't worry, what it means to "scribble the cat" is only one interesting turn of the phrase that will delight the reader. She is a very talented writer, very talented. She is a word-crafter and I would recommend this to anyone who is an avid reader of anything. Book clubs should pick this or ANY of her books!

Alexandra has a tale to tell and she does it so very well... I think it's one of the best "rough living" stories I've read in years...she has a knack for really putting you THERE, WITH her in her

storytelling. Delighted with her books ...and noticed many of them were started-or ended up, anyway, in languages other than English.I hope she can continue writing of her past-in ANY language- so I could have another one- or TEN- to read!!!! Extraordinary like and times of a survivor of the troubles where cultures utterly clash, in Africa between the French, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Americans (now), the British, and every African tribe longing for the riches in the minerals of that vast continent...

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