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Alexandra Fuller Explores Family In New Memoir

August 5, 2019 Michael Giltz

What can would-be writers born into boring, happy families do? Write poetry, I guess. Well, author Alexandra Fuller will never have to buy a rhyming dictionary. Not with her family.

Fuller burst onto the international scene in 2001 with her debut memoir, “Don’t Let’s Go To The Dogs Tonight.” It’s a rambunctious, hilarious, perceptive and unflinching look at a childhood growing up in strife-torn

Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

In it, Bobo—as Fuller’s family calls her—watches her white parents struggle to hold onto their land during a brutal war that rightly ends with the collapse of that fading colonial dream. Read it and you’ll discover a great amount of drinking, story-telling and wickedly pointed commentary by one and all, along with glimpses of racial condescension and comity gleefully mixed together as only a colonialist can do it.

It’s a furiously funny combination of “Out Of Africa” and “Catch-22” and how the heck would she ever top it? Well, you don’t, but you do soldier on and eventually deliver more good stories. In various works of nonfiction, Fuller told the tale of a white African soldier in Zambia, an oil-rig worker in her new home of Wyoming and even the disintegration of her own marriage.

None had the vital pulse of family. (Yes, one was about her ex-husband and sure she married him, but he wasn’t *blood*.) Yes, yes, I kept thinking when reading them, but what about your family? What country have your parents landed in and how are they getting on? Finally Fuller relented and did an entire book devoted to her mother.

“Cocktail Hour Under The Tree Of Forgetfulness” (see, even the title is as good as her first) proved a rich, wholly satisfying look at the life of Nicola Fuller, a more acerbic Isak Dinesen, always surrounded by a rambunctious collection of dogs, birds and other animals. (Nicola talks to them all, including dangerous snakes in the yard, wholly convinced they understand and listen to her.)

Then Fuller freed herself once and for all from the burden of family with her first novel, proving she can deliver the goods out of whole cloth. “Quiet Until The Thaw” covers decades in the life of two cousins in the Lakota Oglala Sioux Nation. Like her best memoirs it’s raw, unvarnished and gives her Native American characters the dignity of being flawed, imperfect and messily alive human beings.

Unfortunately, few noticed. Despite some very good reviews, I think critics were too afraid to recognize a white woman born in England and raised in Zimbabwe had the ability or even the right to create a work of fiction about indigenous Americans. It’s nonsense, of course, but there you are.

On the bright side, Fuller’s returned to her family again and devoted a book to the death and life of her father, Tim. It begins with him dying in Budapest. Whether Fuller is trying to negotiate with the implacable hospital administration or arranging to take her dad’s cremated remains home with them, the stories are blackly humorous yet again.



Alexandra Fuller, 2014

Photograph: Greg Marinovich



The black sheep of his family, Tim spent his life unburdening himself of constraints and expectations. In Fuller's mind, he is always off to the local pub for a drink or taking his nightly constitutional (invariably including a futile pot-shot or two at looming beasties). Tim promises to tell Fuller the secret to life...and then promptly forgets what he was saying. Never fear, the book is peppered with rallying cries and useful tidbits like "Travel light, move fast."

The novel jumps back and forth with the through-line of Tim's death, somewhat successful cremation and a memorial. This final journey of Tim's is punctuated by bits from his childhood, marriage and any odd story Fuller hasn't offered up before. If she repeated some, I didn't notice and certainly didn't care.

While nominally about her father, Fuller's sister, other vivid people in their lives and especially her mother cannot be kept offstage. In Budapest, her mother Nicola finds a garden swarming with stray cats, names them all, feeds them every day, befriends the gardener and thrusts money in his hand for their care when leaving, well aware he'll likely take the loot and be off to the nearest bar.

Fuller tucks Nicola sweetly and sadly into bed after her husband's death, packed and ready to head to the airport before dawn. Fuller shows us the roles of parent and child reversed as they eventually are. But hours later, Fuller finds her mother surrounded by three empty wine bottles and in no mood to get out of bed much less head to the airport. The contents of every suitcase are strewn about the room.

When a cab is called anyway, Nicola somehow but quite naturally knows the cabbie by name and embraces him as an old and dear friend, leaving Fuller on the outside yet again. At the airport, it's Nicola's imperious, imperturbable sense of superiority that gets her carted onto the plane in a wheelchair, not Fuller's polite fulminations.

Tim would surely have preferred to die in the Africa he loved so fiercely. But Budapest certainly offers the right send-off for this eternally displaced family. Fuller writes about one of his last clear moments when dying far from home.

“‘Did I do this to get into one of your Awful Books,’ Dad had asked from his deathbed...; lucidly present in the world I recognized for a moment.

‘I’d laughed then. ‘Probably.’

‘Dad had chuckled too. ‘That’ll annoy Mum.’

‘Another Awful Book, how many more can be written?’

At least two, I’d say. I have faith Fuller will deliver more works of fiction. But I’m just as convinced she will pen a memoir focusing on the tangled, difficult relationship with her sister. At the moment, they’re not speaking to one another, so what’s to lose? And then there are Fuller’s children.....

(Penguin Press, August 6, 2019)

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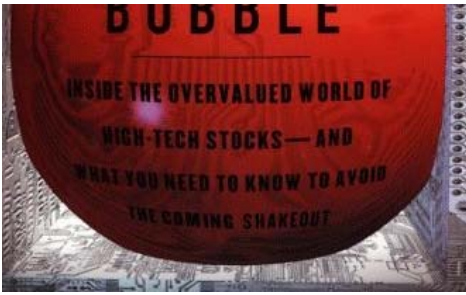


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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine,

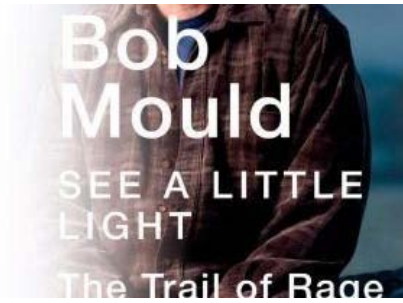
Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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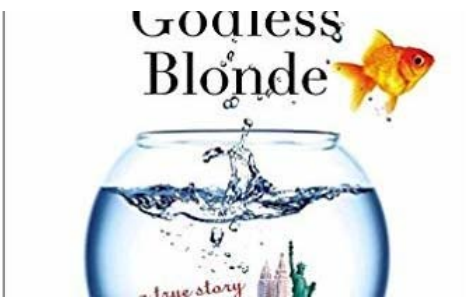
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