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## Book Review: Cheers for Alexandra Fuller's *Cocktail Hour...*

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**COCKTAIL HOUR UNDER THE TREE OF FORGETFULNESS** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**BY ALEXANDRA FULLER**

You may have lost track of author **Alexandra Fuller**. Her debut memoir -- *Don't Lets Go To The Dogs Tonight* -- was a rollicking, bestseller about Fuller's childhood in war-torn Africa with parents so much larger-than-life that they made the phrase "larger-than-life" seem rather puny. It was compulsively readable and funny and sharp. The book was **very much an expected hit in my mind**, despite the long odds of gaining a wide audience.

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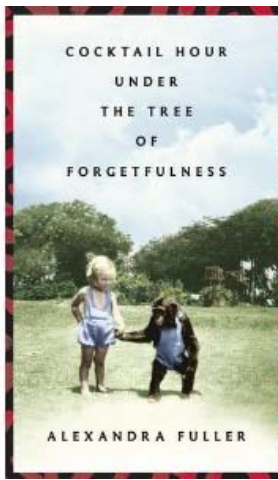


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A sequel involving mercenaries slipped by quietly and Fuller also delivered a well-reviewed look at a Wyoming man who worked on oil rigs and fell prey to the indifferent safety records of the companies that run them.

But now Fuller has returned to the source in *Cocktail Hour Under The Tree Of Forgetfulness*. The source is not just her childhood but her parents and specifically her mother: Nicola Fuller of Central Africa. Mum always wanted to be the heroine of a story but Fuller's memoir was a bit too spot-on and became ever after that Awful Book. Well, now Nicola has an Awful Book of her own, in essence a biography that captures her eccentric, quixotic and downright dangerous tale with full room for humor, love and more than a few highballs.

It begins with Nicola cajoling her Dashing Little Sri Lankan into some pilot lessons so she can fly and land a plane (planes being a constant in the sort of rollicking life Nicola imagines for herself a la *Out Of Africa*, *West With The Night* and so on). Soon we flashback to Nicola's childhood in Scotland, where the family war cry was -- when translated from Gaelic to English -- "Gainsay who dare." This captures Fuller's puckish but loving tone perfectly:

It took me a while to recover from the discovery that my Mum's family had a war cry, but then I thought about Mum and I realized that if you didn't have a war cry to go with that attitude, you'd have to invent one. During the bush war in Rhodesia Mum forwent her family's Gaelic war cry and took up a personal war cry. It was borrowed from [pop star] Cliff Richard and the Shadows and was about being a bandit from Brazil, being the quickest on the trigger and shooting to kill, which was about the extent of Mum's interest in the lyrics. In fact, she quite often didn't make it past the opening word - a loudly shouted "Ole!", which kept it simple for everyone who did not speak Gaelic but confused those of us who spoke absolutely no Spanish. [My sister] Vanessa and I translated the word as "Hooray!" But the meaning was clear either way. My mother was here, she was armed, and you bet your insurrecting Commie ass she was dangerous."

The tale rockets back and forth charmingly, with Nicola's childhood bumping up against Alexandra's current visits to holy family sites, with Mum's dreaded childhood fancy dress parties not preventing her from forcing similar ghastly arrangements on her own children, with the added frisson that you might be dressed up in some silly costume and bouncing down the road to a party but in Rhodesia you better be packing a gun in case rebels decided to attack.

Fuller shows her parents at old age, finally perhaps discovering a resting place in Zambia where they and the land and the people are at an uneasy peace of sorts. By that time we better understand a woman who attended boarding school and whose best friend as a child might have been a chimp, a woman who blithely champions people like Che Guevara (you know who she admires because she names her pets after them) but can't be bothered with "the people" themselves in all their pushy reality. Tragedy, war, struggle, lost children, hunting parties, lost wars, hasty retreats, lost countries, bouts of depression or madness or going "wobbly" if you prefer, and many many drinks -- war-ravaged Africa is, if not romantic, unquestionably vivid in these pages.

"Here's to us," goes one of Nicola's toasts. "There's none like us and if there were, they're all dead." Fuller brings her mother's world and society fully to life here, as wonderfully as she did in *Don't Let's Go To The Dogs Tonight*. If you liked that book, don't hesitate. If you're a fan of *West With The Night* or *Out Of Africa*, here's a far more complicated and modern look at the continent in all its bloody, confusing and addictive glory. Now no mucking about: Fuller's next memoir better be an Awful Book about her dad.



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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with a free copy of the book in advance of publication. He receives far more books than he can cover, so they are provided without any guarantee of coverage.

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**Zoe Triska: 'The Night Circus' Review: The Next 'Harry Potter'?**

So should you read Erin Morgenstern's debut novel, "The Night Circus?" The short answer is, "Yes." The book is both engaging and magical, entrancing the reader every step of the way. Even the first three sentences of the novel, as seen above, transport the reader to another place.

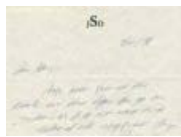
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