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Out of Africa

Unpublished novelist scores with memoir about growing up on the troubled continent

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Let's not muck about. This may only be January, but it's perfectly clear that writer Alexandra Fuller's memoir about growing up in Africa — "Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight" — is destined to be one of the most memorable books of the year.

Rave reviews are coming in from publications like Entertainment Weekly and USA Today, with many more likely to follow.

It's a marked change for Fuller, who has written nine novels that were "spectacularly unpublished," she laughs, until getting an agent and then a publisher within nine days.

"It was just surreal how quickly it happened," said Fuller, who now lives in

Wyoming with her husband and two kids.

"The only way to deal with that in any appropriate manner is to just drink so much champagne. I was glued to the ceiling for a few months."

The beauty of "Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight" is that it's written without apology or explanation, despite being

about a white family in Africa, fighting off the blacks in war-torn Zimbabwe or scrambling to get by in Zambia. Fuller simply presents her world matter-of-factly.

"Thank you for recognizing the lack of judgment," said the 32-year-old.

"That took tremendous restraint, and I found that occasionally judgment would slip in, despite myself. I wanted people to



Alexandra Fuller's response to the success of her book, "Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight" (left), was to "just drink so much champagne. I was glued to the ceiling."

know I wasn't a racist and that Mum drank because she had reason to. And then I thought, people are intelligent. They can figure it out."

Fuller grew up with her parents and older sister, Vanessa, on various farms around the continent. Zimbabwe, especially, was wracked by civil war — there were about 5 million blacks and 200,000 whites. The blacks, understandably, felt they should be in charge instead of the other way around.

That meant Dad was often away from home fighting the "terrorists," while Mum — a larger-

than-life character who loved Africa bitterly — would charge about taking care of the farm and then get to half-mast (Fuller's term for when Mum was drunk and her eyelids were nearly closed).

It's a funny, gripping tale, for Fuller doesn't think twice about the life she leads. Picking off fleas, practicing firing a gun or bandaging a wound (in case the adults are all killed), running with the family pack of dogs, learning to her astonishment that black children have last names, too — it's all the same to her and great, terrifying fun.

Fuller's family survived it all — despite losing three siblings at young ages to one tragedy or another. So dealing with the odd circumstance of Fuller sharing their story with the world should be small potatoes.

"If this book was just about my parents or just about my family without any sort of other historical context, I don't think I would have done it," said Fuller. "They didn't sign some contract at birth: 'We acknowledge that one day you may grow up and be a writer and tell everybody that we drink too much.'"

Though it's stated in the author bio on the dust jacket of her book, Fuller also takes exception to the idea that her childhood — filled with enough food to eat and enough books to read, a great education and the opportunity to go to college — could be described as "hardscrabble."

"Someone else said to me, 'Did you realize at the time you were having an extraordinary childhood?' Well, no, of course I didn't."

"But it was not extraordinary. To grow up in war and a certain amount of poverty with the constant threat of violence and with parents who are at least by certain American psychobabble standards [dysfunctional] — I think that's actually a pretty normal childhood."

"An extraordinary childhood is to grow up in a time of peace without the threat of violence, without hunger, with two parents who are completely loving and read you 'Wind in the Willows.'"

Fuller laughed. "My kids don't know right now they're having an extraordinary childhood, although I've advised them to take notes so they get it right when their books come out."



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