

Quibbling with Fuller's 'Scribbling'

**Scribbling the Cat:
Travels With an African Soldier**
By Alexandra Fuller
The Penguin Press, 256 pp., \$24.95

By Michael Giltz
Special for USA TODAY

Alexandra Fuller can't get out of Africa. She was born in England but spent most of her young life in war-torn Zimbabwe (then called Rhodesia) and later Malawi and Zambia. The troubled continent has been the source of her literary inspiration.

Fuller's best-selling memoir, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, vividly depicted her childhood after her father went off to war. The women and children who were left behind learned to fire guns, apply first aid and save a bullet for themselves if worse came to worst.

Now, a return to Africa to visit her folks brings Fuller in contact with K, a banana farmer and battle-scarred veteran of those conflicts. Curiosity scribbled the cat (slang for killed), but Fuller can't help herself. K is a compelling character and she soon persuades him to take her on a tour of the sites where he fought.



By Margaret Bonner

Fuller: Has gone from *Dogs* to *Cat*.

K is a frightening, fascinating man — a born-again Christian prone to violent outbursts, crying jags and troubled dreams (because of, presumably, the atrocities he committed). Almost immediately, K decides that Fuller is the wife God intends for him, and Fuller plays along. K's war buddies are just as memorable, especially Mapenga, who lives on an island with a "pet" lion that seems determined to make a meal out of the author.

Dogs, written from a young girl's perspective, didn't bother pointing out the obvious: that Fuller's parents held racist views and were wrong to support Rhodesia's minority-ruled government. She tries to maintain a certain impartiality in *Scribbling*, but now that she's an adult, this fence-sitting is tougher to pull off.

In addition, the country's black population comes off as just colorful background for much of this book. The history and politics of the country's wars are rarely broached. So the curiosity that scribbled the cat doesn't seem quite curious enough.

That Mapenga's righthand man on his island was once a soldier fighting against him is surely worth more than a passing mention. But when Fuller is sheepish about admitting she's a vegetarian, you give up hope she'll challenge these men's deepest beliefs.

Still, her descriptions of these soldiers of misfortune are provocative and vivid. And one thing is clear: K and others like him are marginalized and out of power; cruel, capricious governments treat them with a wary disdain; and the world at large pays them no mind.