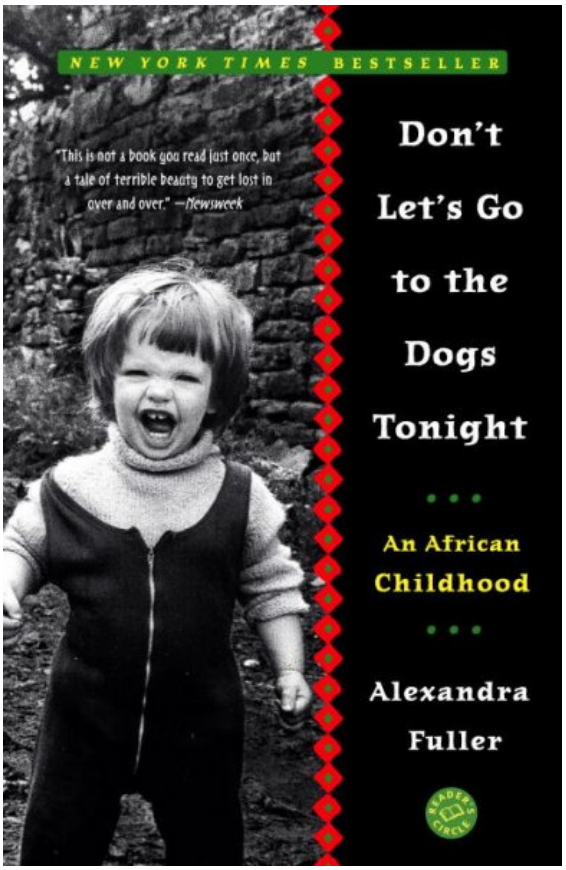

Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
Everson
Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org

the best place to begin

whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- Go to www.wcls.org
- Click on “catalog”
- In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Fuller compares the smell of Africa to "black tea, cut tobacco, fresh fire, old sweat, young grass." She describes "an explosion of day birds . . . a crashing of wings" and "the sound of heat. The grasshoppers and crickets sing and whine. Drying grass crackles. Dogs pant." How effective is the author in drawing the reader into her world with the senses of sound, smell, and taste? Can you find other examples of her ability to evoke a physical and emotional landscape that pulses with life? What else makes her writing style unique?

2. Given their dangerous surroundings in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia and a long streak of what young Bobo describes as "bad, bad luck," why does the Fuller family remain in Africa?

3. Drawing on specific examples, such as Nicola Fuller's desire to "live in a country where white men still ruled" and the Fuller family's dramatic interactions with African squatters, soldiers, classmates, neighbors, and servants, how would you describe the racial tensions and cultural differences portrayed in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, particularly between black Africans and white Africans?

4. *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* is rich with humorous scenes and dialogue, such as the visit by two missionaries who are chased away by the family's overfriendly dogs, a bevy of ferocious fleas, and the worst tea they have ever tasted. What other examples of comedy can you recall, and what purpose do you think they serve in this serious memoir?

5. Fuller describes the family's move to Burma Valley as landing them "right [in] the middle, the very birthplace and epicenter, of the civil war in Rhodesia." Do her youthful impressions give a realistic portrait of the violent conflict?

6. The New York Times Book Review described Nicola as "one of the most memorable characters of African memoir." What makes the author's portrait of her mother so vivid? How would you describe Bobo's father?

7. Define the complex relationship between Bobo and Vanessa. How do the two sisters differ in the

ways that they relate to their parents?

8. Animals are ever present in the book. How do the Fullers view their domesticated animals, as compared to the wild creatures that populate their world?

9. Of five children born to Nicola Fuller, only two survive. "All people know that in one way or the other the dead must be laid to rest properly," Alexandra Fuller writes. Discuss how her family deals with the devastating loss of Adrian, Olivia, and Richard. Are they successful in laying their ghosts to rest?

10. According to Bobo, "Some Africans believe that if your baby dies, you must bury it far away from your house, with proper magic and incantations and gifts for the gods, so that the baby does not come back." Later, at Devuli Ranch, soon after the narrator and her sister have horrified Thompson, the cook, by disturbing an old gravesite, Bobo's father announces that he is going fishing: "If the fishing is good, we'll stay here and make a go of it. If the fishing is bad, we'll leave." What role does superstition play in this book? Look for examples in the behavior and beliefs of both black and white Africans.

11. Consider Fuller's interactions with black Africans, including her nanny in Rhodesia and the children she plays "boss and boys" with, as well as with Cephas the tracker and, later, the first black African to invite her into his home. Over the course of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, how does the narrator change and grow?

12. By the end of the narrative, how do you think the author feels about Africa? Has the book changed your own perceptions about this part of the world?
(Questions issued by publisher.)

Quirky Bio Info about Alexandra Fuller

In a 2004 Barnes & Nobel interview, Fuller shared some fascinating facts about herself:

"There isn't a moment that I am not thinking about Africa. I am either thinking about it in relation to what I am writing at that time, or I am thinking about it in relations to where I am geographically (I am writing this at my desk in my office overlooking the Tetons, which could not be further, you might argue, from Zambia. Yet, I have been thinking all morning that the cry of an angry great blue heron -- they are nesting in the aspens at the end of our property -- sound like Chacma baboons)."

"The best way for me to evoke the same sense of place and the same smells and the same space of Africa is when I am out riding. I have a rather naughty little Arab mare, whom I accompany (it would be an exaggeration to claim that I "ride" her) into the mountains almost every day when the snow is clear. Something about being away from people, alone with a horse and a dog, fills me with an intense sense of joy and well-being, and I always return from these excursions inspired (if not to write, then to be a better mother, or to cook something fabulous, or to do the laundry)."

"I have come to the conclusion that I can only write about something if I have actually smelled it for myself. I have no idea what this says about me, but I think it's a fact of my work. I also cannot think of something without immediately evoking its smell (for example, if I think of my father, I think of the smell of cigarette smoke and the bitter scent of his sweat -- he has never once worn deodorant, so his smell is very organic and wonderfully his -- and of the faint aroma of tea and engine oil he exudes). Once, in France, a particularly thorough journalist (he had 50 questions for me!) said, somewhat accusingly, 'You have written here in your book' (it was *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*) 'about the smell of frog sperm. What exactly does frog sperm smell of?' And without hesitating for a moment, I replied, 'Cut turnips,' which I think surprised both of us."

Author Bio: Alexandra Fuller

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2004.

Alexandra Fuller was born in England but grew up in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe since 1980) from the age of two, during the period of struggle between white settlers who were intent on retaining rule and the black Rhodesian nationalists fighting for independence. Like their parents, Tim and Nicola, the Fuller children, learned to strip, clean, load, and fire the guns in the house, including automatic weapons. They traveled in groups, always on the lookout for mines and booby traps, and at home they were alert for the natural hazards of the region, including the scorpions, snakes, and six-foot monitor lizards that often found their way into the house. Sheila Shoup commented in School Library Journal that "this was no ordinary childhood, and it makes a riveting story thanks to an extraordinary telling."

In Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood Fuller writes about what it was like to be a privileged white child in a segregated society. Despite her privileged status, her life was extremely difficult. Three of her siblings are buried in Africa: one died of meningitis, one drowned, and one died at birth. The farm on which Fuller and her surviving sibling, Vanessa, lived as children was simple. The buildings, including the house, were crude, there was no indoor plumbing, and their parents were constantly trying to pay off their debts. Fuller writes that during droughts, crocodiles searched their fields for water. The family lived in extremely hot and humid conditions, and slept surrounded by the humming of mosquitoes.

One of Fuller's most vivid memories is one of her mother, on horseback and pregnant, singlehandedly fighting off squatters attempting to take over their land. Fuller's mother drank heavily and suffered from manic depression. "Like the formidable parents of other memoirs . . . Fuller's mother qualifies for the rogue's gallery of unforgettable antagonists," wrote Gail Caldwell in the Boston Globe. "The family story within Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight is all the more remarkable for the complexity it contains, rendered here, like Fuller's Africa, with startling, laconic passion." Spectator contributor Robert Oakeshott noted of Fuller's mother that "she survives, and my guess is that most readers will find themselves feeling a good deal of sympathy for her and admiring her courage."

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

★ Fuller, Alexandra. Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood. New York: Random House, 2001.

A classic is born in this tender, intensely moving and even delightful journey through a white African girl's childhood. Born in England and now living in Wyoming, Fuller was conceived and bred on African soil during the Rhodesian civil war (1971-1979), a world where children over five "learn[ed] how to load an FN rifle magazine, strip and clean all the guns in the house, and ultimately, shoot-to-kill." With a unique and subtle sensitivity to racial issues, Fuller describes her parents' racism and the wartime relationships between blacks and whites through a child's watchful eyes. Curfews and war, mosquitoes, land mines, ambushes and "an abundance of leopards" are the stuff of this childhood. "Dad has to go out into the bush... and find terrorists and fight them"; Mum saves the family from an Egyptian spitting cobra; they both fight "to keep one country in Africa white-run." The "A" schools ("with the best teachers and facilities") are for white children; "B" schools serve "children who are neither black nor white"; and "C" schools are for black children. Fuller's world is marked by sudden, drastic changes: the farm is taken away for "land redistribution"; one term at school, five white students are "left in the boarding house...

"This is not a book you read just once, but a tale of terrible beauty to get lost in over and over." (**Newsweek**)

"By turns mischievous and openhearted, earthy and soaring . . . hair-raising, horrific, and thrilling." (**The New Yorker**)

"Ms. Fuller gives us . . . the Africa she knew as a girl, a place of cruel politics, violent heat and startling beauty, a land she makes vivid in all its 'incongruous, lawless, joyful, violent, upside-down, illogical certainty.'" (**The New York Times**)

Suggested Related Reading

All Over but the Shoutin', by Rick Bragg.

I'll Know It When I See It; a daughter's search for home in Ireland, by Alice Carey.

Dinner with Mugabe: the untold story of a freedom fighter who became a tyrant, by Heidi Holland.

Casting with a Fragile Thread: a story of sisters and Africa, by Wendy Kann.

House of Stone: the true story of a family divided in war-torn Zimbabwe, by Christina Lamb.

The Color of Water: a Black man's tribute to his White mother, by James McBride.

Where We have Hope: a memoir of Zimbabwe, by Andrew Meldrum.

The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio: how my mother raised 10 kids on 25 words or less, by Terry Ryan.

Rainbow's End: a memoir of childhood, war and an African farm, by Lauren St. John.

Web Resources

Alexandra Fuller official website: www.alexandrafuller.org

Bold Type author interview: www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0303/fuller/interview.html

U.S. State Department Zimbabwe file: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5479.htm

LitLovers Guide: www.litlovers.com/guide_dontletsgo.html#reviews

Human Rights Watch report on Zimbabwe: www.hrw.org/en/africa/zimbabwe