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Maria Thomas. *Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage, and Other Stories.* New York, N.Y.: Soho Press, 1987. 235 pp. $14.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-939149-06-3; $17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-939149-02-5.

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The Expatriate Experience in Africa

Reviewer's Note: This review is one in a series covering works by non-African authors but with African settings. The works reviewed in this group are those deemed by the members of H-AfrLitCine to make significant contributions to the corpus of African-related literature. E.B.

Writing under the pen name Maria Thomas, the late Roberta Warrick authored numerous short stories, one novella, and one novel. These are contained in *Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage and Other Stories*, *African Visas*, and *Antonia Saw the Oryx First*.

Thomas brings both keen artistic talent and deep understanding of Africa, its history as well as its people (both indigenous and expatriate) to her literary works. The artistry comes from the usual mysterious combination of genetics, education, dedication, experience, and all the rest of that intangible, indescribable we call creativity.

The depth of understanding talent is more tangible, coming from a combination of her own sensitivity and her experiences. Those experiences include especially her stint in Ethiopia with the Peace Corps beginning in 1971 and stops of varying durations in Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and Liberia.

Having studied painting and literature prior to 1971, Thomas gravitated toward the art, culture and language of each of the African countries in which she and her husband lived and served. This interest led her to begin writing stories from the perspective of the expatriate, particularly as the experience of the expatriate touches, sometimes collides, with that of the indigenous population.

(Thomas and her husband perished on August 7, 1989, in a plane crash along the Ethiopian-Sudan border while on a journey to inspect a refugee camp.)

Come to African and Save Your Marriage and Other Stories, Thomas' first published collection, includes 14 works, many of which originally appeared in periodicals such as Story Quarterly, the North American Review, and The Antioch Review. Typical of Thomas' work, this collection presents a variety views of expatriates, ranging from those who romanticize Africa, who seek to take from Africa (even in the post-colonial era), who are defeated by Africa, who seek Africa honestly, who accept Africa for what she is, and who genuinely give to and receive from this land and its people.

To a limited extent, the collection is reminiscent of Joyce's *Dubliners*. Just as that collection uses a progression and recurring themes as its unifying elements, so also does Thomas' collection. However, whereas the pessimism of Joyce's work remains largely unallayed, Thomas' stories intermingle negative and positive plots and themes often from story to story but also occasionally within stories. Both this progression and the contrast between the negative and positive seem most obvious in "Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage," the opening work, and "Second Rains," the concluding selection. Both focus on marriage, the former on a failed relationship, the latter on a complex but positive marriage of individuals, cultures, and, most of all, needs.

Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage chronicles the relationship of Lewis and Marlene Rashak, American expatriates in Africa because Lewis' contract with a university in the US is certain not to be renewed, according to Marlene. Lewis' career has always been something of a team effort (e. g., Marlene's insistence that she BOUGHT Lewis' Ph. D.); consequently, salvaging Lewis' career is inextricably linked to saving their marriage, and coming to Africa is a desperate, ill-fated attempt to rescue both of these.

They fail in both. Lewis takes on a lover and hates Africa. Marlene takes on a younger lover, one of Lewis' students, and thinks she loves Africa. Both of those relationships inevitably fail and fatally damage that of Lewis and Marlene. With their children in tow, they flee Africa,

Marlene knowing that when they arrive in the US, they will complete the divorce she knows must come.

Both Lewis and Marlene have come to Africa under false pretenses, not to learn of Africa or to give to Africa, as the mission of the Peace Corps intended. Lewis has come to teach Africa. Marlene has come to exploit Africa to save the marriage.

The concluding story in the collection, "Second Rains," heals the racial and personal wounds revealed and even deepened in "Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage." Thomas leads her audience to this story of healing with intervening pieces that continue her examination of the land and people of Africa and the foreigners who come to this land. The stories tend to be a mix of negative and positive experiences, depending upon the motives of the expatriate characters.

Peace Corps volunteer Steve Williams ("Why the Sky Is So Far Away") wants to SAVE Africa by administering disease-preventing vaccinations. However, his goal is to record high numbers of vaccinations given. Eventually, his perception of the hopelessness of the task overwhelms him, defeats him, even drives him to madness.

For Gwendolyn ("Summer Opportunity"), African-American from Mississippi, being awarded a summer in Africa develops into her personal journey of coming of age journey and learning her own identity.

"A Thief in my House" chronicles the soap opera-like lives of a group of expatriates who refuse to adapt to African customs. They neither fit in nor respect the land they ostensibly have come to serve. "Silver Sugar from Bombay" continues the theme of failing to fit but especially focuses on prejudicial attitudes toward Asians (Indians) among the expatriates.

Jim Chance ("Jim Chance") exploits Africa by killing its wildlife not only for monetary gain but also because he is by nature a destroyer. However, for the artist Christine, a safari with this agent of destruction becomes a source of energy for her creativity. Like "Jim Chance," "Neighbors" also centers of a clash of cultures. However this clash is that of modern African culture versus the persistence of the primitive, especially aspect of jealousy and witchcraft.

Typical of a number of Thomas' stories, "Abdullah and Mariam" is built on comparisons and contrasts between personal relationships and group, often, of course, racial, relationships. This selection presents a love story between a man and a wife in contrast with a racial hate story cured by love.

"The Texan" returns to the theme of the failures of the expatriates, chronicling the degeneration of the nameless Texan from condescending idealism to violent hatred of the land and people of Kenya and Tanzania and ending in his murder of an African man but going unpunished for the act.

"Shellers" tells of expatriates seeking a kind of renewal of a relationship of brothers and some form of redemption but discovering only questions: Sometimes violence was the tenderness possible? Was resignation the only kind of love he could offer now?

"Mama Angelina's" reveals the infidelity and falsehood of a mixed group of expatriates–Russian, American, German–and also those Africans they touch in an Italian hotel in Africa. Falsehood, in fact, appears to be the common bond of the group.

Thomas returns to the experience of the African-American in Africa in "choobeedoo yum-yum and the anc." William Powell, the African-American, has always been cared for by others, a situation that persists during his time in Africa. That experience leaves him tormented, with no identity, alienated from all whites, Africans, African-Americans. Powell's feeble attempts to establish an identity lead to disaster for those about him. Rejected by the ANC because of his own disastrous failure leading to the death of one of their members, Powell can only make excuses that shift responsibility from him and can only seek refuge with someone who will take care of him.

"She hears falling, the Seed" reveals the violence of African-western contact. Emily Frazier's ring, supposedly an "Irish curse" icon, is emblematic of westerners as a curse on Africa. The contact with the west disrupts the Luo culture of Kenya. The Luo, now living in houses made of cartons and working in sugar factories operated by westerners, become thieves. The violence of the Luo world becomes a powerful attraction that develops into a fascination for Emily.

Returning to "Second Rains," the collection concludes with the love story of Charlotte Renoir, a member of the foreign service, and Kassahun Afewerk, an Ethiopian colleague of Charlotte's supervisor.

Unlike many of Thomas' expatriates, Charlotte seems to bring no agenda to Africa. She does not seek to "save it or its people. She does not come to exploit either the land or the people. She comes because she joined the foreign when she was very young. The pay was good. The travel was fun." No longer young but having kept herself up, in the 1970s and after having served in several

other posts around the world, Charlotte comes to politically volatile Ethiopia where her life undergoes a major change when Kassahun asks her to dinner. Breaking from her pattern of dating only Americans, Charlotte accepts. Eventually, Kassahun proposes marriage. Always forthright, Kassahun explains to her, "I am doing this to protect my children. I want them to have an American mother. I'm thinking of my sons and how to get them out of here."

At first angry and feeling exploited, Charlotte considers and accepts Kassahun's proposal. However, the marriage turns out to be far more than an arrangement to save Kassahun's sons from the impending violence, which is a continuation of the violence of 1961 in which Kassahun's brothers were killed during an attempted coup.

Charlotte continues in the foreign service but also becomes the mistress of an Ehtiopian household so completely that in the view of the Americans she has "gone native." Charlotte "seemed to bloom, as though nature had surprised her with some second rains, rains that came after the dry season had begun."

Not many month after Selassie is deposed in 1974, Kassahun faces certain death because he is "in the wrong tribe." Charlotte and his sons escape, they because of her. What may seem to have begun as a mutually exploitative relationship between Charlotte and Kassahun has indeed blossomed. Charlotte has gained new life. Kassahun has gained the life of his sons.

"Second Rains," then, closes the breach opened by "Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage." Like these two stories, then entire collection focuses on the perspective of the expatriate and contact between the expatriate and the indigenous populations. The entire collection is also similarly honest. Thomas is unbending in this honesty. Without vulgarity or gratuitous ugliness, but instead with respect and sensitivity, Thomas adds to the readers' respectful understanding of and sensitivity toward the land and peoples of the African continent.

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