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“It's my life, and if I want to run from it I can,” quips Tanya Shaffer. An incorrigible wanderer, Shaffer has a habit of fleeing domesticity for the joys and rigors of the open road. This time her destination is Ghana, and what results is a transformative year spent roaming the African continent. Eager to transcend the limitations of tourism, Shaffer works as a volunteer, building schools and hospitals in remote villages. At the heart of her tale are the profound, complex, often challenging relationships she forms with those she meets along the way.

Whether recounting a perilous boat trip to Timbuktu, a night of impassioned political debate in Ghana, or a fumbled romance in Burkina Faso, Shaffer portrays the collision of African and North American cultures with self-deprecating humor and clear-eyed compassion. Filled with warmth, candor, and an exuberant sense of adventure, **Somebody's Heart is Burning** raises provocative questions about privilege, wealth, and the true meaning of friendship.

Somebody's Heart Is Burning: A Woman Wanderer in Africa Details

Date : Published May 13th 2003 by Vintage (first published May 1st 2003)

ISBN : 9781400032594

Author : Tanya Shaffer

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : Travel, Cultural, Africa, Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Womens



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GoldenjoyBazyll says

I stated this book two years ago and put it down one day only to pick it back up today. I was supposed to finish it today. Someone's heart is burning- are not all of our hearts a fire in one way or another???? There was a moment in the book where she says "How could I explain my strange life to him? How could I tell yet another person here with everything that had been given to me, I was still restless and unsatisfied? That I felt driven to wander the earth in search of some elusive key that would unlock that chamber of my own happiness? How could I explain that I chose physical hardship; dysentery, heat rash, dizzying rides in crowded vehicles down bumpy potholed roads- hardship he had no choice but to endure- that I chose all of this, because it was the only thing that made me feel truly alive?"

Somehow- I know about this. I am a happy person however- there is something that happens to me while I am on my own adventures. I am alive in a way I cannot describe. While I definately suffer as she describes and maybe there have been times where I have been even worse- I would not trade it. There is something defining about all of it- everytime I return home I return with another little part of myself that somehow got away and was carried afar on the wind.

Chris says

The first paragraph (something about going to Africa to escape a boyfriend) led me to expect 300-pages of navel gazing. Happily, that wasn't the case (for the most part). This collection of short stories, fluidly told, follows a loose chronological order. At its best, we follow her unique experiences with Africans from all walks of life (rich, poor, urban, rural). She conveys their stories with a sharp, lively voice and makes some meaningful insights (with some clichés tossed in here and there). Near the end, though, I found myself becoming increasingly disenchanted with stories that I felt were trying to reach for greater emotional depth than what the words or experiences allowed.

Rhonda Sarantis says

I wasn't sure I would enjoy this book. I was afraid the writer would be a whiner.. Whenever someone escapes the continent to volunteer I'm suspect! But this woman has a good heart and shared stories about the people she met in Africa with warmth and respect. She learned some important life lessons that I learned from, too.

Ashley Lauren says

If you've seen my bookshelves you would know I'm a fan of memoirs - my favorites are either those who have experiences war, usually WWII, or women travelers. Don't bother trying to analyze that one.

Shaffer's memoir seemed very familiar. If you've ever read Incognito Street: How Travel Made Me a Writer,

Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone, or even Eat, Pray, Love (even though I mostly detest that book) you'll see the similarities. The driving force in these stories was a man back home. They all show a woman who wonders exactly why she travels - is it because she's running away or does she just love and enjoy what she's doing? It's hard, of course, to know. Part of a person, as a traveler, loves it. But the other part is exhausted. When you're away from the place you grew up, even if you've been there for quite some time, you never can quite let down all of your guard.

In that respect, Shaffer's memoir didn't dredge up new feelings for me, but it really wasn't her fault that she was the fifth or sixth woman traveling memoir I've ready, so I'm not downgrading for that.

I did find two things very unique and refreshing - pictures and people. Shaffer had snapshots scattered throughout and it was fascinating for me to go back and forth between her descriptions and compare them to the face in the photograph. And she described people a lot. In fact, every chapter was focused on someone else - someone she met along the journey. She didn't so much analyze them as she did talk about her experience with them and by the end of the chapter you realized how Shaffer felt changed by them. It was a very refreshing way to read a memoir. Of course, it was very "Shaffer-focused" but in the most outlooking way possible. You didn't hear too much me-feelings, and if you did it was in relation to someone else.

And now, like how I feel after every memoir, I want to go to Africa.

Christine says

The woman in this book has a wanderlust like none I've ever seen. She does lots of things that I would be afraid to do, like her crazy boat trip to Timbuktu. In some ways she is frustrating because she runs away from life to travel whenever things get difficult. But the book mostly concentrates on her travels, not why she left for them. Entertaining and interesting and gives a very balanced view of the countries in Africa that she visits, and touches on her struggles in seeing so much poverty around her.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

How long have I had this book sitting on my shelf? Months? Years, even?

Somebody's Heart is Burning is a memoir of the author's time in Africa. She has the usual African travel adventures---run ins with con artists, a bout of sickness, transportation difficulties. All the while, she's thinking about the fellow she left at home. But not enough to actually go home. And she really isn't having a great time in Africa. In addition to her African travel troubles, she has trouble getting along with the other volunteers.

So, my thoughts? One excellent story she shares with us. And that's about it. A nice little travel take.

Shannon says

A lovely, lyrical little book that accurately spills the gut-wrenching moments travel can create. Shaffer describes the lives of African travelers and African natives without complaint, without dramatizing the

conditions and with an almost loving reverie for the involuntary reverie of their lifestyles. Sadly, the author's note at the end points out that her trip, taken in the early 90s, was pre-AIDS epidemic. She hints that now she would find a very different scene before her.

Mitch says

This is actually one of my favorite travel writings, if you want to call it that. There is quite a strong social justice and multicultural flavor to this book, along with recognizably foreign encounters, so how could I not like it??

I also like the way Tanya wears her heart on her sleeve, so some of the content is pretty emotionally raw.

In some ways, her experiences were therapeutic, I suppose. I couldn't really identify with that, but it was interesting. Personally, travel like hers seems like a whole lot of new things to deal with, so it doesn't seem like the best time to be trying to solve problems you packed along with you...but that's just my take.

I was also able to see echoes of personal experiences I've had in her encounters, which of course made her book just that much more involving.

So yeah- I recommend it!

Jessica says

Somebody's Heart Is Burning is the memoir of a white American woman who spent a year in Africa, fleeing confusion over a relationship. ("It's my life, and if I want to run from it, I can," she asserts from the first page.) She begins as a work-camp volunteer in Ghana, and then visits Mali and East Africa as a tourist. I went into this book assuming I'd hate the narrator - given her circumstances for traveling, I figured she'd have a bit of an ego and would spend too much time implying that she is a Wonderful Person for having Taken Risks and Experienced Africa. And while she does have a bit of ego to her storytelling style, I was also reassured by how often she questioned her behavior and admitted that she didn't have all the answers. She admits when she acts wrongly, whether out of pride or selfishness or misplaced good intentions.

She travels so much and interacts with so many different people that a lot of the book is a blur. I feel like I picked up a lot of trivia but didn't leave the text with any real insights or understandings - not into Africa or into Tanya Shaffer. It's an enjoyable day's diversion for someone who enjoys reading memoirs or travel books, but that's about as much as it is.

Zinaj says

This is a book about a woman who decides to explore West Africa after she runs away from love. It tells of

her various friendships with other travellers and Africans, gives a bit of color about whites who decide to go work in Africa and talks about what she sees and experiences as she travels throughout the region.

Arlene says

Twenty years ago, this woman wanderer decided to wrestle with her personal relationship from a distance, from a far corner on this earth, namely Ghana, West Africa where she became a volunteer to build hospitals and schools. Though her year in Ghana gave her time to sort through that relationship, she didn't devote this entire book to her personal life. Fortunately for us, the readers, her main focus in this book was the incredibly unique and special relationships she developed with the many people who crossed her path while being a volunteer. Remember, she was not a typical tourist -- she lived the Ghana way -- working, eating, sleeping, traveling just as they did, and oh, the stories she did tell! She wrote with humor and candid emotion giving us an intimate picture of the people of Ghana, a picture not ordinarily seen in travel books.

In the past twenty years, just about every country in Africa has gone through tremendous changes -- political, social and economic changes. Today, could a woman wander through any part of Africa and have an experience similar to that of Tanya? If that answer is no, we readers should especially appreciate what we learned in this book about the true meaning of friendship.

Kojo Douglas says

Just so, so bad. I've been living in Ghana on and off for 15 years and this book just reveals a total lack of "getting it." I was surprised that I was able to actually finish this.

Sarah says

What separates this book from most travel writing is that Shaffer unwittingly exposes the real breakdown of intl development. I don't know that Shaffer understands that her experience is not really hers; it is the entire story of development projects in developing nations. Were there a section on critical analysis of international humanitarian projects, this would be the companion book to the text. Hers is a story that should be heard and understood when creating assumptions about problems and solutions in the third world.

Tuck says

not south africa, rather west (Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, then east to Indian ocean, but...) series of short vignettes of author's experiences slumming it and also working and helping and making many friends, some enemies, and lots of acquaintances in her peregrinations in africa. though she tries to synthesize west meets east, and international devel meets underdeveled that part falls short. the good parts are her bravery at meeting and trying to get to know regular folks, her willingness to dance, getting hot and sweaty. not a bad book, very grll-power in may ways, but i wish she could have articulated better the "big picture". but then, so do i:|

Zoe says

This book has an excellent structure, each chapter a different story about a different place, people/person or experience. This is the first memoir that I have come across that included photographs. When I read memoirs I tend to idealize a little and the photographs kept me grounded in the reality of the story in a way I haven't experienced before. I wish more memoirs had pictures! I thought that Tanya Shaffer did an amazing job writing about her experiences volunteering in Ghana and west Africa. She was very straight forward in her descriptions, but it's the people not the places that came alive most. I admire her knack and ability to write about people, bringing out their individual traits and quirks, making them almost tangible. It was very honest.

I rated this four stars instead of five, because I felt a lack of resolution in the stories. Shaffer, although a great storyteller, I feel didn't reflect much on her experiences which is something I really look for in a memoir. It's also a personal pet peeve of mine... I can't stand closing a book and feeling teased or dissatisfied. When I realized I'd reached the end of the book I was frustrated -- it ends on a cliffhanger, with the writer trying to make a decision about something, but you never find out what that decision is!
