
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

READING GROUP GUIDE

In some remote villages of Zimbabwe,
it is believed that a solar eclipse occurs
when a crocodile eats the sun.
This celestial crocodile, they say,
briefly consumes our life-giving star
as a warning that he is much displeased
with the behavior of man below.
It is the very worst of omens.

*WHEN A CROCODILE
EATS THE SUN*

A M E M O I R O F A F R I C A

B Y

P e t e r G o d w i n

A conversation with Peter Godwin

When *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* has already been published in your native homeland. How has the book been received in Africa?

Well, new books are incredibly expensive in Zimbabwe, and few there can afford them. Mostly people have picked it up in South Africa, where it has been at the top of their bestseller list since it came out in early November [2006]. I have had a stream of emails and letters from readers in Zimbabwe and South Africa who have strongly identified with the book and have written to me about their own parallel experiences. Many South Africans worry too about whether Zimbabwe might be some sort of awful long-term portent for them, and in that respect the implications of the book have been hotly debated there.

In When a Crocodile Eats the Sun you find out that all you've known of your father's early life has been his own creation. How did this affect your own sense of identity?

I think my sister Georgina put it best when she said that it felt like finding out as an adult that you are adopted. You're still the same person and have still had the same life, but somehow everything shifts a couple of degrees and you look at yourself in a new light. For me, the main bounty, actually, was understanding my father better. He had always been this rather remote, truculent character, and finally I was able to understand why—he had been

suppressing this central secret all along, keeping it even from his own children.

Your mother sounds like an extraordinary woman. Was she pleased with her portrayal in the book?

I think she was fine with it on the whole. She's an old trouper at the memoir business by now as she featured quite prominently in my first memoir, *Mukiwa*, which was about my childhood and accompanying her on her rounds as a doctor in the remote countryside of eastern Zimbabwe. Of course, I let her read this new book in draft, and where there were factual errors I corrected them. But anyone else's impression of you is never quite going to jibe with your own, is it? I think, though, she feels it's an accurate testament of the extraordinary situation we found ourselves in, and she collaborated with me in researching it, as did my sister.

Do you get to go back to Africa? You now have children — do your sons have a connection to the continent?

I go back to Africa as often as I can — several times a year. And my sons are very aware that they have an African heritage, an African dimension. I talk to them about it a lot. And they are always asking me to tell them stories of my childhood there. As they get older I will take them there more often and for longer.

With all the chaos that is now surrounding Zimbabwe, what hopes do you have for the future of the country?

Well, I struggle not to be too negative about it all, but frankly it's nothing less than a tragedy. This astonishing country with the most educated people in Africa, needlessly destroyed by a vengeful dictator. The damage done to Zimbabwe is profound. Many of its people have fled — by some counts nearly half the population. And

the economic infrastructure lies shattered. I think it will take a long time to rebuild, probably a generation.

Africa has been a big talking point in the news the past year—from Mugabe’s term election and his treatment of his opposition to celebrity adoptions. What would you like strangers to Africa to know about your homeland?

That it’s not just a blank screen onto which to project Western fantasies and guilt. That we cannot be its saviors, nor are we its nemeses. That Africa is a huge, diverse place with many different peoples and cultures. If we talked about Europe in the monolithic, undifferentiated way we refer to Africa, it would seem patently absurd—generalizing about Ireland and Romania, Greece and Sweden in one great geographical glop.

I think that Africa’s peoples have been ill served by their leaders, and that we—in the West—have historically enabled that abuse. In the Cold War we supported tyrants like Mobutu of Zaire (now Congo) just because they professed to be “anticommunist,” and the Soviets behaved similarly. Africa became our proxy battleground. It’s only recently that we in the West have started talking of accountability and transparency and democracy. I think that there is, to some extent, a “soft bigotry of low expectations” about the way the West regards Africa, and that is racist.

Researching any book can be tough. Researching your own family history must be incredibly taxing. Can you give me any insight into that process?

Well, for me it was both difficult and cathartic. It was incredibly moving when my father, as he lay dying, reintroduced himself to me, confessing that he was not the person he had always pretended to be, but this quite different man, with an entirely new life story. I could see a huge weight lifting off his chest as he did so. And I got to know him in a way I had never done before. But after wearing a

mask for fifty years, he really struggled to discard it, and I felt I had to let him proceed at his own pace and not push him. I deliberately didn't go back to Poland, where he had grown up, to do my own research, as I wanted to write about his boyhood through the prism of his own memories.

How often and when do you write?

In general, I write at home, in our apartment in New York, in a book-lined study that overlooks Riverside Park, with a view of a statue of Joan of Arc on horseback, brandishing her sword at the Hudson River. I try to write every day—on the principal that it's all about getting into a writing routine. But, of course, there are long periods where you are doing research and not actually writing real prose. For that, you really have to concentrate and tune out the rest of your life. You need to really inhabit the material. I did two big chunks of writing at artists' colonies, Yaddo in upstate New York, and MacDowell in New Hampshire.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Godwin opens and closes his memoir with the incineration of his father. Why might he have chosen to bookend the story in this way? How does the image of fire resonate through the rest of the book?
2. A major theme in the memoir is home. The Godwins are torn among the various places they have lived. Discuss how the various family members react to this fractured sense of home.
3. How does Godwin's discovery that his father grew up Jewish in Poland affect the relationship between the two men? Why would the author's father hide this fact for so long?
4. The experience of the Jews in Europe becomes a major theme in the memoir. What are the parallels with the white and black experiences in Africa?
5. Near the beginning of the book, Prince Biyela tells Godwin a story about Biyela's legendary grandfather: "When they heard that my grandfather Nkosani had been shot, they ran back to the tent and said to the journalist there, 'Now that our *induna* [leader] has been killed, there is no point in making a report anymore,' and with that they killed him" (page 9). Why might Godwin, himself a journalist, have placed this unsettling story at the beginning of the book? What is the role that reporting plays in the memoir?

6. When the author's father emigrates to Africa he becomes George Godwin, "a new man." What is Peter Godwin's attitude toward his father's exile and escape? How does his father's story resonate with his own?
7. In chapter six, Godwin alludes to the Chimera, a monster from Greek myth said to be part lion, part goat, and part serpent. How does this monster symbolize Zimbabwe? Can you identify other metaphorical Chimeras in the memoir?
8. Whites in Africa could be said to represent two related and often dissonant forces: colonization and democratization. In what ways have these forces been positive and/or negative? What is the attitude of the white Africans in the book toward their own historical role on the continent? How does that attitude compare with that of black Africans?
9. Godwin's parents ultimately come to fear leaving their own house. With the situation so dangerous, why do the Godwins refuse to flee? What does the author think about this refusal?
10. Godwin's mother works in a hospital. What role does her profession play in the memoir? How might the short life expectancy in Zimbabwe, a country plagued by AIDS, relate to people's attitudes toward life, death, and purpose?
11. Godwin takes the title of his book from an African tribal belief that a solar eclipse occurs when a crocodile eats the sun: the very worst of omens. How do the solar eclipses—along with their portents—in the memoir echo other, metaphorical eclipses? Where else in the book do figurative crocodiles appear?
12. Africa is often noted for its underdevelopment and widespread poverty. Did reading this memoir bring you closer to understanding why Africa is still poor?