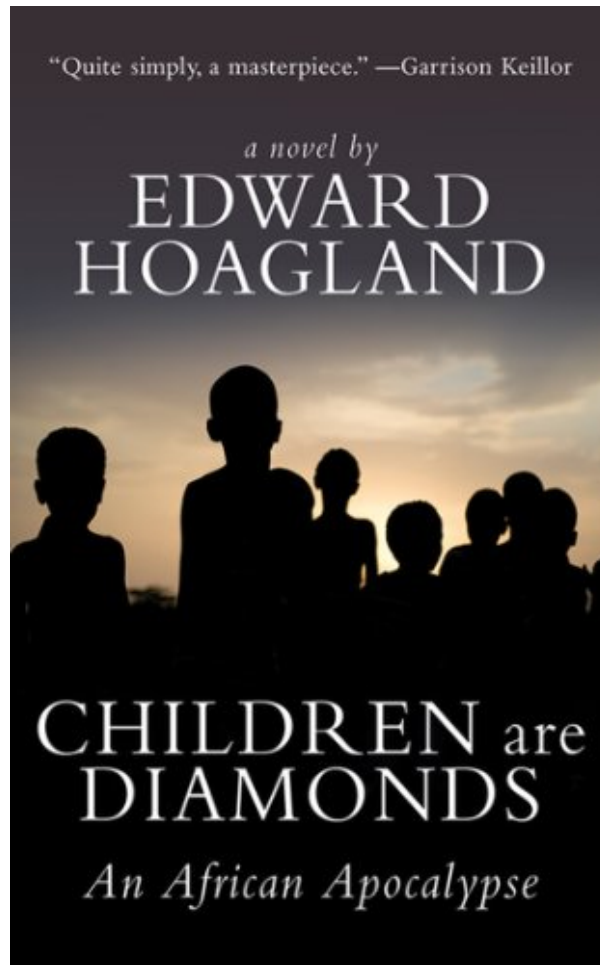


CHILDREN ARE DIAMONDS: AN AFRICAN APOCALYPSE BY EDWARD HOAGLAND



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"Quite simply, a masterpiece." —Garrison Keillor

a novel by

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CHILDREN are
DIAMONDS

An African Apocalypse

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From Booklist

Revered for his essays, most recently collected in *Sex and the River Styx* (2011), Hoagland is also an intrepid fiction writer. In his newest novel, a work of throttling intensity, he draws on his extensive sojourns in Africa to portray Hickey, an American schoolteacher improvising a “knockabout” life as a “guide, ne’er-do-well, aid worker, what-have-you” in central Africa. A pragmatist, Hickey smuggles diamonds and gold as he tries to help destitute people starving in the vise of civil war and brutality beyond comprehension. Tough and impish Ruth Parker runs an isolated, overwhelmed clinic and refuses to give up even after being abducted and possibly raped. The two reach out warily to each other within the maelstrom of famine, torture, genocide, disease, and corruption, struggling to rescue a group of traumatized and doomed children against surreal adversity. The ferocious lucidity of Hoagland’s language and the depth of his characters as they navigate political complexity, hellish violence, endless fear, persistent desire, and desperate calculations of survival make for a shattering tale of epic suffering, bitter irony, and miraculous flashes of beauty. --Donna Seaman

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This is not the Africa of Isak Dinesen, nor the Africa of Joy Adamson. This is the Africa of civil wars and tribal massacres, where the Lord's Resistance Army recruits child-soldiers after forcing them to kill their parents and eat their hearts. The aid workers who voluntarily subject themselves to life here are a breed of their own.

Meet Hickey, an American school teacher in his late thirties, an American school teacher who burns his bridges with the school board and goes to Africa as an aid worker. Working for an agency in Nairobi, one of his jobs is to drive food and medical supplies to Southern Sudan to an aid station run by Ruth, a middle-aged woman, who acts as nurse, doctor, hospice worker, feeder of starving children, and witness. Ruth is gruff but efficient, and Hickey, who is usually drawn to youth and beauty, is struck by her devotion. Returning to Nairobi, he can't forget what he has seen.

When the violence and chaos in the region increase to a fever pitch and aid workers are being slaughtered or evacuated, Hickey is asked to save Ruth overland by Jeep. What happens to them and the children that have joined their journey is the searing climax of this novel. Hoagland paints an unflinching portrait of a living hell at its worst, and yet amid that suffering there is hope in the form of humility, sacrifice, and life-affirming friendship.

- Sales Rank: #584263 in eBooks
- Published on: 2013-06-01
- Released on: 2013-06-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Most helpful customer reviews

15 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

A devastating novel of the African Apocalypse

By Vermonter

This novel will stay with me a long while. Set in 1995, the story concerns the interaction of a failed New Hampshire teacher working for a small NGO and the multiple and complex ethnic and sectarian fault lines in Central Africa. With vivid and sickening violence and disregard for human life by tribes and governments, the book is not an easy read; definitely not a beach novel. In fact, several times I had to remind myself I was reading a novel and not a memoir.

What is really sad is the fact that in 2013, almost 20 years later the same situations and individuals are still causing hardships and destruction. South Sudan (Juba) is now an independent nation, but the LRA is still horrendous, the regime in Sudan is still slaughtering its own people, famine is still endemic to the region due to political agendas, the SPLA is still fighting and the tribes are still killing over cattle and land. The great powers are still using aid and weapons to support their geopolitical games. Children are still the victims.

However, Edward Hoagland has written a novel as much about a flawed human being as he has a historical situation. The main character Hickey loves children and risks his life to save them from refugee camps and warfare. But he also paternalistically uses poor and striving African women for his own pleasures

throughout. There is no simple answers in this book--for example, are NGO's prolonging the violence by feeding and providing medicine to both (all?) sides of the conflict?

I recommend this novel highly, but a quick peek at Wikipedia to get the background of the situation and a good Central African map would help.

17 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

Well worth reading....

By Andrew Mendelssohn

I discovered *Children are Diamonds* after reading a review of the book; I bought the book expecting another stereotyped softened version of Africa. Much to my shock, the book proved to be something much deeper, and for that reason, much more effective than anything I expected.

I won't rehash the plot except to say that it is a first person narrative done by an occasional aide worker (and otherwise ne'er do well, to quote our narrator) who, over the course of the book, undertakes three trips to southern Sudan (now South Sudan) for a second tier relief agency. The events of the book take place in 1995 and are largely accurate. Our protagonist starts his narrative seemingly numb, but by the end of the book his heart is partially broken, and so are the readers'. This isn't a book for the squeamish, especially the last chapter: the images are harsh, and so are the decisions that Hoagland's characters face.

A few last comments: I found Hoagland's writing style difficult at first. He prefers both long, run-on sentences and even longer paragraphs. He also has a depth of knowledge about Africa and the Sudan that requires the reader to know a significant amount of historical background info to fully enjoy the nuances of the book. Nevertheless, this is a book that rewards the dedicated reader. I hope the book gains a wider audience.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

"Disasters here can swallow you in Africa, and the disasters, too, get swallowed up, which may be why we Rolling Stones fool the

By Amelia Gremelspacher

This quote answers one of my most difficult questions. How do these people continue to face the enormity of the daily emergency of Africa. Each child you help has left another crowd of children not to be saved. A shattering scene involves our narrator being tasked by his would be lover, Ruth, to pick a patient to drive with him to Nairobi. Too attractive, and a girl might be grabbed for rape. Too strong, and a man may be drafted. But the weak and the profoundly ill will not survive, better a place for just the right child. In this case it is the deeply likable, wall-eyed YaYa.

The author has masterfully resisted the temptation to arrange the action in a straight column. He allows us to waver in the mad fate that surviving a day requires, yet he saves us just short of utter despair. For a certain type of person, the mud and the chaos weaves a type of awful home that is not able to be escaped. These people are not saints; they are wounded healers. Many of them are dilettantes, risk seekers, competitive aid workers. In answering the question, "why try here", the writing drew me in to the point that I was literally startled to still be warm, fed, and safe when I looked up.

Hoagland's writing enmeshes the reader into the world where nothing works and discord burns across whole peoples. Yet it is not repellent. It is a challenge to start to even glimpse what it takes to understand Africa, and to wonder rather, "Why haven't I tried.?" This isn't a book to be missed. This author has captured a corner of our world which needs to be seen.

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