



Crossing the Heart of Africa: An Odyssey of Love and Adventure

Julian Smith

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Here is the amazing true story of Julian Smith, who retraced the journey of legendary British explorer Ewart "the Leopard" Grogan, the first man to cross the length of Africa, in hopes of winning the heart of the woman he loved.

In 1898 the dashing young British explorer Ewart "the Leopard" Grogan was in love. In order to prove his mettle to his beloved - and her aristocratic stepfather - he set out on a quest to become the first person to walk across Africa, "a feat hitherto thought by many explorers to be impossible" (New York Times, 1900).

In 2007 thirty-five-year-old American journalist Julian Smith faced a similar problem with his girlfriend of six years . . . and decided to address it in the same way Grogan had more than a hundred years before: he was going to retrace the Leopard's 4,500-mile journey for love and glory through the lakes, volcanoes, savannas, and crowded modern cities of Africa.

Crossing the Heart of Africa is the unforgettable account of twin adventures, as Julian beautifully interweaves his own contemporary journey with Grogan's larger-than-life tale of charging elephants, cannibal attacks, deadly jungles, and romantic triumph.

Crossing the Heart of Africa: An Odyssey of Love and Adventure Details

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From Reader Review Crossing the Heart of Africa: An Odyssey of Love and Adventure for online ebook

Kate Lorraine says

I love books that remind me about the complexity of humanity, as this one did. The author tells the story of a man who, spurred by love, makes his way from southern Africa to Cairo in the late 1800s. Interwoven among that story is the author's own parallel journey as one final solo adventure before his upcoming marriage. The entire book is fascinating, from the details of Grogan's expedition to the reminders of how much exploration and civilization has come at the cost of natives who never asked to be "civilized." It's the kind of book that reminds you how small you really are in the grand scheme of things, but also how big of an impact our decisions actually make on the world and the fellow humans who live here with us. And of course, that love, while different for everyone, is the one thing worth crossing the world for.

Rebecca Davis says

This book made me ask a couple questions I hadn't before: what is the purpose of travel writing, and traveling, anyway?

Grogan's epic journey deserves the Candace Millard treatment -- years of research, extraordinary effort to put oneself in the protagonist's shoes, and new findings. (Perhaps "Lost Lion of Empire," which Smith cites in the bibliography, incorporates these things).

But this book is categorized as "travel/memoir," so it leaned more heavily on Smith's own experience and emotional state as he contemplates marrying his girlfriend of seven years. This is his story, and he's entitled to it, but a., it made me sad for the state of gender relations that some men fear adulthood in this way, and women must spend years of heartache waiting them out, and b., the swirl of this emotion overwhelms both the historical story and Smith's being present in his modern-day African travels.

There is something so self-indulgent here that it proxies how poorly we often travel: flightily, at the center of our own universe, only considering the new places as they relate to us, rather than seeking the immersion a more historical book, or deeper travel experience, might provide. By his own admission, Smith is the sort who skips around from place to place quickly, and it shows.

Connie says

Loved this book. I read many books on Africa...modern episodes and historical adventures. This one grabbed me, probably because I have been to most of the places described. I love how the author wove Ewart Grogan's trek in and out with his own. I have read about many African Explorers, but was unfamiliar with Grogan....who in some ways, surpassed them all! Wow! What a read.

Bernie Gourley says

This book tells two tales in parallel, connected by one theme: travel for love. The author, Julian Smith, recounts the experience of Ewart Grogan, an English explorer whose life straddled the 19th and 20th centuries. Grogan traveled the length of Africa from South to North and recounted his experience in a book entitled “From Cape to Cairo.” The purpose of his grand endeavor was to prove his worth as man. Grogan was in love with a woman whose family was of higher station, and he believed that if he could only do what had never been done before, then the objections to his “marrying up” would dissolve.

The other story is Smith’s own attempt to retrace Grogan’s route across the length of the continent. While Smith doesn’t have to prove his worth, his motivations are more complex and tied up with his engagement to be married. Maybe Smith’s motivation is best summed up as a desire to prove to himself and / or his fiancé that he had sufficient commitment and fortitude to get him through rough times—a characteristic relevant to both marriage and crossing some of the world’s least developed countries.

Of his own admission, Smith’s journey was to be far less arduous than Grogan’s by virtue of the fact that he’d be traveling by taxis, motorcycles, buses, and ferries. Grogan and other 19th century explorers were subject to hazards far graver and more ever-present. For one thing, in Grogan’s day virtually everybody who spent any significant time in Africa got malaria. It wasn’t a question of if but when and how seriously. Even if you escaped malaria, there were myriad other tropical diseases to bring one to one’s knees. Next, there was the tribal environment in which one would travel through dozens of tribal territories, all of whose chiefs expected tribute and many of which were outright hostile. For Smith, rule of law was present in some form or fashion along most of his route, such that no one could just murder him and get off scot-free. There was also the risk of crew desertions that could cripple an expedition. Traveling parties had to carry huge amounts of goods from surveying equipment to gifts to medicines to food stuffs. Still, they had to obtain many of the party’s needs along the route. Among other things, this meant hunting animals that weren’t as docile as livestock. Anything less than an instant kill meant having to trudge into tall grass after a wounded creature that had a far greater killing capacity at close range.

This isn’t to say that Smith’s journey was adventure free. Anyone who has traveled in Africa knows that getting from place to place remains a slow and exhausting process. And many of the things that undermined Grogan’s trip also undermined Smith’s, e.g. the author suffered extended fever. But the most devastating factor for Smith’s travels was the fact that parts of Sudan were lawless and a brutal war was being fought. While Grogan barely managed to drag himself through the swampy landscape, Smith was unable to proceed overland because of the conflict. In telling of his travels, Smith discusses many of the dilemma’s that traveler’s face today (e.g. to give people money or not, how to contend with bureaucrats.) Among the travels that modern-day readers might be interested in is Smith’s visit to a gorilla sanctuary.

I enjoyed this mix of travelogue and history. The book gives one insight into the changing nature of the world and, particularly, what was once called the Dark Continent. [Note: while that may sound either racist or awash in a negativity bias, I’ve read that the reason it was called that was that when the 19th century explorers were traveling through much of the continent was unmapped, i.e. blacked out.]

I’d recommend this book for anyone who is interested in travel in Africa—past or present.

North Idaho College Molstead Library Reads says

One of the best books I've read. This is a true, hilarious account of a current-day journalist who follows the path of an early 20th century explorer up through Africa. Africa then-and-now with a lot of sarcasm mixed in. What's not to love?!

Reviewed by: Laurinda B., P/T Library Clerk

Gail says

I liked this book. It makes it interesting to read a story of recent travel to Africa contrasted with a journey by a traveler around 1899. I would not want to travel in either time! The story of Ewart Grogan is an interesting one. Each travel story I read adds another layer to my small knowledge of the history of Africa.

Karen! says

This book tells the story of African explorer Ewart Grogan, with specific emphasis on his journey from south Africa to Cairo--the first to lead a team the full way from North to South by land and river. The author of this work feels a great interest and kinship with Grogan and so, by his own admission, to assuage his cold feet before marriage, he decides to retrace the epic journey.

The story of Grogan is incredibly interesting. Interactions with various native tribes; trouble-shooting a multitude of problems; making attempts to create maps. It's just so incredibly interesting. Unfortunately, Smith rather ruins it with idiotic interjections, anecdotes, and plain idiocy. Through many of the tales of Grogan's journey, Smith interrupts midstream to talk about how, in following the path, he has to wait for a bus. Many of Smith's--we'll graciously label them--anecdotes chronicle momentous discoveries including that Africans are poor and that they do not by and large live in cities, but small villages with unreliable and non-Westernized public transportation.

One of my favorite quotes from Grogan's journal involves a selection about snakes: "One day, when I saw a particularly pretty specimen, I tried the native trick of stroking his head. Then I scratched him as one would a cat, and found he liked the sensation and that it made him uncoil himself at full length. After that we had no trouble measuring pythons."

I was also delighted to learn that after the exploration and return to England, Grogan and his wife returned to Nairobi. During WWI, Grogan was Captain of the British East Africa Intelligence Service. All of the reports that he sent were signed "Simba."

Katherine says

I found this book to be very interesting. One of the other reviewers felt that it was pretty shallow as books on Africa go and that may be if you have an intense interest in the continent and wish to truly delve into its story. I have never had that depth of curiosity--especially after Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim as well as the

many name and regime changes that have occurred in my life time. Exposure to Michael Caine in British red and other horrors really turned me off. But on occasion I have been fascinated with Camus' Algeria, or the story of deBeers and the exploitation of the diamond deposits, or the Egypt of the Pharaohs or the story of the Boer Wars or the final triumph of Mandela in S.Africa. As a science teacher I dreamt of the incredible wildlife of Africa--the Serengeti or the Rift area. Yet, for all that, I've never aspired to visit Africa and still do not for the dirt, insects and disease of the continent repel me.

In his book, Smith describes those things as well as the political unrest in many of the countries through which he and Grogan passed. It is hard to explain how he carried three story lines through the narrative but somehow I found it easy to follow and each to be interesting. He transitioned back and forth in a way that made me feel as though there was a fade between periods much like a good movie is able to blend shots back and forth through time. The transitions were smooth and non-jarring.

Grogan's experiences were almost unbelievable, the time so primitive, in ways, and unmarred by outsider influence despite the colonization by European powers. The landscape so vast and inhabited by so much life. The current conditions, modern. without necessarily terribly advanced by technology but definitely ruled by money or its lack.

For a man so impressed by the beauty of the Utah landscape that he aspired to be married on one of its cliffs, Julian seems almost blind to the beauties of the African scene. In contrast to Grogan's detailed descriptions of people, places and the flora and fauna of the continent, his narration is almost superficial. But then again, he covered, more or less, the same territory in months when it took Grogan years. He rode motor bikes and buses and boats and planes over territory that Grogan walked, slogged and, at times, crawled over. While he spent, in most cases, less than 24 hours with any one person, Grogan was in the company of his porters, cooks, guides and bodyguards for many months and in some cases years.

The best description, for me, was Julian's trek with a guide, two guards and several other tourists up into the mountains to observe silver backed gorillas. This came the closest to the richness of Grogan's narrative; but then, it also came the closest to his whole journey. Perhaps Julian's appreciation of the Utah vistas and other areas of our West stems from the fact that he hiked them and camped in them--less a tourist, more an involved part of the scene.

So, though he claimed to be interested in replicating Grogan's trek that is not really what he did. Yet, though his own observations are lacking--the result of the tourists' here today, there tomorrow headlong race to cover lots in little time, his inclusion of Grogan's experiences and the history of the tribes and European colonization of Africa is worth the time spent reading this book. It is certainly a jumping off place if it peaks one's interest in these aspects of Africa.

As to Grogan's quest for Gertrude's hand and Julian's quest for understanding and acceptance of his life changes through marriage--I was so amused. The more men change--or women for that matter--the more they remain the same. 45 years ago in my 20's the men I dated were exactly like Julian. 37 years ago, the man I married 27 years ago, could have written this book--notice it took ten years for him to bite the bullet. And now, our 25 year old daughter is meeting the new generation of men who are right there with Julian, Grogan and my husband. As Maurice Chevalier sang-I'm so glad that I'm not young anymore! LOL

Anyway, read this, you'll like it!!

Dee says

I never would have made this trek to prove myself for a woman, but guess he's glad he did. Interesting book but still doesn't hold a candle to Teddy Roosevelt's River of Doubt.

Nancy says

Two men. Two women. One huge continent. This is the basis of Smith's story of the trip taken by Ewart Grogan 107 years before Smith replicated the same trail. Grogan was intent on proving to his hopefully future father-in-law that he was man enough to marry Gertrude Watt. He started off just prior to Christmas, 1899, by foot with food, rifles and a team of African porters. Along the way he met Arthur Sharp, a renowned explorer who became his fast friend. He shot elephants, hippos, snakes and, occasionally native men who tried to attack Grogan's expedition. Always the end in sight was to make it to Cairo and wire Gertude that he still loved her and wanted to marry her. It took him over two years and 7000 miles.

Smith, on the other hand, was three months from his wedding day. His understanding fiancee, Laura, had given her blessing to the trip and he had enough money, film and inner strength to go for it. His travels were done by foot, bicycle (riding on a platform while someone else pedaled), motorbike and boat. The same goals in sight but a bit easier passage. However, the political scene in Africa at the time hadn't changed in many ways from that of Grogan's trip and Smith had to constantly keep an eye and ear open to the news when he was where he could listen.

This was an outstanding book! I loved learning the then and now of West Africa and, while I hadn't heard of Grogan prior and I certainly glad I've heard of him now. The writing was easy to follow, with the "old to new and back" done in a way that didn't disturb the storyline at all. A journey to be read but maybe not taken - yet. Politics are always at the forefront in Africa and, in some ways, Grogan had it better.

Andrea says

This book was another in the popular genre "I did exactly (sort of) what a famous explorer did in Africa only much later". I actually often find these really compelling. This book was okay, but didn't measure up, IMO, to some of the examples I've read recently. The author is engaged to be married, but still apparently, for no real reason except basic lack of moral courage, having doubts. Being a travel writer, he decides to follow Ewart Grogan's "Capetown to Cairo" walk. Grogan did the walk partly to convince his future father in law that he was worthy of his daughter. So, the premise, I guess, is that if Smith does the same thing he is proving to himself that he is ready to get married. The book's narrative shifts between Smith's trip, which is really, like Grogan's, only a small part of the total "C to C" and flashbacks to pivotal points in Smith's own courtship with his fiancee'. One problem is that Smith isn't able or doesn't try to dig up anything new about either Grogan or the country he passes through, so the travel parts are mainly descriptions of stiff buns from riding bike taxis finished off by the requisite (for this genre) failed/aborted attempt to get into south Sudan. I don't blame Smith for not going to Sudan. I blame him for too much navel gazing about his excruciatingly mundane love life and not enough real research or even description from the trip itself. But I'm being mean, really. It's actually not a bad read esp. if one hasn't read anything else of this type. I'm going to coin a phrase and call it "African travel Lite."

Matthew says

Bit late on this review, been without a computer for over a month now.

This book is part memoir and part history, as Smith attempts to recreate Ewart Grogan's almost-forgotten overland crossing of Africa from Cape Town to Cairo, the first such endeavour ever attempted. Grogan undertook this feat in order to impress the father of the woman he wanted to marry (who was relatively certain he wouldn't come back alive); Smith, by contrast, is about to get married, and is fleeing his growing sense of anxiety about it.

While I am not a huge fan (or really, any sort of fan) of the "discover your inner-self through travel" subgenre of travel lit, I found myself thoroughly engrossed in this one, in a large part due to the structure. In counterbalancing his own qualms of marriage with Grogan's struggle (which involved disease, wildlife, and attacks by natives, among other things), Smith is able to avoid a lot of the clichés that typically come with this sort of material, especially since he is frank about the contrast between Grogan's courage and his own cowardice.

While there isn't much navel-gazing, however, Smith is also a bit fuzzy in his conclusions as to the root causes of his own fears about marriage. Which means, ultimately, that Grogan's story is the more engaging of the two. Smith's portion isn't bad or unjoyable by any means, but sometimes you simply have to hang introspection out to dry and plunge forward into adventure.

I've corresponded with Smith a bit about his experiences, and he let me know that Grogan's memoir of his crossing is available free from the Gutenberg Project. I'll be looking for that soon, I think.

Amy says

I love reading almost anything I can about Africa. I've always been fascinated by it- especially the animals and 19th century colonialism. I can't get enough of those subjects. I'm thankful Julian Smith's book brought the travels of Ewart Grogan to my attention. More than anything else, reading Smith's book made me want to track down Grogan's memoir and read that instead. I thought Smith was focusing too much on trying to connect his own (dull) love story to Grogan's much more romantic one. He didn't really delve into much about his surroundings in Africa. Instead it just seemed like descriptions of various uncomfortable forms of transit peppered with visits to gorillas and chats with locals about AIDS and/or political strife. While I appreciate the effort to tie Grogan's tale to modern times, it seems like Smith wasn't quite up to the challenge. Particularly since he didn't even complete it! I would really give this book 2.5 stars, but I'll round up to 3 for Africa.

Clivemichael says

I have mixed feelings about this book. He carries the historical narrative well, rehashing the incredible odyssey that was Grogan's journey. However I found his own story at times, less than compelling and pathetically indulgent at worst. I get the parallels but really there are three different stories and they do not

always blend well. In fact I'm hard pressed to have a sense of what he actually experienced with the shallow coverage of his time in Africa. The moments of pathos and compassionate sympathy, right along with the precommitment angst somehow provides that binding thread. Granted the jarring reality of war torn, refugee populated culturally disparate countries demand more than a few days (at the most) passage in order to actually GET a flavour of them. What a contrast to Grogan's decisive confidence and evocative descriptions. I'm inspired to go to the original.

Barbara says

Nice parallel construction of a British explorer's journey through parts of Africa in the late 1800's with the author's retracing of part of the journey. He tells the history in an engaging way, so that it felt like story and not dry history.
