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"A haunting account of one man's determination and the struggles of a people living in a deeply troubled country."--Booklist

When William Powers went to Liberia as a fresh-faced aid worker in 1999, he was given the mandate to "fight poverty and save the rainforest." It wasn't long before Powers saw how many obstacles lay in the way, discovering first-hand how Liberia has become a "black hole in the international system"--poor, environmentally looted, scarred by violence, and barely governed. *Blue Clay People* is an absorbing blend of humor, compassion, and rigorous moral questioning, arguing convincingly that the fate of endangered places such as Liberia must matter to all of us.

Blue Clay People: Seasons on Africa's Fragile Edge Details

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Author : William Powers

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Pat says

This was a very interesting book. The author writes about spending a coupe of years in Liberia while it was still somewhat dangerous (before Taylor was overthrown) and about how it was to work for an NGO in that environment. It changed his life in many ways and he is now in Bolivia apparently, still doing similar work. So it is both a memoir of his years in Liberia and the problems in working in a failed state and still trying to keep people from becoming totally dependent on the food suppliers as well as a discussion of how some of the rest of the world (Malaysian timber companies as an example) are raping such countries for their natural resources and threatening the biodiversity of the planet.

Kara says

This book certainly made me never want to visit Liberia, which, amongst other problems, has no electricity. Or phones. Or plumbing. Anywhere.

A terrifying science fiction story could be written about this sort of post-apocalyptic world, except that it really exists, today, and used to be a progressive and relatively successful African free state. Things went wrong after a long civil war, and our author visited with a service agency to try to pick up the pieces.

Erin says

This book changed my life. It shook me to the core. It turned everything I believed on its head and the closing so brought home my own privilege that it felt like the ground I thought I knew had slid out from under me. To live in a relatively safe and secure place rather than a hell dictated by the whims of others - the impact of history, governments and the unfathomable actions of the people surrounding you... It terrified me.

Luis Rivera says

Blue Clay People
By: William Powers

My experience with this book was very fascinating. This book is classified as a non-fiction as relates the experience of a man who ventures into unknown territory. The author of the book and main character, William Powers took a trip to Liberia and what he encountered and how he dealt with the different situations is what makes the book interesting. His experiences carried over to the rest of this life. He went to this new country as an aid and health worker but he came out as a new man.

The most interesting quote I believe from this book is, "Like most people who go overseas to do development work, I did so expecting to find out what it's like to be poor... That's not what happens. Instead you learn what it's like to be rich, to be fabulously, incomprehensibly, bloated with wealth.(92)". This quote

was very fascinating for me. Usually when we, as Americans, visit other less fortunate countries we and the majority of people next to us always think about how we'll be seeing how poor people live. However, later you realize how blessed we are living in the great country of America. This book gives many life lessons and describes how other people around the world live and how we must not be arrogant but we must be humble and thankful for everything that we have..

The question I focused on during this book was, How does an individual's point of view affect the way he deals with conflict? This question was perfect to think about when reading this book. He, just like most Americans, believe that this country America is not prospering and how we are not thriving in this unhealthy country. However, when he went to Liberia for the first time he realized a couple things. First he realized that the problems he and many Americans have today are very diminutive problems that people in other countries much rather wish they had. Second he realized how lucky we are as a country right now especially in the type of government we have. The governments in Africa at the time and still today are going through very difficult problems sometimes leading to revolutions and overthrowing of governments. We in the United States don't realize how lucky we are to be able to prosper in this great country.

I would recommend this book to anyone who lives in the United States of America and has never been to another country. Even though this is a book, it has very graphic story telling and as you read you feel like you are experiencing these stories yourself. I would also recommend this book to anyone who is interested in overseas medical careers and people who want to read how other countries live and deal with medical issues. Lastly I would recommend this book to anyone who needs a wake up call on how difficult life could be if you didn't live in the great country of the United States of America.

Serjeant Wildgoose says

As with 1 or 2 other reviewers, Bill Powers' book hauled me back to my own recent experiences in this stunning country.

Before I deployed there a colleague who had spent his childhood in Malawi told me that one way or another Africa gets to everyone; you either hate the place or it becomes a part of you. So when, towards the end of his book, Powers describes his last farewell with his Liberian friend who, grabbing his hand covers it in earth, I could smell the richness of the red dust - and knew I am one of those who can never leave it behind. (6 months after leaving Monrovia, 6 months spent in Iraq, I was in the Congo.)

There is more in these few hundred pages than nostalgia for the likes of me. Such an important message for those who sit and watch comfortably from the sidelines and tut-tut as human horrors like Charles Taylor are hauled before the International Criminal Court; in all likelihood watching on their TV nestling in a mahogany cabinet.

Powers hits the nail so squarely - 'A friend in the States told me that he could never live in a place like Liberia. When I asked him why, he responded, "because I couldn't live so close to a human and environmental holocaust".

"Buy you do."

Mitch says

For those with an interest in international social justice and protecting the environment, this is a good reading choice.

I knew nothing of Liberia before I read this and am glad for the introduction.

I found the author's personal memoirs of his two years in a high leadership position in an NGO, providing the basic necessities for survival to the poor, to be revealing and emotionally moving.

...and alternating between glimmerings of hope and total despair.

Aid is actually very difficult to figure out; there are so many factors working against coming up with a good form and seeing it succeed. The author doesn't shy away from the complexities and discouragements that come from failed attempts. In fact, he lists only about two modest more-or-less sustainable successes and some considerably larger failures.

Better to read this than to stamp a smiley face on the topic, though.

I do have a complaint: While the author joins in the chorus of "We can't have Western imposed aid, we need to listen and implement local solutions"...he doesn't show much in the way of local solutions. His two successes, the village rice project and the mountain moving, were both initiated and one was heavily supported from outside. (Though both were implemented locally.)

Nor does he go so far as to say that two major factors defeating sustainable aid are cultural norms and personal moral failings. (aka corruption in various forms.)

Current thinking holds cultures as some sort of sacred institutions instead of seeing them as flawed creations that frequently interfere negatively with their participants' lives. And personal moral failings are often excused as necessary for survival.

Both issues are hard to address...and this book pretty much didn't. It probably couldn't without being labelled as patronizing.

Moving right along...

I appreciated the portrayal of the author's relationship with Ciatta; I feel he did a good job relating the two very different sides both brought to the table and how loaded a deeper commitment would have been...and also how limited his further involvement could be. When two such economically and culturally divided individuals come together, there would appear to be little chance to avoid a deep sadness.

I give this book high marks and am pleased to report that the torturing, raping and murderous Charles Taylor is still serving his 50 year sentence (which he will not survive) inside a British prison.

Ellen says

Through much of this book I couldn't escape what a douchebag this guy came off as. He repeats the mantra, "It's not sustainable. It creates dependency." even regarding gifting a beanie baby, thinks of his servant as his slave, tries to introduce guinea apigs as a source of meat, and wonders he just can't accept the Liberian way of being non-monogamous. He gives his shoes to the chief! His shoes! Why? But maybe that's his way of showing growth. Because he doesn't seem quite so terrible at the end. At least not as terrible as his editor who missed that the author referred to the same woman (Liza) as two different nationalities and spelled a crapload of things wrong.

Also I can't believe his girlfriend still wanted a diamond and that Jacket became a frikkin' logger.

Full disclosure: I also worked for CRS for a bit. I'm also hyper aware of the typical development model and the inherent inequities. I preach about it often. Maybe I too am a douchebag.

Doris says

The author, William Powers, directed food distribution and ecological preservation for Catholic Relief Services in Liberia after the war and under the sanctions against Charles Taylor. His is an interesting story of the challenges and disappointments of those efforts. It gives one an idea of living and working in a third world country, the desperation of the lives there, and the difficulty of choosing between survival and preservation of the forest. He is a very good storyteller and the book is worth reading for anyone wanting to learn more about Africa, its wonder, beauty and tragedy.

Michael says

One of those international environment and development books that makes you wince even if you're not surprised by what you see. Powers headed off to Liberia just out of his master's degree to work for Catholic Relief Services, with the grand goals of improving Liberia's health, education, and economic development prospects while stopping deforestation of the country's rainforest. Nice ideas. He arrived at what he thought was the end of a civil war. Instead, he arrived at a temporary halt in the fighting that would shortly end. In the meantime he found an expatriate NGO community living a high life of SUVs, parties with embassy staff, and jazz and beer in the capital city, while in the hinterlands, aid was wasted, corruption was rampant, and the natives were reliant on international handouts rather than developing their own infrastructure. He went in as an idealist, writing eagerly back to his fiancee in the States and espousing a sort of post-sectarian missionary zeal to help the noble Liberian people. He ends up rather soured on the whole experience, even when he does get out into the country, find more responsible economic development models (i.e. building capacity in sustainable agriculture) and finding a Liberian girlfriend when his engagement falls apart. Moral of the story: International development is a dicey business, and living in a developing country is good for introspection and personal growth, but risky for your love life.

Linda C. says

I have no idea why I have this book. When I opened it up, I found a receipt from when I attended the Willamette Writer's Conference last year. I like to buy books of the speakers I hear but I don't remember Mr. Powers. I wonder what the thinking was by the bookstore manager why he brought this book along.

In any event, Blue Clay People is a really cool title. The cover is a wonderful photograph of smiling children frolicking in the ocean. My readers know by now that those two things are surefire hooks for me.

Blue Clay People is Powers' story of his time as a relief worker in Liberia. He struggles with the local dialect of English, the proper handshake, having servants in his home. Deep in his heart he wrestles with creating more dependency as he sets out to break the cycle of poverty.

This is a deeply moving account of life in Liberia where malaria, AIDS, deforestation, under the control of a money hungry dictator is considered the norm. Mr. Powers came to this country believing he could change all that. He didn't leave Liberia as the new land he dreamed it could be. But he left it better in small individual ways. I think he learned a lot about himself along the way.

Blue Clay People isn't a particularly well written or well edited for that matter. As a writer that drove me nuts. Getting past that, Blue Clay People taught me that my existence is connected to a place on the other side of the world. Even small acts of compassion will make a difference in our world. I rate this book 3 out of 5, an average when I combine writing skill with a memorable story.

Sarah says

I found this book to be a captivating read at times, and a bit preachy and trite at others. But learning about the fascinating culture and people of Liberia keep me reading through those tougher parts. I do appreciate the honesty with which the author writes about his experiences and feelings while living in Liberia, even if it made me dislike him at some points.

Wow, I just read someone else's review of this book that said it made her NEVER want to visit Liberia. So I had to add to my review that reading this book made me absolutely curious about Liberia and anxious to visit it myself one day!

Sally says

One man can make a difference. William Powers takes a post with Catholic Relief Services in Liberia. He does his best to decrease dependency but can't change decades of cultural habits built on an unstable economy and despotic rulers. Graft is everywhere. Charles Taylor, the latest corrupt leader and former freedom fighter, and foreign companies steal everything they can of the country's natural resources. Powers and his friends try to bring about change but the country is not ready yet and he leaves.

A M says

if anyone wants to know what my experience was like in Liberia (more or less), this is the book to read. though it's set before the 1994 conflict began, it's still gives the flow and feeling of Liberia: how the people speak and glimpses into those cultural "quirks" we all know exist in each and every culture. it made me feel like i was back in Liberia...despite the "difficulties" i wrote about in my mass emails, i miss it every day.

LDB says

I really enjoyed this book. Bill Powers was in Liberia starting from 1999. I had been there in 1998, so this felt like walking down memory lane. Much of what he described reminded me of my time there as well as the cadence of everyday speech. In addition, he describes his work leading a food security project, which is what I will soon be headed out to Liberia to work on. While the book will not give you much detail on the conflict Liberia suffered through, it does provide a bit of a cultural tour through a conflict-stricken Liberia. As I prepare for my own move to Liberia, I am glad I read this book before going -- if for no other reason than to have gotten me thinking more about my own last experience in Liberia as I prepare for a Liberia I am sure has changed tremendously and not at all.

Mary says

This is a an account of a relief worker/manager being in Liberia during the civil war, and was recommended to me because I am in Liberia doing some development work as I write. I feel a bit meh about this - while it is an easy read, and in some respects seems to capture the local scene, overall there seems to be too much of an effort to bring in a bigger, global point. The author says that he merged people and incidents, and changed names, to protect people, but the effect is that he ends up describing perfect incidents (goes home on a break and lo and behold, a friend of his fiancée has new mahogany furniture, a wood that was being disastrously harvested in Liberia, destroying the rainforest) or off-handed statements that cast a whole different light - really, you are seeing a local woman, and only from an off-handed comment about her possible desire for a green card suggests to you that you might question your relationship?

Relief work is very difficult and has far fewer clear-cut rewards than would be desirable, and I do admire anyone who can do it. However, this book would have been more interesting if the author had not felt the need to wind up all loose ends into a grand solution. (Witness getting the beggar boys outside the supermarket to be paid to clean up the trash mountain, a solution apparently hit upon during the author's last drive back from the market before leaving the country, and instantly working.) This is useful to read if one is doing relief work and/or working in Africa, particularly Liberia, but is only okay.

While not a criticism of this book per se, I read it as an electronic book, and according to the acknowledgements this was not self-published, and there was supposedly an editor. How come, then, are there lots of typos, some apparently created by an overactive spellcheck, and spacing so bad that stories run into each other? Come on, publishers, try a little harder.
