



Mango Elephants in the Sun: How Life in an African Village Let Me Be in My Skin

By Susana Herrera

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When the Peace Corps sends Susana Herrera to teach English in Northern Cameroon, she yearns to embrace her adopted village and its people, to drink deep from the spirit of Mother Africa--and to forget a bitter childhood and painful past. To the villagers, however, she's a rich American tourist, a nasara (white person) who has never known pain or want. They stare at her in silence. The children giggle and run away. At first her only confidant is a miraculously communicative lizard. Susana fights back with every ounce of heart and humor she possesses, and slowly begins to make a difference. She ventures out to the village well and learns to carry water on her head. In a classroom crowded to suffocation she finds a way to discipline her students without resorting to the beatings they are used to. She makes ice cream in the scorching heat, and learns how to plant millet and kill chickens. She laughs with the villagers, cries with them, works and prays with them, heals and is helped by them. Village life is hard but magical. Poverty is rampant--yet people sing and share what little they have. The termites that chew up her bed like morning cereal are fried and eaten in their turn ("bite-sized and crunchy like Doritos"). Nobody knows what tomorrow may bring, but even the morning greetings impart a purer sense of being in the moment. Gradually, Susana and the village become part of each other. They will never be the same again.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Californian Susan Herrera spent two years in northern Cameroon in what might be described as the classic Peace Corps assignment: teaching school in a remote African village. 'Jam bah doo nah?' ('Are you in your skin?') her neighbors ask her by way of greeting, and the response means, 'Yes, I am alive, fully present and experiencing the moment.'

"Herrera's account is filled with cross-cultural anecdotes that are alternately amusing and poignant. She is appalled as she watches the other teachers administer corporal punishment, only to discover that her own students don't respect her authority because she refuses to beat them. Her solution is to devise more creative forms of classroom discipline. A pompous village chief offers her a bloody goat head as a gift of courtship. Herrera feels the thrill of triumph when her most ambitious student masters a bicycle for the first time, until the girl's older brother coldly rebukes the foreign teacher, 'Don't put desires in her head that she can never have.' Herrera's growing friendship with several local women and her tender romance with a handsome Cameroonian doctor give the narrative its continuity and novel-like structure."—Scott Zesch, *Austin American-Statesman*

"Whether she's writing about falling in love, getting malaria or teaching a young woman how to ride a bicycle, Herrera draws in readers with her uncommon intelligence and wisdom."—Mary Spicuzza, *Metro Santa Cruz*

From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

Susana Herrera spent over two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Northern Cameroon. Now a schoolteacher in Watsonville, California, she uses many of the stories from her life in an African village to teach her students about compassion, diversity, strength, and faith.

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