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Booklover -- Africa

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When I was young, going on safari seemed like the most exotic thing you could do. Maybe this idea came from watching John Wayne ride on the side of a jeep through the plains of Tanzania in Hata or admiring the richly-detailed photographs published in National Geographic; either way I still have a safari on the “to-do” list. In the meantime, I have recently taken a literary safari of Africa, which is more affordable. My guides were V.S. Naipaul in The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief and Ryszard Kapuściński in The Shadow of the Sun.

Before we embark on our safari, I would like to tell you how I got started on this particular literary journey. If you have been a follower of this column you will know about my book-loving friend, Joy, who resides in Eleuthera, Bahamas. The recommendation to check out Ryszard Kapuściński's The Shadow of the Sun came via her. And although I have read two previous works (The Bend in the River and The Enigma of the Arrival) by V.S. Naipaul, The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief was recently reviewed in the Sunday edition of The Post and Courier, the local newspaper in Charleston, SC, by an old classmate. Seemed necessary to pick up the new work and explore it, which led me right down a narrow African alley and the connection to the work of Ryszard Kapuściński.

V.S. Naipaul, a native of Trinidad, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001 “for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories.” A recent biography of V.S. Naipaul paints a somewhat different and monstrous picture of race, sex, and cruelty. Most of us outsiders only see the beauty created in his words, a few more intimate companions have the privilege of knowing a cruel hand and a tart quip.

Ryszard Kapuściński, a native of Poland, was the only foreign correspondent for the Polish Press Agency with the responsibility of covering 50 countries. His career in journalism began after attending university in Warsaw and carried him throughout the developing world observing the end of European colonialism. Kapuściński arrived in Africa in 1957. He was to begin his affair with this country as colonial rule was beginning to dissolve. The book is a work of journalism with a feel of fiction and, by some scholars’ view, more fiction than fact. Maybe one would not immediately think to join the works of these two authors, but with respect to their writings on Africa, I found a remarkable equality of observation. While Kapuściński’s work is a compilation of his adventures as he is reporting from Africa, Naipaul has a specific quest in mind. He is exploring African belief, the taboo surrounding it, where did the beliefs arise, and how have they been influenced by Western religions, the cruelty, the bigotry, the witchcraft, and what is to be made of it. Naipaul speaks of the influence of the missionaries, the fear of the Western world to understand the black magic of Africa, his impressions of the colonial settlements. Kapuściński strives to avoid the typical Western enclaves in exchange for the bright, sandy, sometimes dangerous huts of the natives and seeks to uncover the real Africa.

Both find a way to capture the minute and the mundane and make it vibrant, and exotic. This reader wanted to find the saw-marked timber of the stairwell, the Hewlett Packard laptop in the chief’s house, the bench on the side of the sandy road, the intense light of an unshaded desert, the corrugated sheet metal homes of Monrovia. Yet, neither book is without its description of the vast natural beauty of Africa. The animals of the Seregeti plains, and the Sezibwa waterfall in the Mukono district of Uganda are two amazing visuals that entertain us.

Finally, in the Land where creation began, Kapuściński observes: “As if one were witnessing the birth of the world, that precise moment where earth and sky already exist, as do water, plants, and wild animals, but not yet Adam and Eve, it is this world barely born, the world without mankind and hence also without sin, that one can imagine one is seeing here...It was still night, but Africa’s most dazzling moment was approaching — the break of day.” While V.S. Naipaul asks his guide Phillip about the “idea of possibility in society”: “In my view the idea of possibility has to do with humanity.” Thus we are left with our beliefs and the hope for humanity.