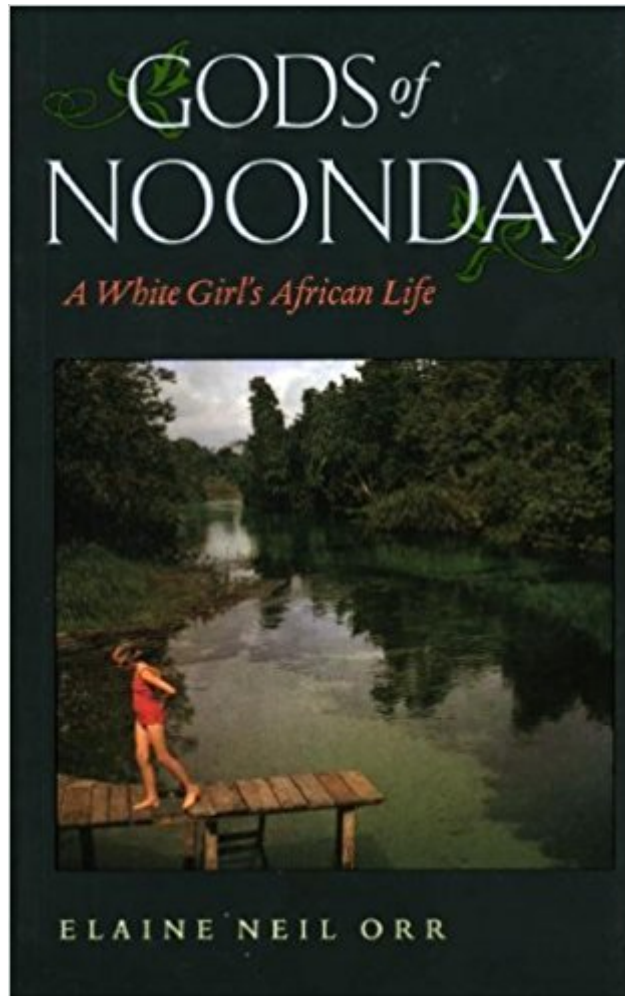




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# Gods Of Noonday: A White Girl's African Life



## Synopsis

The daughter of medical missionaries, Elaine Neil Orr was born in Nigeria in 1954, in the midst of the national movement that would lead to independence from Great Britain. But as she tells it in her captivating new memoir, Orr did not grow up as a stranger abroad; she was a girl at home—only half American, the other half Nigerian. When she was sent alone to the United States for high school, she didn't realize how much leaving Africa would cost her. It was only in her forties, in the crisis of kidney failure, that she began to recover her African life. In writing *Gods of Noonday* she came to understand her double-rootedness: in the Christian church and the Yoruba shrine, the piano and the talking drum. Memory took her back from Duke Medical Center in North Carolina to the shores of West Africa and her hometown of Ogbomosho in the land of the Yoruba people. Hers was not the dysfunctional American family whose tensions are brought into high relief by the equatorial sun, but a mission girlhood is haunted nonetheless—by spiritual atmospheres and the limits of good intentions. Orr's father, Lloyd Neil, formerly a high school athlete and World War II pilot, and her mother, Anne, found in Nigeria the adventure that would have escaped them in 1950s America. Elaine identified with her strong, fun-loving father more than her reserved mother, but she herself was as introspective and solitary as her sister Becky was pretty and social. Lloyd acquired a Chevrolet station wagon which carried Elaine and her friends to the Ethiopian River, where they swam much as they might have in the United States. But at night the roads were becoming dangerous, and soon the days were clouded by smoke from the coming Biafran War. Interweaving the lush mission compounds with Nigerian culture, furloughs in the American South with boarding school in Nigeria, and eventually Orr's failing health, the narrative builds in intensity as she recognizes that only through recovering her homeland can she find the strength to survive. Taking its place with classics such as *Out of Africa* and more recent works like *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, *Gods of Noonday* is a deeply felt, courageous portrait of a woman's life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Though Orr's experience as an "MK," or missionary kid, in Nigeria in the 1950s and '60s was in many ways less exotic and foreign than one might expect, most Americans do not complete high school amid successive governmental coups and political chaos. Orr's acute memory and reflective contemplations about life in her beloved Africa in those formative years give readers an intricate picture of an unusual upbringing blended with an adult's take on the cultural changes in the world beyond the missionary compounds where her family was posted. The North Carolina State University professor of literature and women's studies brings a critical eye to her cherished childhood world, showing that many of the pressures of early adolescence and high school (most of which she completed in a Nigerian missionary boarding school) she endured are strikingly familiar to American schoolchildren's experiences. She interweaves the story of her recent serious illness (a disease resulting from diabetes), which clearly created a longing for the familiarity and safety of her childhood. While Orr's recent troubles seem mercifully to have been alleviated, she clearly found some healing in poring through her past. Looking at pictures of Africa, she thinks, "I could die and be satisfied because once I knew a place of such stunning grace that my life has already been fulfilled." This memoir is much more personal and painterly than it is politically or historically charged, and would not lose any of its charm for losing a third of its length. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Orr's acute memory and reflective contemplations about life in her beloved Africa... give readers an intricate picture of an unusual upbringing blended with an adult's take on the cultural changes in the world beyond the missionary compounds. •Publishers Weekly  
Reading Gods of Noonday was like falling under a lovely spell. With mesmerizing language, Elaine Orr writes about her childhood in Africa, capturing the beautiful, the sacred, and the essential. (Sue Monk Kidd, author of The Secret Life of Bees)  
Gods of Noonday is a clear-eyed yet heartfelt memoir of a white American girl born and growing up in Nigeria, West Africa. Deeply thoughtful, candid and unsentimental, it explores with great sensitivity and understanding the rare blessing of this most extraordinary and enriching of childhoods. A classic of its kind. (William Boyd, author of Brazzaville Beach and A Good

Man in Africa) This amazing memoir shares with the reader the remarkable intelligence, honesty, and lyrical sensibility of Elaine Orr. Her style of writing is breathtakingly beautiful, whether she is describing the flora and fauna, the rivers and landscape of Nigeria, or the inner landscape of her personal journey of discovery and healing. I read this fresh, insightful, and original book in a constant state of wonder and excitement. (Sena Jeter Naslund, author of *Ahab's Wife and Four Spirits*) Very few childhoods are this exotic, and even fewer are retold in such beautiful language as Elaine Orr does in this book. If her heart is still partly marooned in her exotic childhood world, her mind made it possible for me to live there, too, and understand. A fascinating memoir with language rich enough for a poem, plot rich enough for a novel. (Doris Betts, author of *Souls Raised from the Dead*) In a voice by turns intimate, engaging, melancholy, familiar, lyrical, and fraught with the tender distance of learning, Orr portrays a white girl's life in the Nigeria of the 1960s and 1970s, postcolonial, yet far from free. Hers is a rich memoir of childhood mystery, adult illness, and triumphant recovery. (James Morrison, author of *Broken Fever*) Truly learned, incredibly fascinating, Elaine Orr's *Gods of Noonday* melts the Atlantic divide as we read the story of this unique personality located in two different worlds. Here is a rare example of a memoir that turns experience into knowledge and teaches without being prescriptive, in the process giving us an unmistakable portrait of the remarkable power of human dignity. (Toyin Falola, author of *Yoruba Gurus*) This amazing memoir shares with the reader the remarkable intelligence, honesty, and lyrical sensibility of Elaine Orr. Her style of writing is breathtakingly beautiful, whether she is describing the flora and fauna, the rivers and landscape of Nigeria, or the inner landscape of her personal journey of discovery and healing. I read this fresh, insightful, and original book in a constant state of wonder and excitement. (Sena Jeter Naslund, author of *Ahab's Wife and Four Spirits*)

I was compelled to read, "Gods of Noonday: A White Girl's Life in Africa," after completing Orr's new novel, "A Different Sun." A Different Sun: A Novel of Africa I was struck by her virtuosic writing, I was eager to try her memoir. I wasn't disappointed! "God's Of Noonday" is among the best memoirs I have ever read. Orr has held nothing back, we know what she was thinking, how she experienced daily life and events. I felt the joys of her childhood and the aches and angst of her adolescence; the love she has for Nigeria, her birth home, tempered by the difficulties, pain, and sometimes resentment of her forced Americanization. In short, it's a fabulous read characterized by Orr's creative and masterful use of language. If you haven't yet read "A Different Sun," (see link above) I'd recommend picking up both books, then first reading "Gods of Noonday" to gain some insight into the African missionary lifestyle. You'll find an interesting aspect of reading both is that "Gods of

Noonday" is Nigerian missionary life from the perspective of youth while the novel "A Different Sun" is from an adult perspective. Neither is immune from experiencing similar joys and pains, and Orr gets it all across brilliantly.

I too was a MK in Nigeria, and I was there some of the same years Elaine writes about. In fact, our family lived on a missionary compound not too far from where Elaine lived early on. Because I could relate to her experiences and some of her feelings, at times I felt as if she was stealing my thoughts, emotions, and memories. Would I have enjoyed this book if not for the personal ties?

ABSOLUTELY! She is a wonderful writer, and I wish she would write more.

Lamenting author - not as much historical significance as I would have liked to have seen. It was difficult to get through at best.

Elaine Neil Orr's memoir, *Gods of Noonday: A White Girl's African Life*, is an essential book in an era of global expansion. Orr's courage to claim as home Nigeria, the land of her birth and childhood, despite her expatriate status, should encourage expatriate children everywhere to claim their various nations, whether they integrated to host cultures or not. It should encourage them to do the archeology, as Orr does, uncovering the archetypes of their host cultures, whether they were conscious of them at the time or not. And it should encourage families raising children overseas to give them a fuller immersion, permit them host country playmates, and encourage local education and language study. Parents employed outside their borders must recognize that their childhood homes are not their children's childhood homes. Orr's most symbolic immersion was swimming in the cool clear Ethiope, and she claims the river as her sacred ground. "Nothing you could tell me about Jehovah was equal to the proof of divinity provided by the mere existence of so lovely a river. And so I worshipped it." The river represents the cultural immersion Orr longs for, after the fact. Her life in Nigeria seems decorous and material as she recalls American girl toys she got for Christmas in an American decorated house, later wishing it had been African art. Orr contrasts herself to "real missionaries" who spoke native languages, lived among Nigerians and regarded her, a white child, as no "more special than they (Nigerian children) were." Honesty glimmers through that exceeds "Out of Africa" and "The Poisonwood Bible," however much those books claim to be "of the land." For instance, Orr sees the anger of Nigerians directed at American missionaries during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement when bulletin boards were defaced in the hospital where her father was administrator and her mother a nurse. It seems that Orr mourns a land she lived on, often secluded

from, rather than in and among. And yet she dares to claim more, and that claim of being Nigerian is like catharsis in her illness, which is, perhaps, her most poignant claim. She suffers a disease, diabetes, common to African Americans in the U.S., many of whom, she realizes, may not have received the care she did as she faces end stage renal disease. Dr. Orr's writing recalls Isak Dinesen's, in that there is longing on every page. But it also recognizes the fallacy of claiming too much, knowing (as Ngugi wa Thiong'o did in "Weep Not Child," his lament in response to "Out of Africa"), that the land taken by colonists was not theirs to mourn. Even when her mother attempts to involve the teenage Elaine in Sunday evening meetings, she realizes, "I had become too Americanized to feel comfortable trying to pass as a Urhobo girl...." Her voice and project gain strength as she interweaves her adult experience of declining health and relationships, finding that she has resisted intimate friendships, whether because she moved so often, or because she is seeking to "rekindle a greater loss." The reader may wish to know more about how her marriage was resolved, but that may be another volume. Grippingly Orr writes about the Biafran war (1967-70), the suffering all around and the shields thrown up for the children even after the loss of a mission surgeon. "You really should not try to raise children in the midst of a war and pretend it isn't there," she writes in one of many direct addresses to her readers. We are drawn in. Orr is also eloquent about the estrangement experienced on returning to the land that was supposed to be her home. She refutes the misconception that the trauma of MK life is about landing in Africa without prior knowledge of the culture. "West Africa will take you in." Rather the trauma is in moving back to America and trying to pass as an insider. "It's hard to hold up under that kind of pressure and remember who you are." She finished high school in the U.S. where she "I often attempted greatness, but it was very hard without a village behind me." Her unique observation echoes a weighty theme among global nomads (see "Unrooted Childhoods: Memoirs of Growing Up Global"). Orr recognizes that, despite being enriched by Nigeria, she was impoverished of community at "home." The America her parents were rescuing her for was already lost to her, and her boarding school compound was separated from African village life. Also essential at a time when missionary kids are confronting their missions (see: [mksafetynet.com](http://mksafetynet.com)) and demanding trained dorm parents and child advocates, is Orr's recognition of sexual hazing and ritualized beatings in the boys' dorm. The rules of decent behavior frayed, so that "I left like the foreigner I was. I left the way I always left: without a tear." Her connectedness to any place was unavailable to her. Her wrenching refrain is, "For all I loved there, it was not mine to hold." Even those who've lived all their lives as rooted as trees should read this book for Orr's masterful style; her resonant similes, "My youth was slipping away like badly spent money

This is one of the finest books I've read, outstanding for its honesty, superb writing, and daring juxtapositions of past and present as Elaine Orr lets us into the world of being a white girl in Nigeria, daughter of missionaries, hidden from the facts of the Biafran War as a child, and caught between Nigerian and American culture. The added layers of Orr's perceptions of how her girlhood trapped girls, along with her experiences with dialysis, kidney failure, and successful transplants, add a deep understanding of how life creates twists and turns for us that bring out and depend on--and flourish because of--a mixture of luck, perhaps, but also self-assertion and daring, despite all the odds. This smart, honest, and gifted writer is a must-read.

I am an MK and thus expected to feel a connection with this book just as I have experienced when reading other TCK/MK oriented books. Maybe I would have felt a connection if I would have kept reading. Yet, after forcing myself on for a few chapters I finally asked myself, why should I continue? The book reads like a free-association transcript. Grasshopper-like chronological jumps back and forth and around again with thoughts, concepts, and feelings equally scattered make it seem this way. This is the type of book I would write if attempting to process the issues in my life. It is not the type of book I would write when attempting to share my life with others.

I have not been able to stop thinking about this book which is so beautifully written by Elaine Neil Orr. As she told the story of her childhood in colonial Africa, I could feel the heat, smell the sometimes awful smells, taste the dust, and relate to her pain of being a child of 2 countries. She writes hauntingly of war breaking out all around her and how the Americans chose to ignore it and just kept "carrying on". This is a great book for anyone that grew up one country( mainly due to their parents' jobs) but were then sent back to live in their parents' country. Elaine starts the journey to find what she left behind in her beloved Africa only after her health takes a serious turn for the worse. I could not put this book down until I knew the ending.

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