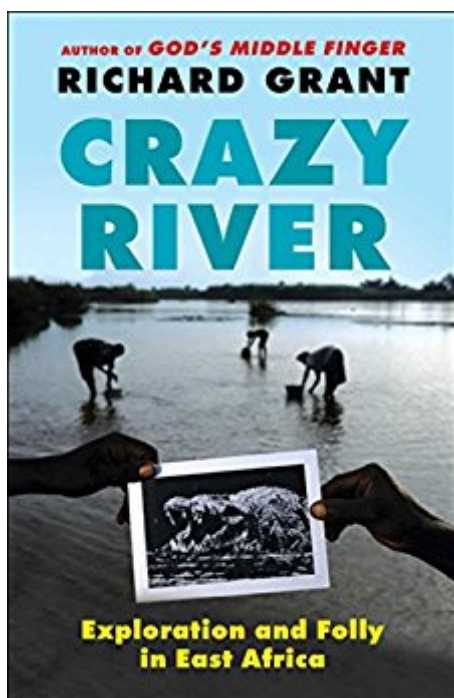


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Crazy River: Exploration And Folly In East Africa



Synopsis

NO ONE TRAVELS QUITE LIKE RICHARD GRANT and, really, no one should. In his last book, the adventure classic *Gods Middle Finger*, he narrowly escaped death in Mexico's lawless Sierra Madre. Now, Grant has plunged with his trademark recklessness, wit, and curiosity into East Africa. Setting out to make the first descent of an unexplored river in Tanzania, he gets waylaid in Zanzibar by thieves, whores, and a charismatic former golf pro before crossing the Indian Ocean in a rickety cargo boat. And then the real adventure begins. Known to local tribes as "the river of bad spirits," the Malagarasi River is a daunting adversary even with a heavily armed Tanzanian crew as travel companions. Dodging bullets, hippos, and crocodiles, Grant finally emerges in war-torn Burundi, where he befriends some ethnic street gangsters and trails a notorious man-eating crocodile known as Gustave. He concludes his journey by interviewing the dictatorial president of Rwanda and visiting the true source of the Nile. Gripping, illuminating, sometimes harrowing, often hilarious, *Crazy River* is a brilliantly rendered account of a modern-day exploration of Africa, and the unraveling of Grant's peeled, battered mind as he tries to take it all in.

Book Information

File Size: 3290 KB

Print Length: 354 pages

Publisher: Free Press (October 25, 2011)

Publication Date: October 25, 2011

Language: English

ASIN: B004IK9C66

Text-to-Speech: Not enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #155,209 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #59

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Travel > Africa #123 in Kindle Store >

Kindle eBooks > History > Africa #134 in Kindle Store > Books > Travel > Africa > General

Customer Reviews

Okay, now that I've gone on record on about how actively I disliked Julian Smith's Crossing the Heart of Africa - an award winner? really? - I feel it only right to explain exactly WHY I enjoyed Crazy River so much. Comparing the two, to me, is like comparing Paul Theroux with a college undergraduate essaying his way through first-year creative writing. Grant is acerbic, witty and a keen observer of human nature. I have traveled extensively in Tanzania and on Zanzibar; Grant got Zanzibar spot on. And not a romanticized, 19th century version of Zanzibar, either, but Zanzibar as it is in 2015. Grant has an expedition in mind - he's quite up-front about how quickly his plans fall apart, and his own shortcomings as a would-be explorer. Even though his plans fall apart, though, he stays on a linear course. Crazy River has a genuine beginning, middle and a real end. That ending, in Rwanda, following a face-to-face sit-down interview with Rwandan president Paul Kagame, immediately after being overwhelmed at the genocide memorial in Kigali, reads both true and profound, and is not at all what you might expect. I cannot overemphasize how much I enjoyed Crazy River, and how much I appreciated being taken on Grant's journey with him. And make no mistake: This book is so sharp, so keenly observed, so well-written, so fascinating in every respect, that as a reader you are genuinely there with him, every step of the way. I know a little bit of Africa. Not much, just what I've seen with my own eyes and experienced myself. I know people - expats and locals both - who live in Tanzania, Kenya and other countries, and have either chosen to make East and Central Africa their home, or have lived there all their lives. For me, Crazy River captures this corner of Africa exactly as it is, today, right now, in this day and time. It's neither an optimistic nor a pessimistic view. Rather, it feels simply . . . honest. I haven't read any of Grant's other work. Based on this book alone, though, he strikes me as mad talented.

This book is a pleasant surprise and an engaging, easy travel essay on the contradiction between Tanzania's tremendous potential for moving forward and the chaos of daily life and lack of urgency one encounters as an outsider. I've traveled to Tanzania 8-10 times, and Richard's observations are entertaining and contain a great deal of truth. He does a nice job of weaving in the history (often sad) of Tanzania's different regions and peoples into his adventures and setbacks while traveling around the country. He makes friends with interesting characters and explores the slums, bars, seedy restaurants and portals of everyday life, using these experiences to build an interesting tale. It's clear that Richard finds many things he enjoys about Tanzania, and he shares these vividly. But he doesn't leave out his frustrations, and provides a clear picture of how tiring it can be to get through a day in this often hot, crowded, inefficient place. He meets interesting people in Burundi

and Rwanda and shares great insights on the post-genocide attitudes he encounters, ranging from the Rwandan president to orphans and disenfranchised youth living on the street. I enjoyed the later chapters on life in these two countries as much as his adventures traveling across Tanzania. While the author warms to most of the local characters he meets, he clearly has no respect for the donors and NGOs working in East Africa. His narrative gets a little preachy at times about the real motivations of western aid workers and their inability to get anything done. He also downplayed the incredible friendliness of Tanzanians and the constant expressions of welcome that one hears from the locals. Some of Richard's travel challenges resulted from his own decisions, such as hiring a local fishing boat to travel from Zanzibar to the mainland. Most locals take the ferry, and avoid the seedy port town where he spent a depressing night. I've also had better luck avoiding the stomach viruses and tropical illnesses that plagued his entire journey; maybe that's good luck (on my part) or a bit of dramatics on his. But overall, this book is a great read for anyone traveling to Tanzania who wants a prelude on the culture, people, landscape and challenges of this enchanting country.

Actually, despite the title of my review, I did enjoy this book considerably, it is just that there wasn't actually that much of the book that was truly about the river. It was a mostly enjoyable and entertaining read, though at times I got annoyed with the author or with his portrayals of the various characters he met along the way. I am a resident of Tanzania and have traveled in Burundi and Rwanda as well, therefore I feel competent to say there were times that his reflections were spot on, but other times, he seemed to rely on stereotypes and hearsay. It is true that in the few months he was on the road, it would be impossible for him to have a "complete" experience (if anyone ever can?!?), but sometimes he presented himself as a bit of an authority in things of which he has a pretty limited view. The last irksome bit was the way in which he expressed such relief at being back in America- hah- he was only there a couple of months- how can you get so worn out by Africa in only a couple of months?? All that said, I have no trouble recommending this book for anyone about to embark on an African adventure, especially one in East Africa, or anyone who knows someone there. It is a pleasant way to spend an autumn weekend, curled up by a nice fire with a cup of hot cocoa, or in the hotter climate of Dar es Salaam- on the beach with a cold gin and tonic. PS I read the kindle version which did not have a map. I don't know if the hard copy version of the book has a map of Grant's route in it, but it would have been a nice thing to have.

So well written that I found myself feeling some of the joys and anxieties experienced by Mr. Grant. Will recommend to friends just as enthusiastic by this book as *The Middle Finger of God* and

Dispatches from Pluto.

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