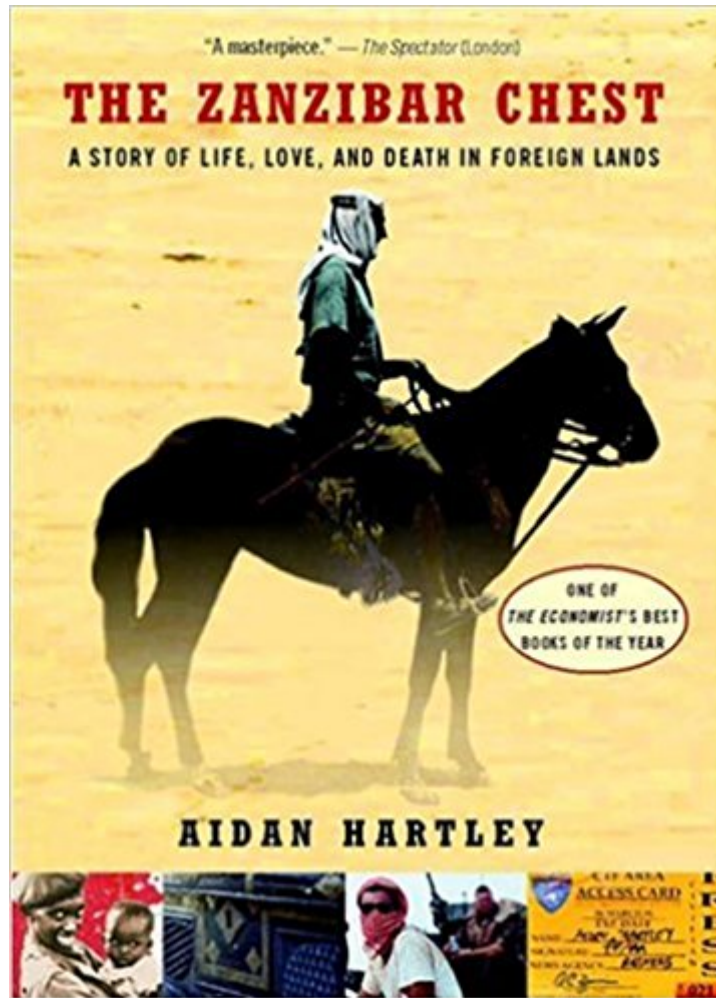




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The Zanzibar Chest



Synopsis

Hartley, an acclaimed frontline reporter who covered the atrocities of 1990s Africa, embarks on a journey to unlock the mysteries and secrets of his own family's 150-year-colonial legacy in Africa. A beautiful, sometimes harrowing memoir of intrepid young men cut down in their prime, of forbidden love and its fatal consequences, and of family and history. and the collision of cultures over the enduring course of British colonialism in Africa that defined them both.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Toward the end of this mesmerizing chronicle, Hartley writes simply of Rwanda, "Like everything in Africa, the truth [is] somewhere in between." Hartley appreciates this complexity, mining the accounts that constitute his book not for the palliative but for the redemptive. Born in 1965 in Kenya into a long lineage of African colonialists, Hartley feels, like his father whose story he also traces, a magnetic, almost inexplicable pull to remain in Africa. Hartley's father imports modernity to the continent (promoting irrigation systems and sophisticated husbandry); later, Hartley himself "exports" Africa as a foreign correspondent for Reuters. Both men struggle to find moral imperatives as "foreigners" native to a continent still emerging from colonialism. Hartley's father concludes, "We should never have come here," and Hartley himself appears understandably beleaguered by the horrors he witnesses (and which he describes impressively) covering Ethiopia, Somalia and Rwanda. Emotionally shattered by the genocide in the latter ("Rwanda sits like a tumour leaking poison into the back of my head"), the journalist returns to his family home in Kenya, where he happens upon the diary of Peter Davey, his father's best friend, in the chest of the book's title.

Hartley travels to the Arabian Peninsula to trace Davey's mysterious death in 1947, a story he weaves into the rest of his narrative. The account of Davey, while the least engaging portion of the book, provides Hartley with a perspective for grappling with the legacy that haunts him. This book is a sweeping, poetic homage to Africa, a continent made vivid by Hartley's capable, stunning prose. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Hartley, a journalist and British subject with four generations of colonial administrators in the family, offers a startlingly refreshing perspective on the political, social, and cultural impact of British colonialism in Africa and Arabia. The son of a foreign service officer, Hartley was raised in East Africa and educated in British prep schools. As a journalist, he traveled the war circuit through Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia, Bosnia, and other hot spots. Drawing on his personal experience of colonial legacy--his family being more comfortable fighting and dying in the colonies than living in Mother England--and his contemporary journalistic perspectives on war and conflict, Hartley details a fascinating odyssey that reflects on the past, present, and future of colonialism. He criticizes the policies of the UN and the U.S. in many of the world's trouble spots, putting a contemporary face on historic colonialism with an accuracy and veracity seldom seen in Western critiques. Vernon Ford Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

While this book wasn't what I was expecting, I want to declare right at the outset that it was REALLY REALLY GOOD! The author, Aidan Hartley, is a journalist and *The Zanzibar Chest* is his memoir of his childhood, being born and raised in Tanzania, and also the years of his 20s and 30s, when he was war correspondent in Africa. The son of a British military colonial, Aidan's family had a rich history of living the ex-pat life. Weaving in tales of his father's life in Africa, Aidan Hartley narrates a scene of beauty, love, fear and loss. At night, lions grunted and roared and the hollow volcanic hill rumbled as rhino cantered by. "We were in a paradise," said my father, "that we can never forget, nor equal." As the book progresses, the reader is a fly on the wall, observing the life of a young journalist. I remember how an American dropped his trousers for a group of us at the bar and boasted how he'd lost his left testicle in a Balkans mine blast, which he claimed hadn't prevented him from seducing a nurse during his recovery in a Budapest hospital. As Hartley finds himself in the midst of war-torn Somalia, Serbia and Rwanda, his

writing becomes darker and eventually he cannot distance himself from the horror. "They say we journalists ignored the story for months. We were there all the time. What's true is that we didn't understand at the time the full magnitude of what was happening. I was an ant walking over the rough hide of an elephant. I had no idea of the scale of what I was witnessing. I highly, highly recommend this superb memoir.

I just can't resist true stories by journalists. And this book, subtitled "a story of life, love and death in foreign lands" is that kind of book. It allows me to be an armchair traveler and live vicariously without having to take any risks. And it also teaches me a lot. The author, Aidan Hartley, is descended from a long line of British colonialists. He was born in western Africa in 1965, attended college in England, and came home to Africa as a journalist. This book is about those experiences. But, woven throughout, is the story of a friend of his father's who met a mysterious and violent death. Aidan found a diary of this man in a chest after his father's death - hence, the title of the book. If the book was just about this quest, however, I would have been bored, because his findings all happened in the past. What intrigued me most were the author's more recent experiences, experiences which seemed to include several lifetimes of being where the action was. A lot of things happened in Africa in the 1990s. And Aidan Hartley was there, risking his life and covering the stories for Reuters. He was there in Somalia when the Americans sent in troops. He was there during the famine in Ethiopia. He was there in Rwanda during the massacres. And he was in the Balkans during the bombing in Belgrade. The stories were fascinating. But his own reaction to them and how he lived was even more interesting. He writes about other journalists and bonding with them over alcohol and other drugs. He writes about his romance with a photographer named Lizzie. He writes from the heart about the destruction and despair. And he writes about the stories that Reuters wouldn't print and the politics involved in his profession. The events came alive for me - the sounds, the smells, and the danger. Through it all was the ultimate frustration of not being able to change anything. There are odd insights and unique word pictures that I'll always remember. Like that of a fellow journalist who was trying to stay in shape during the Ethiopian famine. And so he jogged every day along the same road on which the emaciated and starving people were struggling to stay alive. And then he writes about the celebrities who brought attention to the problem and the photographers that followed them around. He tells that that when Sophia Loren was there, there were such mobs of people following her around that they didn't notice that they were trampling on a small starving boy who was too weak to crawl out of the way. Rwanda was another horror, with hacked corpses everywhere. Once, they found a small boy still alive in a mass grave. They rushed

him to the hospital. It was a story that made big news and it was reported that he was given intravenous fluids and recovered. But the truth was that the boy died; that story was never printed. Hartley then raises the question which he asked himself at the time, if it might not have been better to let the small boy die with his mother. The stories are sad. And they affected him deeply. Eventually he was no longer assigned to the front lines. Most of his journalist buddies were dead, having had the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was difficult for him to re-adjust to a world where horrors are not the stuff of his daily experiences. It took him a few years, but he did recover. He is now living with his wife and two young children in the Kenyan countryside. This 479 page book is his legacy. Yes, I do recommend the book although I sure did wish the publisher had included a map of Africa. Just understand though, this is not a book to make you smile.

This is a truly amazing and moving book. It is rare indeed to find such a writing talent in the same person as such an intrepid adventure hound. I won't summarize the book, as other reviewers here have done so well enough. At first I was taken aback by Hartley's matter-of-fact renditions of horrific war scenes. By the end of the book it becomes apparent that he has seen so much of an unbelievably hellish nature that it is more amazing that he survived emotionally enough to tell the story at all. Many of the graphic stories here of the wars and violence in Africa and the Balkans are not for the squeamish, so be forewarned. On the other hand Hartley's stories of his family's history in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula are extremely tender. On the book jacket, a reviewer describes Hartley as a "Hieronymous Bosch reincarnated as a frontline correspondent". To me he seems more like a Dante who has visited both Paradise and Inferno and has produced an astonishing and breathtaking narrative. Not only that, his writing is nothing short of eloquent. The suggestion by some other reviewers that there are only a dozen pages about the "Zanzibar chest" itself is misleading. The chest contained the diaries of Hartley's father's friend Peter Davey. One of the major threads in the book is Hartley's retracing Davey's life and travels. Hartley tells many stories about Davey and his father's relationship with him, which occupy at least 60 pages of the book. However this is only one thread of many. This book is also helpful in understanding some of the historical context for the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, as well as events in Somalia (leading to the "Black Hawk Down" incident). By random coincidence, I read this just after reading Chris Hedges' "War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning". I found the latter to be a tremendous help in understanding the mentality of someone like Aidan Hartley, who was so clearly addicted to putting himself in harm's way to get the story and so clearly at a loss when he wasn't able to.

I am simply awed by the fact that Aidan Hartley was able to witness these incredible scenes and remain sane. Accounts of his father's and his own experiences in very harsh lands are expertly interwoven and simply stunning. A great read that will leave you anguished for those who have suffered through the ordeals he describes.

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