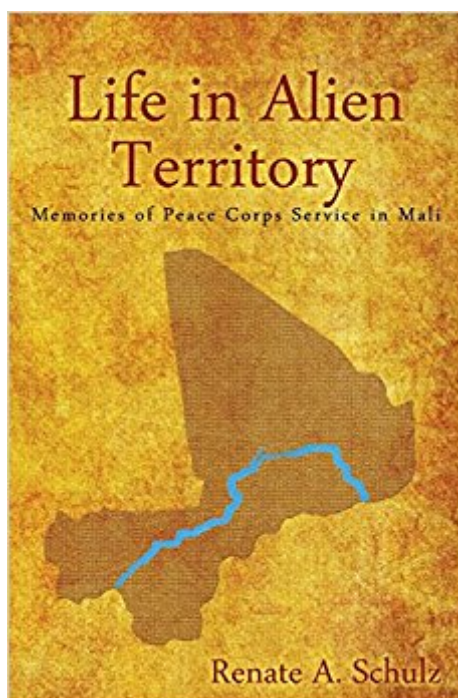


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Life In Alien Territory: Memories Of Peace Corps Service In Mali



Synopsis

Retired university professor Renate Schulz is looking for something to do with her life, some way to give back. She decides to rejoin the Peace Corps forty-six years after she first served. *Life in Alien Territory: Memories of Peace Corps Service in Mali* chronicles her eleven months in Mali, West Africa, a predominantly Muslim country. At age seventy-one, she is the oldest Peace Corps volunteer among 180 other Americans. Schulz weaves the highs and lows of her life as a volunteer in Africa into her daily journal entries. Her personal struggles with the challenges of living in third-world conditions, particularly at her age, are woven into her real-life concerns about human rights in West Africa, particularly for women and children. Her time in Mali, with all its challenges and frustrations, are offset with her growing appreciation for this "alien" culture. In this wonderfully readable travel narrative, Schulz captures the spirit of the culture, education, and people of Mali. At the same time, she shows how you are never too old to have a life-changing adventure.

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Customer Reviews

Given her experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria (1963 and 1965), Professor emerita, Renate Schulz, returned to West Africa (2011-12) to serve the Malian people, less a stranger than a newcomer. The series of journal entries that constitute her account of life in alien territory ranges from the initial departure for Mali with twenty-three young American volunteers to the grueling pre-service training in very humble surroundings, where the author acquired the name "Salimata Diarra," her work with students of English and an English Language Club, instructors of English at the Art Institute in Bamako, and attempts at understanding and speaking Bambara. Serious

problems with a number of living quarters, including theft, pleasant conversations with Malians and cheerful participation in local customs, such as a colorful and moving wedding reception, and a host of encounters that most of us will probably never experience populate this well-written narrative. Westerners will be struck by the destabilizing loss of time, individualism, and initiative and the contradiction between "let's start right now" and the Malian "insha Allah approach." The "unsettling shock" Schulz experienced between the transcultural field of "shared human experience and similar aspirations" and numerous intercultural encounters reminded her that she was "living in alien territory" in which her "opinions, encounters, and cultural expectations" differed markedly from those in the host country. And yet, as she writes, "I have to admit that my many moments of frustration are balanced by those moments when I love the challenge, when I love the unpredictability of daily life, when I love the insights I am gaining into another culture and into myself. I feel alive 'living on the edge'." Most troubling are the tradition of male dominance (forced marriage) and the practice of female genital mutilation (according to the traditional view, female "circumcision") in Mali. Reason, equality, and science offer more desirable alternatives. (Parenthetically, in 1997 the highest court in Egypt decided against the imposition of the practice of FGM in government hospitals even against protestations by Islamic scholars.) While educational and political activities seem haphazard, the social life to which Malians are accustomed is still anchored in tradition. For Schulz, the future of the country depends "on changing the role and rights of and opportunities for women." The adjective, "alien," in the book title indicates not only the author's experience but perhaps also those within the country itself. There are stark contrasts between life in poverty-stricken regions of the country, members of the middle class, and those few with means, tribal authority, and political power. The author is deeply concerned about the negative effects of the predominant form of Islam practiced in Mali. Her criticisms of Islam stem not from allegiance to another faith but human reason alone, which include tongue-in-cheek invocations to Allah. Schulz' hope is for the Malian people to whom she dedicates her book. The fact that all sales are donated to support Peace Corps projects in Africa is proof of the author's heart for humanity. The book may also be understood as a testimony to the generosity, determination, and strength of many Peace Corps volunteers at no matter what age. "Life in Alien Territory" is a fascinating, disturbing, and thought-provoking read. I learned a great deal about life in that West African country as well as the author's life. The book is replete with a list of general information on Mali, a few intriguing snapshots, and a glossary of terms from the Bambara language and several loan words from French. A short bibliography of further readings, which includes Barbara Kingsolver's "The Poisonwood Bible," rounds out the volume. The book can be recommended to those who are concerned about (inalienable) human rights and the human

condition.

A great read, especially if you want to learn about Malian culture.

Chinua Achebe (2012) wrote that "The Triumph of the written word is often attained when the writer achieves union and trust with the reader, who then becomes ready to be drawn deep into unfamiliar territory, toward a deeper understanding of self or society, or of foreign peoples, cultures, and situations. Not only does *Life in Alien Territory* invite the reader to examine his or her own reactions to the author's experiences, this very readable book provides valuable insights into foreign peoples and cultures so different from our own.

Renate Schulz's lifetime experiences in the Peace Corps are vividly documented in this book about Mali. Her travel narrative does not stand outside the culture of this country wracked by strife, but becomes a passionate part of it, bringing readers an immediate and unforgettable understanding of the people of Mali.

I think Renate showed real courage and dedication to her assignment in the Peace Corp. Learned how poorly the volunteers were incorporated into a workable program. It had to be frustrating for someone with her capabilities. It was very inefficient and mostly unsuccessful in the culture she was expected to help. I had a hard time putting the book down.

Powerful and insightful

This book tells of an amazing adventure and an amazing woman. Wow. A wonderful read.

This book is a great read for a number of audiences. Whether you are thinking of entering the Peace Corps, going to Africa or just want to live vicariously through Renate Schulz's months in Mali, you will be entertained. Schulz returns to service with the Peace Corps at the age of 70 after a 46-year hiatus and gives an up-close and personal account of the trials, tribulations and uplifting moments during her stint in "alien" territory. From hilarious visitations to the "njegen" to trying to teach in a seriously disorganized and deprived educational system, each chapter describes a new angle to an experience too real to be fiction. Schulz's pithy comments like, "Trying to integrate myself

into my host family is the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. I am using it as a survival test," show patience and determination on the edge. The bonus is a glimpse at how people outside of the U.S. live under less than ideal conditions but keep keeping on. Her closing statement, "The experience strengthened my conviction that working jointly across cultures—often one-on-one—was and still is the most effective way of addressing the problems of humanity and effecting lasting change," is a testament to her tenacity and hope for mankind.

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