

Synopsis

Published to rave reviews in the United Kingdom and named a Richard & Judy Book Club selection; the only work of nonfiction on the 2008 list; Blood River is the harrowing and audacious story of Tim Butcher's journey in the Congo and his retracing of legendary explorer H. M. Stanley's famous 1874 expedition in which he mapped the Congo River. When Daily Telegraph correspondent Tim Butcher was sent to Africa in 2000 he quickly became obsessed with the legendary Congo River and the idea of recreating Stanley's journey along the three-thousand-mile waterway. Despite warnings that his plan was suicidal, Butcher set out for the Congo's eastern border with just a backpack and a few thousand dollars hidden in his boots. Making his way in an assortment of vehicles, including a motorbike and a dugout canoe, helped along by a cast of characters from UN aid workers to a pygmy rights advocate, he followed in the footsteps of the great Victorian adventurer. An utterly absorbing narrative that chronicles Butcher's forty-four-day journey along the Congo River, Blood River is an unforgettable story of exploration and survival.

Book Information

File Size: 2807 KB

Print Length: 396 pages

Publisher: Grove Press; Reprint edition (September 15, 2009)

Publication Date: September 15, 2009

Language: English

ASIN: B0097D6XNO

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #130,536 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #6

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Africa > Central Africa #37 in Kindle Store > History > Africa > Central Africa #46 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Travel > Africa

Customer Reviews

Without the publication of this fascinating account of one man's arduous journey across a continent

and through a forgotten country, the world would be worse off. The author weaves together historical accounts of the few who preceded him: Henry Stanley ("Dr. Livingstone, I presume."), Robert Conrad (Heart of Darkness), Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and Barbara Kingsolver (The Poisonwood Bible). This makes the book much more than just a travel report but also a bibliography as wide and as deep as the mighty Congo River.

This was a gripping story of a dangerous journey through almost unbelievably primitive conditions. Much of what he related about his encounters was almost unbelievable to read about in the 21st C. I've traveled to third world and developing world, and have seen the incongruity of people on ox carts with cell-phones etc. as they progress unevenly--but progress they do! But there is none of that on his journey. No sign of the 21st C, and almost none of the 20th C remaining in the area he traveled through. It broke my heart to realize how the world has ignored and forgotten the suffering DRC people. Mr. Butcher is a very interesting writer, and I appreciated the regional history as well as the story of his own tribulations and perseverance (although at times I thought he was just plain crazy to continue!). I would have given this book a "5 star" but the end of the book just petered out, so the end was a bit of a disappointment. Nonetheless, highly recommended!

I just finished reading both this and Jeffrey Tayler's *Facing the Congo: A Modern-Day Journey into the Heart of Darkness*, which describes a similar journey. The two books are quite different in their approaches to the material, but they lend themselves to comparison, and on the whole, this book, *Blood River*, comes out ahead. The premise of this work is simple. The author, at the time the Africa correspondent for the Daily Telegraph, decides to retrace the journey of the most famous Daily Telegraph correspondent of a previous era: Henry Morton Stanley. He prepares for this trip for years, reading extensively about Stanley, the Congo, and Africa in general before starting his remarkable trip. After first flying to the shores of Lake Tanganyika, he then follows, using mostly modern conveyances, the route pioneered over a century before by Stanley. Throughout he compares his experiences with those of the prior explorer, and with the experiences of only a few decades ago, at the time of the Belgian colony. I was amazed to learn how developed the Congo had been prior to its independence. A modern joke, which does not feature in this book, but which applies completely goes as follows: a child asks his grandparent "what did you use for light before candles were invented?" and the grandparent replies "Electricity." The constant refrain of this book is the elderly, 70+ year old crowd, who remember clean water, good roads, good hospitals, the rule of law, and electric light, while their grandchildren work as subsistence farmers or

mercenaries. Butcher writes as a journalist, and it shows. His ability to bring even a savage and dangerous "undeveloping" country to vivid, engrossing light is superb. His research before the trip shows as well, in his asides about flora, fauna, and the monuments he discovers. His point in making the trip was a deeper understanding of the country, and this is where the starkest contrast is seen between his work and Tayler's. Tayler states at the opening of his book that the journey was one of self discovery, and that book is much more inward focused and solipsistic. It is surprising then, that I feel the reader gets a better picture of Butcher than of Tayler, as we see his interest in, and concern for, the people he encounters. His closing paragraphs add a note of hope to an otherwise bleak look at the "broken heart of Africa". Which is a wonderfully coined phrase, by the way. The book is written in British English, with an occasional word I had to look up as an American reader. (I had never heard the term "tatty" before reading this). Occasionally he repeats himself, with some key phrases repeated more than once. Butcher describes Mobutu's "singlehanded" prevention of Congo's success on at least three occasions, using very similar wording. But these are relatively minor quibbles with an otherwise excellent work. Highly recommended.

Another Western journalist's account of his travels through a war-torn African country, this time, the Congo. For anyone who read and enjoyed King Leopold's Ghost, this book can almost serve as a sort of sequel. In it, Tim Butcher attempts to retrace Henry Morton Stanley's portentous journey through the Congo over a century before. A friend of the author ironically points out, it's probably more dangerous to trek across the Congolese bush now than it was in Stanley's day. So, I admit the book's premise may be a little bit gimmicky, but Tim Butcher's voice more than makes up for it. He's a great writer and a genuinely likable person. (For those of you who have watched the show Survivor Man, imagine a Les Stroud who reads.) I found him to be sincere and direct - equal parts compassionate and honest. And despite his incredible hubris in undertaking this mission, he's surprisingly gentle-spirited and not at all pretentious. And just when I would begin to categorize him as a sort of straight-forward, no-frills writer, he would sideswipe me with a beautifully written description of something or someone he found compelling in the Congo, like a rusted piece of Belgian railroad track overtaken by the bush, or the frenetic Congolese priest lamenting the absence of law and order, or the man who was willing to give his four-year-old child to a complete stranger to save him from the Congo. I definitely enjoyed this book enough to pick up his next one right away.

The author sets out to essentially re-create HM Stanley's journey along the Congo river through what is now DRC (formerly Zaire). The writing style is approachable and there is enough intrigue

and adventure to keep the readers attention. Recommend

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