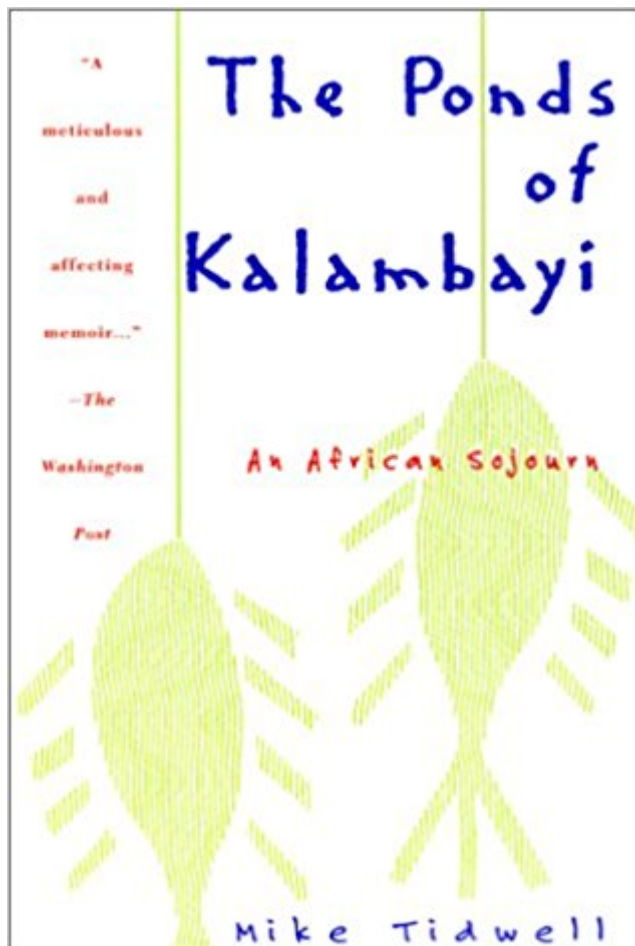




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The Ponds Of Kalambayi



Synopsis

A hilarious and wrenching memoir from a peace Corps volunteer in Zaire.

Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Lyons Press; 1st edition (May 1, 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 155821447X

ISBN-13: 978-1558214477

Product Dimensions: 8.4 x 5.6 x 0.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 17 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #226,754 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #2 inÂ Books > Travel > Africa > Democratic Republic of Congo #154 inÂ Books > Travel > Africa > General #531 inÂ Books > Sports & Outdoors > Hunting & Fishing

Customer Reviews

As a Peace Corp volunteer, Mr. Tidwell spent two years in the grasslands of south central Zaire trying to teach the benefits of fish farming in some of the poorest villages on the continent. His task was not easy. One villager was convinced that fish would stock the ponds naturally, since they come to earth in raindrops. Others suspected that the ponds were just another way for whites to exploit black labor. When he finally made headway, the fish farmers gave away nearly half their harvest to relatives, and Tidwell learned one of many powerful lessons: tradition takes precedence over profits. While the tragic poverty and disease faced by the villagers was daunting, Tidwell found that their adherence to heritage and their celebration of tiny triumphs and daily satisfactions revealed a life richer than he had ever known.

Tidwell presents his memoir of a two-year sojourn as a Peace Corps worker among a remote tribe in Zaire. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Mike Tidwell's memoir of his two years of Peace Corp work teaching villagers to build fish ponds is about so much more than that. He writes so honestly about what he learned from working closely with his African neighbors and how he came to understand their generosity from an African perspective as opposed to his American perspective. He has so many adventures with the men the

Kalambayi region that each chapter taught me something new. Mike shares his doubts about himself and those he works with. He confesses his errors and shares his times of despondency. But all in all I think he feels the way that I do...living in Africa as an American is the best education because you are forever changed...your world of thought is so much larger. I wanted the story to go on and on because every evening I looked forward to being with Mike's world in Zaire.

Tidwell does a beautiful job describing his two-year experience developing fish ponds in Zaire. Very well written; he pulls no punches on his early misunderstandings of the local culture. This would be great training material for Peace Corps Volunteers anywhere in the world. But hilarious it is not. Who writes those blurbs, anyway?

Mike Tidwell's "The Ponds of Kalambayi: An African Sojourn" is an interesting account of his trials and tribulations living in Zaire. He starts out a wide eyed foreigner ready to solve poverty and then comes to realize ugly truths. His fight with constant sickness, native's mistrust, and universal poverty/death is startling. Yet even when surrounded by a sense of fatalism he moves on and tries to help the lives of the poorest. His ponds do not promise prosperity but they do promise sustenance. Tidwell may not be Superman but he is a hero in my book.

Good read made me laugh out loud at times. I am missionary serving in CAMEROON he paints a good picture of his experiences.

Pretty good book, arrived on time and good price!

I have had this book on my shelf for a long time and finally read it. It is a well-written, emotionally honest and fascinating account of the author's experience as Peace Corps volunteer in Central Africa (then Zaire) in the mid-80's. My main quibble (and only one other review I read mentions this) is the complete lack of description of women in the book. Occasionally it will be mentioned that someone's wife brings out the stewed chicken, or that the author's "employee" (who really becomes his closest friend) that does his cooking and laundry is teased in the village for doing "women's work" when fetching water. Compounding this lack of attention to women is the occasional mention of meeting up with other Peace Corps volunteers on trips to the local big city, and some of these volunteers were...women! They had the same position as the author, training villagers in digging, stocking, and maintaining fish ponds. The hurdles they faced must have been far, far higher than

the author's. I was left wondering what strategies those women used in training THEIR fish farmers. Though their job was the same, I'm sure their experience was very different, and I wish the author had spent at least a sentence or two on the subject.

My impression of Peace Corps memoirs, before reading this book, was not good. This seems to be recognized as one of the better ones, and as an engaging, perceptive memoir with a strong writing style, it certainly exceeded my expectations. Tidwell spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1980s, living in a remote region of what was then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), where he taught fish farming to villagers. It begins with a chapter on his fairly bizarre training, but other than that it's all about living and working in Kalambayi rather than about the life of Mike Tidwell (though he is probably an interesting person outside of this experience. Fun fact: this is the same Mike Tidwell who, years later, founded CCAN). Kalambayi, of course, turns out to be an extremely difficult place to work. The people are desperately poor; poor nutrition, poor health, poor education, and a cultural hostility to family planning, not to mention government corruption, all contribute to and result from this vicious cycle. The author is observant and insightful, and his two years' immersion provide fascinating material, but what really makes this book work is his respect for the people he encounters. He finds aspects of the culture frustrating, but comes to understand why that society works the way it does, neither condemning it as backward nor romanticizing the simpler lifestyle. He sees the men he works with as individuals rather than stereotypes, without preconceived notions of Africans getting in the way. He's also honest about his own weaknesses and avoids making too much of himself. Tidwell does reveal a blind spot; he does not, apparently, interact with any women while in Kalambayi (other than one mentally ill beggar who harasses him into feeding her), nor give any reason why that would be so, especially in a society where virtually everything happens outdoors. It seems odd, to say the least, that an otherwise keen observer of people and places could move from 1980's America to a traditional society barely out of the Stone Age, and have nothing to say about gender roles. Other than the potential for cliché portrayals or pat answers to the world's problems - neither of which is present here - my initial skepticism about Peace Corps memoirs derived mostly from the fact that not everyone with interesting experiences can write. Fortunately, Tidwell can: the writing flows naturally, the transitions are smooth and the pacing appropriate; Tidwell keeps the focus on the interesting aspects of his experience, the people he meets and the world they inhabit. I found it compelling reading and read the book fairly quickly. I would recommend this memoir as a strong example of travel writing: it paints a vivid picture of Kalambayi and its people, as well as the challenges of working in international development. And it

gave me new respect for anyone who volunteers to join the Peace Corps; it is clearly grueling, soul-draining work, so kudos to Tidwell and everyone else who decides to take that on.

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