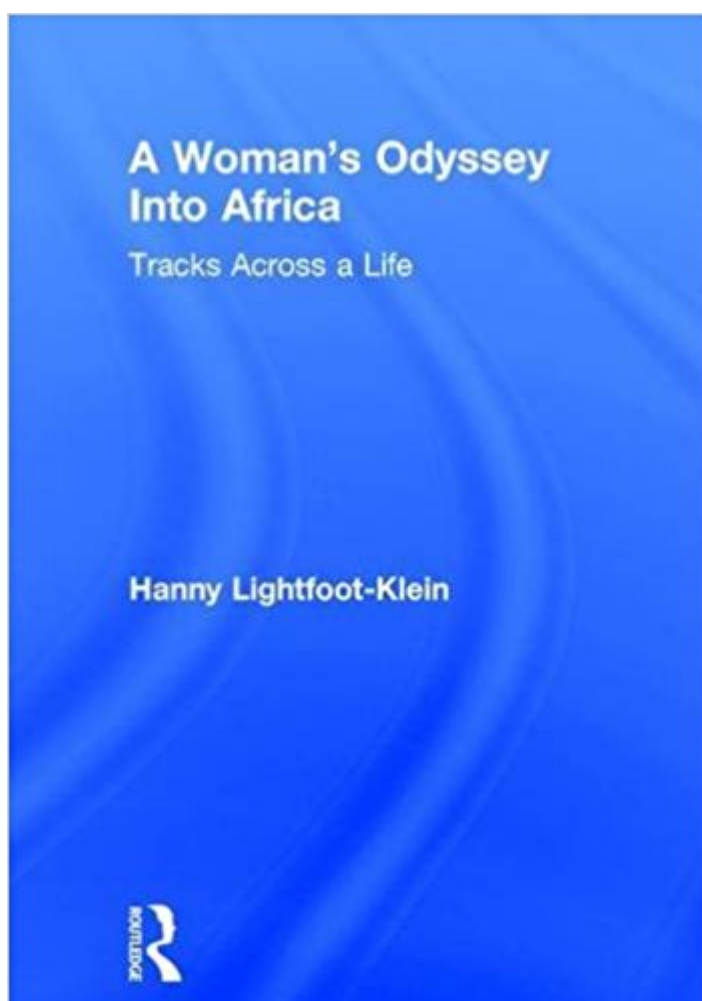


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A Woman's Odyssey Into Africa: Tracks Across A Life (Haworth Women's Studies)



Synopsis

Here is the intriguing story of one woman's mid-life flight from her stultified, middle-class, psychologically crippling, and unfulfilled existence into a world of high adventure, danger, hardship, and endurance, which ultimately leads her to autonomy and recognition. In her new book, *A Woman's Odyssey Into Africa*, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein chronicles three year-long solo backpacking treks through remote areas of sub-Saharan Africa. In the process, she discovers the mainsprings of strength within herself as she follows her own drummer, finding the courage to face the darkest and most secret convolutions of her own mind. She weaves the story of her journey through the men, women, and children she meets, and the dangers and adventures she faces as a lone woman traveler--part and parcel of the path she has chosen to take. She infuses readers at any stage of life, especially women, with the courage to do what their individual drummer dictates, as she did, to find fulfillment in life. Lightfoot-Klein assures readers in her book: "Even a life of quiet desperation is not beyond redemption. Change starts with a reassessment of the distortions in self image one has been programmed to accept. It starts with an inner rebellion, a realization that something has been amiss and a desire to set it right, if only to leave a better heritage for one's children. And then, most important of all, it begins with a single, wild, breathless moment, where one picks up an unaccustomed load and steps off into the unknown . . . Her message is truly for everyone."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

More about the author than about Africa, this unusual memoir tells of a woman who regenerates herself in midlife through three yearlong solo backpacking trips. Though the narrative is disorganized and the writing sometimes clichéd, the story is often absorbing because the author is so intrepid. A burnt-out English teacher in a "nightmare" New York City high school, Lightfoot-Klein, with her children grown, her marriage disintegrating and her lingering health problems resolved, decided at 51 to trek through Africa. While in Sudan, she learned of the barbaric but widespread African custom of female genital excision; obsessed with the story and proud to meet the challenge of life in Sudan, she returned to work on her first book, *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Circumcision in Africa*. She intersperses chapters on her background, including a particularly warped family and an invented Native American grandfather, with African adventures both inspiring and cautionary: dealing with the bureaucracy, finding lodgings at police stations, having sexual escapades, eating raw camel's liver and being raped if this happened to author; if not, stet on the beach in Kenya. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Lightfoot-Klein, an educator and family counselor, has written a readable story about her three-year solo backpacking trek into remote parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Like many Victorian women travelers before her, Lightfoot-Klein takes a midlife flight from her unfulfilled life into a world of adventure. Her explorations of her own nature and responses to danger and hardship stand in vivid contrast to her stultified childhood and marriage. She illustrates how one ordinary middle-aged woman can become extraordinary through determination and curiosity. This story of one woman's efforts to understand herself through trial-by-ordeal travel is engrossing and at times inspiring. The book is part travel, but more a women's studies book. Recommended for public libraries and mental health collections.- Susan Fifer Canby, National Geographic Soc. Lib., Washington, D.C. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Hanny's quest in Africa was two-fold: to enlighten us on the condition of African womanhood, and her desperate need for a toilet. The validity of the first quest is nearly obscured by her pursuit of the other. Americans bear a world reputation for their obsession over toilets in other countries. Hanny's frequent assessment of amenities in the Sudan and elsewhere becomes tediously repetitive. One is tempted to ask the location of the return ticket and why it wasn't put to use. Such carping is no longer acceptable, however, and it becomes our duty to cheer her perseverance and fortitude as she continues to address the more important issue. She deserves full marks for describing the ubiquity and impact of the Barbaric Practice. With roots in many cultures reaching back into a dim

past, female 'circumcision' is broadly practiced in Africa and elsewhere. Hanny Klein takes us through many tours of towns and villages, all the while making certain we understand how shabbily African women are treated. It's all a novelty to her, and we are led to share her confusion and anxiety. It's not a pleasant picture and she paints it with the bleakest possible hues. Along the way through Africa, we are also given numerous insights into her life. Raised in Germany, she went to New York to teach in Inner City [read slum] schools. Her relations with her father beggar description and she was despised by her mother. It's not an auspicious beginning, but it grows worse. She details her parents' relationship, but passes over her own marriage in a few sentences. If she ever had any feelings for the man, they aren't imparted to us. She has the tact to avoid laying full blame at his feet, but you can't help but wonder what prompted the marriage at all. Given her later description of her sexual predation while visiting Europe, it's difficult to accept him as the guilty party. It may be unfair to taint Hanny with an obsession with sex rivaling that of her need for proper facilities, but she spends at least as much ink relating her experiences as she does on the topic at hand. Today's literature on Muslim Africa relates many interviewees with wives who share secrets about their lives. They tell one tale, while living another. Islam asserts an iron control over women's lives, both emotional and physical. It's alien to Klein as it is to most of us. Klein recounts her growing awareness of Sudanese conditions, deftly bringing the reader along as she gains new knowledge. Female circumcision remains the central theme, with few other aspects of male-female relations examined. Control of female sexuality has no justification, but logic isn't likely to bring it to an end. As Hanny Klein puts it so well; "If only it were a little easier to persuade people to do what is good for them. But how do you win them over to your way of thinking when they have their own definition of what is normal?" Any campaign to end this horrible practice must confront a long established cultural tradition. Given that this book relates Klein's own inability to deal with a variety of cultural norms in several countries, it makes a poor foundation for fashioning such an effort.

The courage of the author to undertake her adventure of traveling in Africa solo with a backpack at age 50 is indeed compelling. She is a natural storyteller, yet opens up to reveal her own inner struggles based on a difficult childhood with manipulative parents. Her reporting of the practice of "female circumcision" in parts of Africa is introduced in the book as she was doing research. However, as horrible a thing as this is, she helps the Westerner understand where it comes from and how it plays an integral part in that culture even today while at the same time she fights to abolish it. I didn't want this book to end. I would read another book by her in a nanosecond. She's inspiring, honest, and courageous.

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