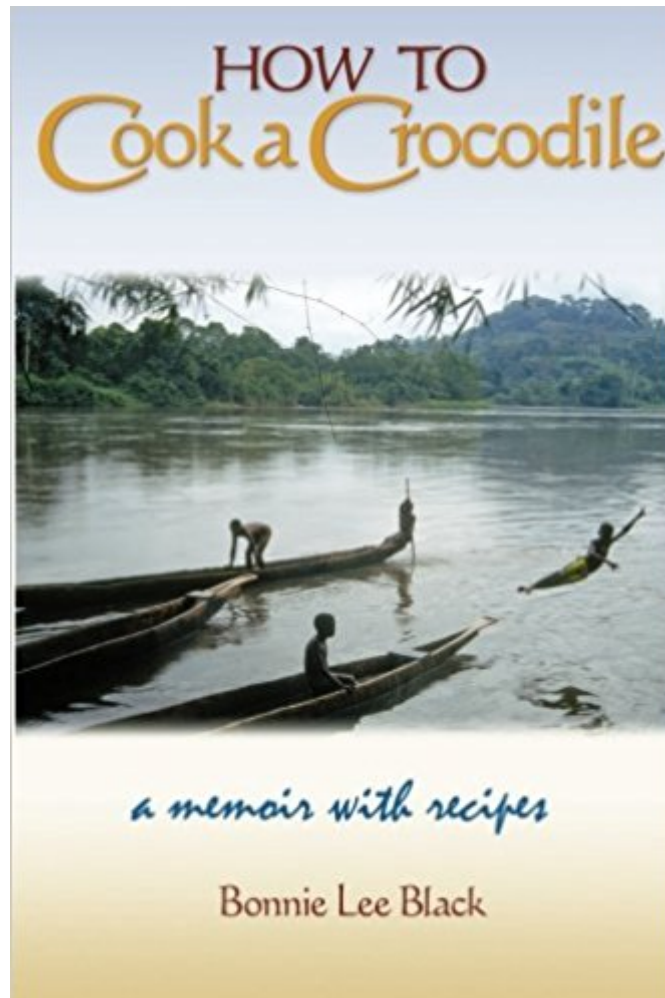




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How To Cook A Crocodile: A Memoir With Recipes



Synopsis

Casting caution to the wind at the age of fifty, New York caterer and food writer Bonnie Lee Black decided to close her catering business and join the Peace Corps. Posted to the tiny town of Lastoursville in the thickly rainforested interior of Gabon, Central Africa, Bonnie taught health, nutrition, and cooking, in French, primarily to local African women and children. In the two years she served in Gabon, Bonnie developed her own healthy recipe for a purposeful life, made in equal measures of good food, safe shelter, meaningful work, and unexpected love. Like M.F.K. Fisher's classic, World War II-era book, *How to Cook a Wolf*, Bonnie's true stories comprise a lively, literary, present-day survival guide.

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Customer Reviews

Bonnie Lee Black joined the Peace Corps at the age of fifty, after having been a writer/editor and chef/caterer in New York City for many years. She served in Gabon, Central Africa, as a Health and Nutrition Volunteer from 1996-98. Bonnie is the author of the memoir *Somewhere Child*, published by Viking Press in 1981. She has since written two memoirs about her recent work in Africa: *How to Cook a Crocodile*, and *Patchwork: A Memoir of Mali*. An honors graduate of Columbia University in New York, Bonnie also holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University in Los Angeles. She now teaches English and Creative Nonfiction writing at the University of New Mexico in Taos.

"A good book should leave you . . . slightly exhausted at the end. You live several lives while reading it." -- William Styron Having just finished Bonnie Lee Black's "*How to Cook a Crocodile*," I

am pleased to report that I am delightfully exhausted. Ms. Black's deeply affecting memoir of her experience as a Peace Corps volunteer -- teaching nutrition, cooking, and hygiene to the locals in Gabon (West Central Africa) -- would be riveting on its own terms. She writes powerfully, after all, about tackling forces that would, and do, stagger lesser beings: the oppressive nature of a stultifying and ultimately withering climate (Gabon is located squarely on the Equator); the lingering effects of systemic poverty; the heavy cloak of inertia fostered by years of neglect by the outside world; continual assaults by insects and reptiles (when were **you** last called upon to pick up a machete and fend off a snake in **your** kitchen?); and the like. That said, her saga is all the more remarkable, and dramatic, given her personal background, which she recounts engagingly by way of introduction. For Ms. Black headed for the Peace Corps at the age of 50, having flourished for years in Manhattan's ultra-sophisticated circles: first, as a writer fully at ease in both the personal and the corporate realms; later, as a caterer extraordinaire, cooking up haute cuisine delights for the high and mighty. Eventually, she realized, there was something more, and deeper, to be had. Shunning the creature comforts that accompany such an existence, motivated by a desire to share her skills, and, yes, to find a purpose all too lacking for all too many here in the West, Ms. Black set out for Gabon -- and its mind-boggling challenges -- at an age when many at least fantasize about retiring. Against this backdrop, "How to Cook a Crocodile" should be understood for the richly rewarding experience that it is. It relates not only the author's dogged, inspiring, and, ultimately, successful efforts to bring a modicum of improvement to the lives of women and children in Lastoursville, a city in central Gabon, set on the OgoouÃ© River and surrounded by rainforests; it does so with the insightful wisdom, intelligence, sensitivity, and humor (self-deprecating and otherwise) that can be shown only, if at all, by someone who has lived a rather full existence before embarking on the adventure of a lifetime. And if that weren't enough, she brings vividly to the printed page the lives of those whom she encounters there -- including at the most touching, and personal, levels. It was Emerson who taught us that "to laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children . . . to leave the world a better place. . . to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded." Measured by the demanding lights of both a Styron and an Emerson, Ms. Black has unquestionably succeeded with this book. Her account ends with the tantalizing hint that another such book might be in the offing -- this one centered on her further activities, this time with an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization), in Mali. Speaking for the readership class, I say simply: We can only hope.

This is a memoir of a writer's Peace Corps stint in the French-speaking country of Gabon, Africa.

Not only did the author move to Africa and learn to speak French at the age of 50, she left the frenzied world of a NYC caterer and found herself in a country with little development but lots of places to find meaning and purpose. She was intent on returning to Africa as she had lived in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) for a time in the 70s, when her missing child was found living there. Black does an amazing job of making the reader understand the difficult adjustment she faces upon her arrival in Gabon and the joy she finds in unexpected places and people. All of this is conveyed in a way that makes you feel the heat of the rainforest, the beauty of a vastly different culture, the joy of unexpected love, the loneliness of the outsider, the fear of the unknown, and gives an understanding to this steamy country in Africa where the extreme weather acts as an impediment to progress, yet becomes part of the beauty of living so close to the earth. Black's story is intertwined with memories of her childhood, her loving mother and alcoholic father, her previous experience in Africa, the loss of her daughter, and her years spent living, writing, and cooking in NYC. To that end, each chapter includes recipes of dishes she made for others and recipes she taught to the women of Gabon as part of her work in community health. I have yet to try one of the recipes, but if you read this book, make sure you've eaten because your mouth will be watering with all the gourmet dishes Black whips up with seemingly no effort, right there in the middle of the rainforest. Her generous, open spirit, her humor (there are parts of this book that are hilarious), and her love of cooking and the people of Africa make this book a joy to read. Someone call Oprah.

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