

Review: A Road Through Mali-Kuli: A Novel

By Agi Kiss

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Agi Kiss. A Road Through Mali-Kuli: A Novel. Washington, DC: 1stBooks Library, 2001. 411 pp. ISBN 0-7596-4992-8 (paper). US\$14.00. Acid-free paper.

A well-written and highly engaging mystery, *A Road Through Mali-Kuli* stimulates thought about deeper questions of international development and environmental conservation. Along with her strong grasp of the international development arena, Kiss knows sub-Saharan Africa well. Her rich descriptions of the local scene give the reader a strong sense its sights, sounds, and smells. From the Delamere Terrace in a Nairobi hotel (a real place) to the raunchy Cock and Bull bar in Mwatumi, Rumura (a fictional African country), scenes will be familiar to those who frequent such places, and they will engage the imagination of readers who haven't. Including characters like the grubby and clueless Australian tourists and the old British couple sitting in a faded hotel lounge, sipping gin and muttering about the good old days gives the story a greater sense of authenticity.

Kiss entertains the reader with a fast-paced mystery containing numerous unexpected twists and turns. She also foregrounds important questions about validity, efficacy, and morality of externally directed attempts to bring about sustainable development in developing nations. Speaking metaphorically of the difficulties involved, she describes the Mali Kuli forest: "if you look at the forest from far away, it looks like a blanket of solid green. When you get a little closer, you see there are actually lots of different shades of green. And if you get right inside it ... you see it's also black, white and brown and yellow and red ... you can see every color in the world in the forest ... and so, the closer you look at something, the more complicated it becomes" (p. 246).

Who is Mr. Singh? Traveling back and forth between Nairobi and the Rumura, everyone seeks to meet this elusive man. The plot revolves around various expatriate efforts to "save" people and environment-typical northern development themes. Corruption is rife, from village yokels to top-level government officials and European expats who run illegal and/or immoral moneymaking schemes. The goods at issue are rare animal species and valuable hardwoods from the Mali Kuli Reserve. The bad guys try to plunder whatever they can from Rumura's rich but diminishing natural resource base. Thuggish police Captain Kamanga, his boss, and their French partner,

have their hands deeply in the natural resources till. Their opponents, including an arrogant and misguided Dutch environmentalist, expat biologists, and a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agent, attempt to foil their plans. In the end we are still unclear on the position of the well-educated, seemingly sympathetic Director of Forestry, Dr. Maleke. Does he care about his country or is he just out to make a buck? And, what about the expat biologist protecting endangered bonobos from use by local pygmies (who sell them to foreigners). Is he a caring conservationist, myopic jerk or both?

Kiss' character development is strong. Along with the "present" of the story, the pasts of key players add depth and realism. The main character is Carol Simmons, a middle-aged, white American, who works for a development NGO. In one subplot her marriage is troubled, but the story focuses on her entanglement in a web of crime and corruption that nearly takes her life. Her old Peace Corps friends try to assist her. One of them, a diplomat and stereotypical male, barely escapes his own termination in fumbling attempts to save the day. The lives of average Rumurans are also portrayed through characters like Margaret Waiyala, the strong president of the Mwatumi Greengoods Women's Cooperative which is supported by Carol's NGO. The description of the co-op's meeting with Carol, who is investigating allegations of corruption, conveys a realistic sense of sub-Saharan African culture through the gathering's boisterous and chaotic nature. In another dose of reality, Margaret's niece, abandoned by her husband, returns to the village with her children to seek assistance from her relatives. Her culture places her at the mercy of the village's senior men's council-her local leader aunt does not possess the power to rescue her.

If you like excitement or if you wish to recall or sample the difficulties of working cross-culturally, *A Road Through Mali-Kuli* will provide both and more.

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