

Justin Chapman, *Saturnalia: Traveling from Cape Town to Kampala in Search of an African Utopia* (Los Angeles, CA: A Barnacle Book, Rare Bird Books, 2014). pp. 286.

Shane Villacorta

Saturnalia: Traveling from Cape Town to Kampala in Search of an African Utopia, by Justin Chapman, examines the various American, South African, Zimbabwean, Zambian, Botswanan, Rwandan, Ugandan, Kenyan, and Tanzanian cultures. Chapman, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley and a former Altadena, California elected council member, is the book's protagonist. Chapman writes the memoir from the perspective of a white, educated American man traveling to Africa in order to overcome drug addiction. This demographic background helps the reader contextualize his narrative. The memoir is divided into several sections, each of which represents a snapshot of time throughout his travels from Southern Africa to Central Africa. While not formally divided, the two main parts are his travels from Cape Town, South Africa, to Mityana, Uganda, and Chapman's subsequent and lengthy stay at Mityana. Although *Saturnalia* is a memoir that does not have the formal qualities of an autobiography or scholarly work, it has the hallmarks of a novel memoir. The usage of colloquial language grants the memoir a raw feeling that attempts to be objective. Because Chapman is traveling through the various countries, he only scratches the surface of some of the major social issues that he finds such as: class relations, politics, the treatment of women in African culture, and the assuming nature of American culture, ignorant, and perhaps disrespectful.

The beginning of the novel illustrates the cultural differences between the United States of America, South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Zanzibar. Additionally, one of the major social issues Chapman comments upon is the organization of class in these localities. Chapman travels to Africa from America in an effort to rehabilitate his opioid addiction.

Chapman first arrives in a Cape Town hostel and comments on South Africa's wealth disparities. Notably, Chapman wrote about the township and its dire living conditions, which he believed was an "unfortunate existence."¹ This is a stark contrast from the beautiful, grand home his family's friend possess

that overlooks the False Bay in Fish Hoek Valley. During his travels, Chapman also noticed how the South African government manages its public services like the transit lines. He found public transportation, such as trains, not well run which was a criticism he expressed about many of the African nations he visited. Furthermore, Chapman also commented upon the differing visa prices amongst the African nations, with Tanzania's visa costing almost 100 dollars² while Uganda's cost fifty dollars³ in Uganda. In the cases where the countries did not even check for a visa, he felt costs unnecessary.⁴

In Mityana, Uganda, after staying with a local priest named Father Odo, Chapman commented upon women in that environment. He concluded that "women are second class citizens."⁵ Exemplifying this, for Chapman, was the fact the priests did not allow the nuns to eat at the table while they ate.⁶ Moreover, the women in the monastery were not only required to cook for the men and themselves, but also clean up afterwards. Through this jarring experience, Chapman skillfully juxtaposed criticized the monastery's gender divisions.

Through an experience with young American women, Chapman notes some of the negative stereotypes Americans had about Uganda. During a journey to Murchison Falls, according to Chapman, the young adults articulated ignorant and racist words about the region. They began singing Disney's *Lion King's* "The Circle of Life" while driving towards the Ugandan waterfall. Furthermore, they pretended to be warthogs, to caricature Pumba, another *The Lion King* character.⁷ However, Chapman attempts to justify their ignorance by writing that they probably did not know any better. He was blinded by his own views of Africa and thought his perspective was a given. He eventually became irritated with the young women's ignorance about Africa.⁸ This interaction, for Chapman, represented some of the cultural barriers prevalent between the two cultures.

I recommend this memoir to those seeking an evolutionary journey through some parts of Africa through an individual's travelogue. Although the underlying story is about a recovering addict, the memoir attempts to tackle cultural interactions within Africa. Thus, the book serves both as a tale to encourage people to overcome their substance abuse and shed some light on the diversity within African countries.

Notes

¹ Justin Chapman, *Saturnalia: Traveling from Cape Town to Kampala in Search of an African Utopia* (Los Angeles, CA: A Barnacle Book, Rare Bird Books, 2014), 22.

² *Ibid.*, 93.

³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.