

# READER'S GUIDE

## Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa

Edited by Julie R. Dargis



INDIE HOUSE PRESS

Copyright © 2013 Julie R. Dargis  
All rights reserved.

Cover photo © 2013 World Concern  
Used with permission.

Published by Indie House Press through CreateSpace.com

Indie House Press

*Professional Resources for the Independent Voice*

Minneapolis, Minnesota

[www.IndieHousePress.org](http://www.IndieHousePress.org)

## WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT

### *Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa*

The story of an independent woman afoot in a world of adventure, danger and romance.

--**Brian Lambert, MINNPOST**

What Dargis achieves by combining her sonnets with the gutsy m.o. of an intrepid global observer is a compelling tour de force.

--**E. Timothy Carroll, first executive director, National Council of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers**

In *Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa*, Julie R. Dargis tells the story of her life in Africa and beyond, blending her family history with the history she has lived overseas in rich poetry and prose.

--**John Coyne, Editor, Peace Corps Worldwide**

Julie Dargis brings to vivid life the dangers, challenges, and rewards of providing aid on the front lines. I highly recommend this book to anyone seeking insight into humanitarian work in the 21st century.

--**Michael Kocher, Vice President, International Rescue Committee**

Julie's writing is brave, true and moving. There is nothing self-conscious about this journey of self-discovery.

--**Chris Hennemeyer, Specialist in African Affairs**

Ms. Dargis poignantly reminds us all that there is no path leading us to our own liberation. You can rifle through the outer world all you want, but in the end the only solace will come from the journey within.

--**Jules Hermes, Author/Photographer, Children of India**

## CONTRIBUTORS



Melanie Kondrat, Remembering Chris Stevens

Chris Hennemeyer, Central Africa Today

Darja Perisic, Serbia after 1999

Eric James, PhD, Recommended Reading List and Useful Links

*Lori Kurtz-Larkin, copyeditor*

# CONTENTS



	Acknowledgments	i
1	Introduction	1
2	Topics and Questions for Discussion	3
3	Discussion Questions for Selected Sonnets	6
4	American Refugee Committee Interview	10
5	Selected Updates on Countries Noted in the Book	15
	<i>Morocco, Remembering Chris Stevens</i>	15
	<i>Serbia After 1999</i>	21
	<i>Central Africa Today</i>	24
6	Recommended Reading on Humanitarian Issues	30
7	Useful Links and Blogs for Humanitarian Workers	32



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank World Concern for the use of their *No Guns* photo, which is also used by permission in the *Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa* book trailer on YouTube.

In gratitude for their fine work around the world, and following their generous support during the launch of *Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa*, a portion of proceeds of the paperback edition of this Reader's Guide will be donated to the American Refugee Committee.



## INTRODUCTION

*Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa* enters the world of humanitarian aid work through one woman's eyes. For over twenty years, Julie R. Dargis worked with populations affected by conflict in some of the most dangerous and remote areas of the world. She began her career with the US Peace Corps. She continued her work in countries deeply affected by war. In her stories and verse, Dargis works with local communities to bring clean water, basic health care, and education to some of the most vulnerable populations in the world. An honest and moving account of life in war-torn nations, Dargis tells of the aftermath of trauma with a spirit and conviction that inspires.

From Morocco to Serbia, Rwanda to Cote d'Ivoire, Congo to South Sudan, *Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa* recounts stories of war-affected populations rebuilding their lives with unbreakable spirit. Dargis depicts life overseas in the face of adversity with stories that offer a front row view of life in the field. Readers travel with Dargis as she flies on single engine aircraft over dense forests and travels with her colleagues through arid deserts on makeshift roads. Through her travels, the reality of living in some of the most dangerous and insecure countries in the world is demystified.

In this Reader's Guide, the author has included topics and questions to stimulate discussion and debate by book club members and students alike. To allow readers to consider the historical context of the essays and verse from a fresh viewpoint, the guide also includes updates by international specialists and colleagues working at the community level to rebuild war-torn communities after years of conflict.

A recommended reading list for people interested in humanitarian issues, useful links, and other resources for humanitarian aid workers, are also included.

This guide is intended to be a companion piece to the book ***Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa***. The purpose of the guide is to both aid readers to better understand the author's and expand upon the background and historical context surrounding the global issues discussed within the chapters.

Due to production costs of the paperback version, it is not possible to provide this version free to readers. Therefore, 100% of proceeds from the sale of the paperback edition, after production and marketing costs, will be donated to the American Refugee Committee.

An electronic version is available free through Smashwords.com and can also be downloaded free of charge from the Smashwords.com distribution partners, including iBooks, Kobo and Barnes and Noble online.

A PDF version of the Reader's Guide is also available for free download and can be found at: [www.PitStopintheParisofAfrica.com](http://www.PitStopintheParisofAfrica.com).

## TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As a child, the author is branded by her mother as a difficult child. How does this experience affect her work with children throughout her career? What is her connection with children who have been either thrust into an adult world and/or who take on adult roles at a young age?
2. In the section “Notes on the Boyfriend Sonnet,” the author discusses how she initially began writing sonnets. What is the significance of the author’s relationship with Brock? How does this relationship continue to influence her life?
3. The first time that the author returns home to the US, she is shattered following her experiences in Rwanda. Why do you think that she returns in such an exhausted state? What does she do to rebuild her life after her return? How does this initial experience affect the author’s future professional decisions?
4. While living and working in Washington, DC, the author stands in front of a photo of the former Peace Corps office building, which is undergoing demolition. What is she longing for as she contemplates this destruction? How does this photograph foreshadow her professional life to come?
5. After returning home for a second time, the author begins dating on the internet. In one story, the author recounts how she dated a man who shared a traumatic story for the first time since it had occurred. This happened a week after the author had had a flashback of a traumatic event of her own

that she had shared with the man. What experiences have you had in your own life whereby someone may have appeared in your life at a time when you needed him or her the most?

6. While working in Brazzaville, the author meets a young girl named Faith. Why do you think that the author is drawn to this child to the point that she considers adopting her? How does her experience working with Faith parallel her early experiences as a young girl with her own mother?
7. When the author was working in Bulgaria, she was managing a long-term development program with adequate resources and a “full and competent staff.” How was her lifestyle different as a result? Would you prefer working in a fast-paced humanitarian relief environment or in a longer-term development program in a more stable country? Why?
8. Chapter Ten is a very short chapter. What is the purpose of including this chapter? Why do you think that the author chose the title of this chapter to be the title of the book?
9. In the chapter on Chad, the author recounts a story about a celebrity and his father. Why do you think that the author did not name the celebrity?
10. In the final chapter, the author reflects on why she decided to leave the world of humanitarian relief. Yet, she finds herself back in the middle of conflict areas overseas in numerous countries while working as a consultant on short-term assignments, and later, as an executive for an international non-profit based in her hometown. Why do you think that the author returned to these difficult places once she was safely home?

11. In the Epilogue, the author tells a story about meeting an old woman from the southern Italian province of Calabria while she is in Rome. What is the significance of the author's relationship with this woman? Why do you think that they became fast friends? Why do you think that the author has chosen to tell this story as an epilogue to her life story?
  
12. What are some of the coping mechanisms that the author used in the face of the many stressful circumstances that she encountered in her life and work overseas? Which of these coping mechanisms were successful? Why? What might you have done differently to cope?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR SELECTED SONNETS

1. **The Boyfriend Sonnet** (*Chapter Two, page 34*)

Are the two people depicted in this sonnet approaching their relationship similarly or differently? How does the author feel about the man? What is the message outlined in the couplet of the sonnet? Do you agree, or disagree, with the commentary in the couplet?

2. **The Late Night Moon** (*Chapter Two, page 36*)

What is the visual that is presented in the first line of this sonnet? What feelings or emotions does this visual depiction inspire? How does the short length of the relationship affect how the author approaches the relationship? Does the author express any regrets? In the closing couplet, what is the final lesson? What is the significance of this lesson to the author at this stage in her life?

3. **Reckless Abandon** (*Chapter Three, page 53*)

The sonnet begins with the phrase “amber leaves” in the late fall and ends with the same phrase in the early spring. How does the structure of this sonnet inform the overall meaning of the poem? How does the reference to the seasons relate to the comment about children playing with reckless abandon?

4. **Crossing to Safety** (*Chapter Five, page 94*)

This poem, titled after the book by the same title by Wallace Stegner, depicts a sense of emptiness and loss. What were the issues facing the author during her tenure in Rwanda that may

have led her to write this poem? Does the poem mirror the author's personal or professional life?

5. **Christ-Age Prague Spring** (*Chapter Seven, page 133*)

In Christianity, Christ was 33 years old when he died. To gain insight into how the title was derived, consider Christ's age at his death with the date that the sonnet was written. In mythology, what powers are wielded by the Infant of Prague? What square in Prague lays claim to the infamous striking clock?

6. **Knight's Crossing** (*Chapter Seven, page 134*)

This sonnet explores the special interests, skills and background of a man well known to the author. He was a master in what area? What was his country of origin? In the context of medieval gravesites, in the two areas noted in line eleven of the sonnet, explain the reference to "castaway pawns." What is the significance of a draw between queens?

7. **One Hundred Minutes** (*Chapter Nine, page 181*)

What images does the "The world is my banquet, water my wine" bring to mind? In the final line of the couplet of the sonnet, it is stated that each passing moment ends a minute. How does the last line of this sonnet connect to the first line of "Translucent Thunder," on page 186 of the book?

8. **Sonnet for Sardo** (*Chapter Eleven, page 205*)

One of the marvels of living and working overseas is how quickly and deeply friendships are initiated and cemented. As a young Peace Corps volunteer, the author made many friends

who she would not have otherwise sought out. The intensity of the experiences shared in training served to bring disparate, discordant personalities together. Later, as a humanitarian aid worker, this phenomenon brought solace. Sharing emotions through trauma and joy, Sonnet for Sardo speaks to the mysterious forces that bring two people together, even when they are most certainly meant to remain apart. Who are the people in your life who mysteriously remain connected to you against all odds? What are the lessons that you are learning about yourself as a result of these liaisons?

9. **After the Conflict, Before the Peace** (*Chapter Twelve, page 224*)

Following the submission of the manuscript to the initial editor for *Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa*, the feedback that the author received included a suggestion to include a poem at the close of the book. To capture over twenty-five years of her life in one sonnet, she considered her understanding of the cycle of life.

*Final reflections on a personal note:*

By incorporating the final sonnet into the trailer for the book, I achieved my goal of making an imprint in the world. I had been working with a small independent publisher to cut a trailer for the launch of the book. We developed the concept together, but I was sent a link to iStock.com to search for photos and background music, and I was also asked to do all of the copywriting. Instead of buying rights to photos, I reached out to my friend and colleague, Stéphane Barsalou, with whom I had worked in the Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire and Aceh, remembering the many wonderful photos he had taken over the years. He sent me a number of images to choose from with his permission to use any or all of them

in the trailer. But it was my sister, Kathleen, a gifted documentary film editor, who wanted to put a more meaningful element into the trailer. She wanted to use my voice.

Since the publication of the book in January, I have marketed the trailer much more aggressively than I have marketed the book. The book is a transparent, and honest, look into my inner life. The trailer is a result of a much wider collaboration within the world around me. With gratitude, I take this opportunity to thank both Stéphane and my sister, Kathleen, for allowing my voice to soar.

To view the trailer, visit:

[\*Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa\* Trailer](#)

## AMERICAN REFUGEE COMMITTEE INTERVIEW

*The following questions and responses are the transcript from the Community Book Club sponsored by the American Refugee Committee, moderated by Therese Gales in Minneapolis on April 24, 2013.*

1. Please talk about your method of writing. The sonnets are dated, but it is not clear about the rest of the narrative content. Had you been writing for a while, or did you wait and do most of the writing years later, looking back at your life? Why did you choose to do it now?

*Author Response: I always knew that someday I would publish my poetry. I had a chance to publish one poem in a literary journal when I was in Belgrade. But it wasn't until a few years ago that I was ready to publish them. The original concept was to publish the sonnet on one page, with notes on where I was and what I was doing on the opposite page to provide context to the pieces. When I returned from South Sudan in 2010, I knew it was time, so I took out the sculpted heart that my Peace Corps boyfriend, Brock, had given me in Morocco prior to asking me to write my first sonnet, and I began the introduction since originally, I was going to dedicate the volume to him. I was consulting at the time, so while traveling, I completed all of the notes sections.*

*When I thought I had a manuscript (it was about 100 pages), I put it out to readers, but they almost all came back saying that they preferred the prose. I was also working with a developmental editor, and she called me after reviewing the manuscript and she told me that she saw it more as a full-length book, with up to 200 more pages. She told me not to wait to write another book, saying that this needed to be my book. So I quit my job and over the summer, wrote out all my favorite stories.*

2. Was it therapeutic for you to write, or was it challenging, having to relive some pretty traumatic experiences? Can you talk about this?

*Author Response: I love the act of writing, because you never know where it is going to take you. When I would start a new essay, the page would be blank, I would begin to write, and after a few paragraphs, I was taken on this incredible journey. And I must say, it is helpful to be a relentless self-editor, because sometimes you have to throw away the initial layers in order to get to the heart of the story.*

*I essentially spent the summer alone, working up to 12 hours a day writing, editing, and organizing the material. And although it was a very lonely time, it was also one of the most cathartic experiences of my life. Some stories were so difficult for me to write that I sat stunned for days at a time, trying to figure out why I felt so awful. When I got toward the end, I was blocked and could no longer write, and I thought it was because I was preparing to write about a close friend who had been killed in Afghanistan. But after a few days, I realized that it was because I was not writing about an experience that had happened to me (when I broke my toe in the roadblock in South Sudan). Until that day, I had not realized how traumatic that the event had been, because I had thought that I had already worked through it.*

3. At the American Refugee Committee, we work with millions of refugees around the world. These people have been uprooted from their homes and have lost everything due to conflict or disaster. In the book, you talk about refugees and the refugee experience, and you say: "...no matter how deeply [the refugees]...planted roots after fleeing their country, something inside of them continued to tug at them—eventually pulling them back home." How has working with refugees played a role in your own life journey filled with transitions and a personal "search for home?"

*Author Response: I remember writing that line. I included it because the home, or later, the concept of home was always something that I was seeking. It was the greatest inner struggle for me for more than twenty-five years. This was particularly confusing to me since I traveled so widely, and so often. For many years, I knew that I was 'running away,' but there also came a time when I clearly was not. And yet, I still had not come to an internal understanding of what home meant to me.*

*There is a section in the book where I tell about trying to go home to Minneapolis to settle down. But when I ran out of money and had to go back to work, I called my mother to seek her advice. During the conversation, while I lament my need to leave yet again, she tells me that I have to go, since I have always been happiest overseas. And I remember feeling as if a huge weight had been lifted off of my shoulders, since I no longer needed to feel guilty for not wanting to be in Minneapolis. That said, Minneapolis will always be my home. And this is the phenomenon that I have observed with the refugee populations. Even when, in the case of the Republic of Congo, the refugees fled across a narrow river, their souls still seem to be pinned to the other side. It's a mystery that I still ponder to this day.*

4. Your book tells stories of a life that included many challenges, including: constant travel; establishing roots and then uprooting again; working with people who have survived unimaginable horrors; and your own personal bouts with illness. For people who are interested in this field, can you talk a bit about lessons learned regarding work/life balance. How does it change you to be in the field that long? How do you stay grounded?

*Author Response: Well, for many years I was not grounded at all. I worked too hard. Many of us did. Part of the problem is that working for NGOs, programs are often under resourced. This is particularly true if you are managing a portfolio of multiple donors, since many of the*

*donors, particularly the UN agencies, do not want to fully fund the costs for staffing and costs necessary to carry out the programs. So you are constantly covering gaps in staffing and you don't always have the funds you need to get the job done in a reasonable timeframe.*

*For me, I was a traveling director when I was overseas. I understood that my field staff, especially the national staff, appreciated when I would go out to the field to touch base and address their issues and concerns. And I never wanted anyone to feel abandoned, or left to their own devices. As this was my personal issue, I addressed it externally by helping others. It was only when I quit the hard overseas field work that I was able to see this. Once I understood what I was doing, I was able to begin to readjust my approach to management. But it wasn't until after I had written the book, that I was truly able to find my balance.*

5. You have worked with so many people around the world. Is there anything you can comment on regarding any commonalities or insights about people?

*Author Response: I love people, especially people from other cultures. I have always been so intrigued by cultural differences. Which is why it is so interesting to me that the very basis of the book, and the point that I make in the closing author's note, is that "...notwithstanding our many cultural differences, at our very core, we are all the same."*

*I came to this realization through conversations with my mother. Over the years, when I would come back from a country in Africa, if I tried to explain my experiences to highlight the exotic differences the eyes of my family members, or friends, glazed over. But when I would tell stories of the people I met, my family and friends would be riveted. Stories about people are naturally stories about connections, unless you don't like the person. But either way, it pulls on your emotions and others can relate to that.*

*So, more than once, after I had told her a story, even if it were a traumatic story, my mother would say, "It's amazing, but based on what you are telling me, people are all the same." I think that it somehow made her feel closer to me, knowing that I was out in the world living and working with people that she could relate to on a human level. I was not out in some far flung land, alone. As a mother, I think that this made her feel more at ease each time that I would depart for a new posting.*

6. Where are you going next?

*Author Response: Now that I have finished my sabbatical, I will take a few more months off to market the book. But I will need to go back to work soon, since I need to support myself. Currently, I don't have any plans. I would like to stay in Minneapolis for another year, since it's so nice to be close to my parents. But I also know that the work that I love is not here. So, I really don't know. But I can tell you this, wherever I go, although Minneapolis will always be my physical home, I believe that I will feel at home wherever I end up in the future. I am open and ready for the next chapter of my life. And I am grateful. Feeling at home wherever you are in the world is one of the greatest feelings on earth.*

## SELECTED UPDATES ON COUNTRIES NOTED IN *PIT STOP IN THE PARIS OF AFRICA*

### Morocco

#### *Remembering Chris Stevens, My Journey to Ouaouizerth*

*The following blog post by Morocco Peace Corps volunteer Melanie Konblat documents the legacy of Ambassador Chris Stevens. Reprinted with permission, the post recounts the early life of a committed and well-loved Peace Corps volunteer who was stationed in Morocco during the same period outlined in the book.*

I like to think that if I had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco in the early 80's Chris Stevens and I might have been friends.

Maybe we would've bonded over our mutual love for the Tadla-Azilal province. For the mountains that surround us. For the red dirt that threatens to stain our clothes every day. For the generous culture of the Amazigh people who've inhabited this region for ages.

Or maybe we would've bonded over a love for the West Coast (Best Coast). We might've compared notes on our favorite hiking trails. I probably would've tried to convince him that Mt. Rainier is far superior to any mountain they have in California.

Perhaps our time would've been spent trying to make sense of some of the more amusing, at times ludicrous aspects of life as a Peace Corps volunteer. The cultural mishaps, language woes, highs, lows, 'Aha!' moments, etc.

Nearly 30 years have passed since Stevens began his service in Morocco. 30 years is a long time. But I also like to think that some aspects of service in the Peace Corps transcend time and technology. He might not have been able to relate to the magic that is an external

hard drive loaded with TV shows and movies, but he would've related to the magic that is a hot shower. He would've understood how meaningful it is to master certain aspects of Darija because 30 years doesn't change the fact that it's still not a written language. He would've understood the intricacies of Moroccan culture; standard greetings, eating with the right hand only, sticking to your triangle in a tagine, etc.

I guess what I'm trying to get at is that Stevens was human. That prior to his days of law and Foreign Service, he was someone like me (or like a lot of volunteers) trying to figure out a little about himself and the world in the midst of this adventure. When I found out via other volunteers that Stevens served in a town relatively close to mine I felt compelled by his story. Compelled to find out more about this man, his service, his community, etc. in the hopes of shedding a little bit more light into the root of his passion for North Africa.

The plan was to travel to Ouaouizerth via taxi with my site-mate Emily and my counterpart Aziz. I pitched the idea to Aziz the week before and he enthusiastically agreed to accompany us in the role of translator. Aziz was integral to the plan. He was the one who suggested we start at the high school and go from there.

Of all the acronyms, sayings, and mantras that the Peace Corps attempts to impart on its volunteers one of the most important is: Never work alone.

Counterparts are essential to sustainability and success, not to mention getting in the door.

The road to Ouaouizerth winds through the Middle Atlas Mountains. It's hard not to feel like you're in the middle of nowhere as you ascend higher, for to look out is to see nothing but green. If it sounds cliché to say it was a beautiful day, then so be it. It was a beautiful day. I snagged a front seat next to the window, enabling me to enjoy a gentle breeze and gaze with content at my surroundings. The closer

you get to Ouaouizerth, the view opens up. Ouaouizerth is settled in a valley of sorts, surrounded 360 degrees by mountains and rolling hills, nestled a few kilometers from the shores of the region's lake Bin El Ouidane. The descent into Ouaouizerth is tree lined like out of a storybook and it's not difficult to imagine why Stevens would've loved this area so much.

We arrived mid-afternoon while the town was sleepy. It's a quaint town, equipped with the usual sights of mountain towns in Morocco. Cafés, pharmacies, *banuts*, all-purpose stores, etc. Curiously there are remnants of French colonialism left over, noticeably homes with sloped roofs and windows with crown molding. After lunch, we meandered over to the high school which exists on the far edge of town.

Here's where things got interesting.

I had planned getting to Ouaouizerth. I had thought about questions I might ask people who knew Stevens. But I hadn't actually thought about what would happen when we showed up at the high school. For all the informality that exists in Moroccan culture, the Moroccan education system makes up for it. The affairs of education are very formal. Often just getting into the building requires various signatures, clearances, stamps, etc.

This little caveat is something I am well aware of, given my hopes to teach at the high school this fall. Somehow however, it slipped my mind. Better to ask forgiveness than to ask permission, right? Worst case scenario they'd send us home.

Thankfully, Aziz was able to work a little magic. By which I mean he spoke Darija and explained to the administrators that we weren't tourists, but are Peace Corps volunteers like Stevens. Once we were able to communicate this idea, the doors opened up both literally and figuratively.

We met with the principal, teachers who worked with him, people who knew of him; nearly everyone we met had something to say about him. They lauded him as a great man, excellent teacher, beloved by the community, and everyone expressed deep sorrow at learning of his passing.

The most compelling and in depth recount of Stevens came from an English teacher at the high school, Lahcen, who was one of Stevens' students. Much has been said about Stevens' work as a diplomat, but little has been said about his work as a Peace Corps volunteer. Which left me to wonder, just who *was* Chris Stevens? With the help of Lahcen, I was able to find out a bit more.

*He was not interested in himself.*

*He devoted all his time to teaching and learning Moroccan Arabic.*

*He was the kind of guy who carried a notebook in his back pocket and would write new words down and practice them; a fact which endeared me to him since I do the same.*

*Stevens was a model teacher. He provided extra hours after the school day was finished to his most dedicated English students.*

*He was personable. Always listening. The kind who made you feel like what you have to say is important.*

*Stevens was inspirational. Lahcen cited Stevens as the reason he became an English teacher. He remembers uttering his first English words at the request of Stevens. 'What's your name?' Also according to Lahcen, "Any qualities that were good--he had it."*

*He was active. Always on foot. Fond of hiking and jogging. Every afternoon between five and six Stevens would jog along the dirt path to the village right outside Ouaouizerth and would often stop by Lahcen's house.*

*He would drink tea and practice Tamazight with Lahcen's mother. On Friday's he liked to play basketball with his students. Afterwards they would sit around and talk. They were always talking about different things.*

*Stevens was interested in Moroccan culture and he was described as being tolerant. He showed respect to the standards of the community by jogging in track suits as opposed to shorts.*

*From a volunteer standpoint, Stevens was smart. He lived close to the souk. He was the kind of teacher who gave back tests outside of class, so as to save embarrassment.*

Lahcen also pointed out that Stevens always wore the same khakis, track jacket, white polo, and tennis shoes. A fact which Emily and I found particularly amusing as most volunteers have a disdain for laundry and often wear many of the same clothes day after day.

Lahcen provided us with an incredibly rich portrait of the kind of person and volunteer Stevens was. As our time at the high school drew to a close, we were blessed with the opportunity to visit the home where Lahcen grew up, where Stevens spent many afternoons. We met with Lahcen's brother, Ali, who being close in age to Stevens considered him a friend. Over tea and bread, we were able to learn more about Stevens, view some photos, talk about the Peace Corps, and more. It was with great hope and satisfaction that I left Ouauizerth that afternoon.

I wish I could better describe how meaningful this experience was. I wish my words and images were capable of explaining why that day was the best day I have had thus far in my service. But I'm afraid they fall too short. But I will say this:

The legacy of Chris Stevens speaks to what service in the Peace Corps is all about; it's proof that the Peace Corps is relevant. Opponents of the Peace Corps might argue that it's a money drain, that its results aren't quantifiable, that it's resume padding for

overachieving post-grads who aren't ready to enter the "real world," etc.

All to which I respond, how? How can money be wasted in the spirit of diplomacy and fostering peace between nations? How can you measure the extent to which you've changed someone's life? How do you define the "real world?" And who's to say that Peace Corps volunteers aren't living in it?

It means something that nearly 30 years after Stevens served in Ouauizerth people still talk about him. That when I met with counterparts last week the first thing they expressed to me was their condolences for his death. That, when word got out about his passing the entire community of Ouauizerth mourned, even people who never knew him. And moreover, that every single person who knew him lauded him as a great man with a compassionate heart.

Stevens was a model Peace Corps volunteer, ambassador, and citizen. But more than that, Stevens was a model human being. Someone with a passion for service to others and an inclination to leave this world a little better than it was before.

Well done sir.

*To see the original October 3, 2012 post with photos, visit:*  
[Rembmering Chris Stevents, My journey to Ouauizerth](#)

## Serbia After 1999

Two decades ago, Yugoslavia was among the most promising countries in Europe. Unique qualities of the blended nation attributed to the strength of the Balkan region. Bounded by nature's beauty, plentiful resources, and a blend of different cultures, Yugoslavia was undeniably one of most fascinating countries in Europe. Home to three religions, the southern Slavic nation was a fuse of geographically contrasting lands inhabited by people with "Balkan charm." Unfortunately, the prospects for peace in the country, following the breakup of Yugoslavia, were short lived as long-time stability was torn apart by ongoing wars, political and religious clashes.

Religious conformity originated with the emergence of nationalism. The same characteristics which attributed to the success of the country eventually gave way to its demise, as the population embraced politically contrasting outlooks. Corrupted leadership ignited political turbulence and xenophobia due to territorial aspirations and hunger for power. Currently, socio-political instability in the region can be attributed to the unwarranted wars, resulting in newly divided borders. Most of the former Yugoslav nations have hardly achieved sovereignty, and many continue to face political corruption, financial instability, and a weakened social morale.

I was nine years old, living with my mother in Serbia, during the period of the repetitive NATO air strikes. Perhaps the deserved retribution would not have been as colossal if the air strikes had solely been directed at political targets. However, as in any war, the civilian population bore the heaviest burden of both human casualties and infrastructure destruction. The year 1999 ushered fear into the populace, as glass shattered and walls collapsed. During this time, basic necessities, such as water and electricity, became luxuries.

My mother and I sought protection underground in the crowded shelters, where adults and children alike opted for sarcastic humor to uplift themselves over simple card games, the sole source of entertainment during long, dark nights. Those who fled were considered fortunate, not because they improved their chances for survival, but because they achieved a level of sanity.

The scenery of war torn Serbia was captivating as I stared out of the bus window, bound for Hungary. Tears covered my face as I hoped to return to everyone I had left behind. Oddly, I was concerned that the bridges, which provided safe passage for us as we crossed the Sava and Danube rivers, would stay intact so that we could return. Bombs and missiles circulated in the air and along the streets of Serbia continuously for three months, after which Serbia was never the same. People grew thicker skin as our celebrated successes became more predominant in topics unrelated to war, such as sports and Eurovision, as the financial and political stability in the country continued to deteriorate.

The political stage in Serbia became a mockery after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, who was the first democratically elected politician post Slobodan Milosevic. Dr. Djindjic was the last hope for Serbia's reformation and progress toward modernization, but his life was taken when his vision threatened the corrupted leaders of both civilian and military officials. The paramilitary, political and criminal oligarchy, which flourished under the previous regime was unwilling, at any cost, to give up illegal, lucrative privileges. Before progressing forward, Serbia had to deal with the heavy burden of the past—the illicit regime of Milosevic.

The last respected leader of Serbia, when the country was part of the former Yugoslavia, was Tito, but as his power dimmed so did the remainder of the country. Today, Serbia pushes forward with a goal to enter the European Union, persistently jumping through hoops

with optimism. Yet, realistically, the current situation in Serbia will not change excessively, based on unity with the remainder of Europe. Most likely, Serbia would become a financial burden to the wealthier countries of North Western Europe. Perhaps the new conditions for entrance into the wider European community continue to emerge because the European Union is well aware that they cannot financially subsidize another Greece, Poland or Romania.

In the past decade, Serbia has achieved as much normalcy as humanly possible. What remains fascinating to me is the spirit of the populace. Serbia may very well be one of the few locations in the world with the least monetary benefits, but the richest and most populated nightlife, with people spilling out of the cafes out into the streets. The hospitality and humor of the Balkan people never fades, but it will take time—generations—to erase the bitter aftertaste of war and we can all fully welcome our neighboring countries in absolute peace.

As for Yugoslavia, it is a shame that such a jewel of a country fell apart. The strength of the people, one of the many fascinating aspects of Serbia lives on, but it will never be as strong as when Yugoslavia was one. What once made us a powerhouse of the Balkans, in the end was our greatest downfall and drove us all apart. As Ms. Dargis suggests in the sonnet “The Promise of Peace” from *Pit Stop in the Paris of Africa*, “the current is strong!” so with a deep breath, once again “fill my lungs, Sarajevo, with song.” After all, that’s what the plum brandy is for!

Darja Perisic  
May 24, 2013

*Editor's note: Darja is the daughter of Vanja Paradinovic-Robinson, my colleague and friend noted in the chapter on Belgrade. I met Darja in Belgrade in 1999. I also spent time with her and her mother when they were urban refugees in Hungary, after having fled Serbia during the NATO air strikes in Belgrade.*

## Central Africa Today

In December 2011, *The Economist*, a magazine not given to wild flights of fancy, published a startling cover story announcing “Africa Rising: A Hopeful Continent.” The magazine was not alone in its optimism. Prestigious advisory firms like Ernest & Young, Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey & Company also have been equally bullish about the continent’s prospects. Even Tony Blair, who in 2007 described Africa as a “scar on the conscience of the world,” recently declared, “Africa can be for the first half of this century what Asia was for the second half of the last.” And indeed, there are parts of Africa that are making real progress, economically, politically, and sometimes even both. But when grand claims of an impending ‘African century’ are made, the pundits are not talking about Central Africa. On the contrary, it’s without doubt the toughest region of a struggling continent. Even the most relativistic analyst would have a hard time touting its virtues.

Far from the cosmopolitan coast, only peripherally plugged in to the global economy, largely undemocratic, and rife with conflict, the heart of Africa beats erratically. At 1.3 million square miles, Central Africa is an immense region endowed with an abundance of natural riches. Some of the world’s great rivers, and one of the planet’s largest tropical rain forests, can be found there. While it’s geographically and ethnically diverse, it remains largely politically homogeneous, ruled by a mixed bag of “strong men.” There are various definitions of which nations precisely make up this part of the world, but for the purposes of this essay, we will focus on Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Rwanda.

The US-based Freedom House, an organization with a mission to promote democracy, categorizes every country within the Central Africa region as either “not free” or “partly free,” while Transparency

International ranks them all, save one, in the bottom 20% of its “2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.” Beyond questions of governance, there are also common bread and butter issues at stake. For example, a recent US Department of Agriculture report predicts that among the countries that will continue to be “food insecure” in 2023 (i.e. unable to meet the basic food needs of its population) are Burundi, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The largest and most critical country in Central Africa is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Popularly known as the DRC, the destiny of the entire region is linked to this massive nation, which is the size of the US east of the Mississippi and home to 75 million people. Endowed with abundant arable land, vast mineral wealth, unrivaled hydroelectric potential, and creative, entrepreneurial people, the DRC has been a calamity for its entire modern history. Similar to the countries that have become present day Rwanda and Burundi, the Congo was also under Belgian rule, in a patently exploitative way. But economic plunder was only part of the picture. Blood and brutality also characterized the birth of the country. As Adam Hochschild wrote in his modern classic *King Leopold's Ghost*, “the further I explored, the more it was clear that the Congo of a century ago had indeed seen a death toll of Holocaust dimensions.”

Although recent leaders have shed less blood than Leopold, they've been no less cynical. The most notorious was Mobutu Sese Seko, labeled by Transparency International as the third most corrupt ruler of all time. The latest in this succession of presidents is Joseph Kabila, who succeeded his father upon the latter's assassination and then was re-elected in two flawed polls, the most recent described by the Carter Center's electoral observation team as ‘lacking credibility.’ Kabila's twelve years in power have resulted in no real change in the lives of ordinary Congolese, who remain among the poorest populations in the world.

With a tradition of this kind of “leadership,” it’s unsurprising that the DRC has become synonymous with corruption, violence and poor governance.

Across the broad Congo River from the DRC’s capital Kinshasa one can see its sister city Brazzaville. In a region plagued by political paranoia, there is of course no bridge connecting the two neighboring capitals. The skyline of the much smaller Congo is dominated by the modernistic tower of the powerful French oil company Elf. Petroleum, projected to run out in by 2030, accounts for 70% of the Republic of Congo’s GDP. Despite its energy resources, however, the country imports most of its electricity.

Towering over Congo’s political scene is President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who has been the country’s strongman for most of the past three decades. He first came to power in 1979, when the US administration was headed by Jimmy Carter. And, although certainly more peaceful than the DRC, the Republic of the Congo engaged in a brutal civil war between 1997 and 1999, and parts of the country remain insecure and unsettled. The 2012 US State Department’s Human Rights Report notes that “major human rights problems included beatings and torture of detainees by security forces, poor prison conditions, and lengthy pretrial detention.”

As dismal as the Congos seemingly are, they are paragons of stability and progress in comparison to the Central African Republic. Landing in somnolent Bangui, the capital of CAR, one feels lost in time. Only one hotel is worthy of the name (built by former Libyan leader Muamar Kaddafi). Uniformed men are constantly hunting for a bribe, and an internet connection is as rare as an honest cop. Visiting Bangui, however, is akin to a trip to the French Riviera in comparison to the rest of the country. With a history of French colonial neglect and exploitation, followed by endless coups d’état, including the recent overthrow of President Bozize (himself a former coup leader), today, it is unclear who is actually in charge of the CAR.

A ragtag rebel group called Seleka took control of the capital city last March, and absent the rule of law, has been busy looting, killing, raping with impunity since then. Like all previous regimes, the interest of the rebels is in expropriating the country's wealth of diamonds, timber, and oil without consideration of the well-being of the people, who rank among the world's poorest.

In many ways, Rwanda couldn't be less like its neighbors. In a region with no real political ideologies and no coherent economic models, it stands apart. Small, fiercely proud, disciplined, densely populated and short on natural resources, Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, understands he must deliver economic progress to his countrymen if he is to avoid a repeat of the ethnic bloodlettings of 1959, 1962, and most dramatically, 1994 when nearly a million people were slaughtered.

Kagame has invested heavily in education and IT infrastructure, successfully courting foreign businesses by promoting Rwanda as a safe, clean, well-managed place to invest. The downside of the "land of a thousand hills" is its lack of political plurality and a sketchy human rights record, but many Rwandans view this as an acceptable price to pay for stability and security.

Burundi, which lies directly to the south of Rwanda, is approximately the same size, population, and shares an almost identical ethnic makeup with its neighbor. But Burundi has, by nearly all measures, performed worse than its doppelganger. Compared with Rwanda's neat, bustling capital of Kigali, Bujumbura is a sleepy and dilapidated little town. One is more likely to find international aid groups in the country than foreign investors. However, many feel that Burundi has a much healthier approach than Rwanda when it comes to inter-ethnic relations. In Rwanda, understandably sensitive after the 1994 genocide, even acknowledging the existence of ethnicity is effectively banned, whereas in Burundi discussions of this type are openly embraced.

Despite high hopes as a son of Africa, the Obama presidency has a weak record of engagement on the continent, particularly in Central Africa. In an era of waning support for foreign aid and governmental activism, there is no grand overarching theme guiding US policy. The CAR and Republic of the Congo, former French colonies, are still viewed as principally Paris' problem, and Burundi remains an afterthought at best. The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda get the lion's share of Washington's attention, but our approach remains marred in a humanitarian and security rut, focusing on the tense border between these two antagonistic neighbors.

It would be absurd to suggest that the solutions to the problems of Central Africa are simple or self-evident. Many bright minds have understood the importance of improved public health, agricultural production, women's empowerment, relief assistance etc. However, there are other approaches which clearly need more attention from the region's friends.

Given that the single greatest impediment facing the region is weak governance, there is great need for an unrelenting focus on encouraging political reform. Every diplomatic, legal and economic tool must be used by the US and its allies to promote accountability, while punishing corruption, for in Central Africa corruption is not simply a crime, it is a sin—the cost of which can be measured in human lives. Our current policy of accommodating, or ignoring, some of region's weakest and least transparent leaders has delivered very few results.

The second great need is investment in youth, not simply educationally or vocationally, but with a view to fundamentally changing a long-time culture of acquiescence. As with many countries struggling with high levels of poverty, Central Africa's future will be driven in large part by its burgeoning population of young people. Lacking in jobs, political opportunity, and basic entertainment, the region's vast pool of disaffected young men will continue to be a

simmering source of instability, easily exploited for criminal and military means. But there are other possible scenarios, including a youth-driven “African Spring,” replacing a cadre of cynical elites who have controlled African politics for far too long.

To address these issues, we must be willing to think the unthinkable. One of the sacred shibboleths concerning African countries has been the inviolability of national borders. Large land masses—artificial constructs cobbled together into countries such as the DRC and CAR—from the outside, are officially viewed as nation-states, rather than the fifty-some year old fictions that they are. The permanence of small, fundamentally unsustainable states such as Burundi and Rwanda is unquestioned. By first recognizing that there is a sordid history of outsiders reconfiguring the borders within Africa from faraway lands, we can begin to more actively debate the conventional wisdom of the geopolitical status quo.

Africa remains mired in hyperbole as either the heart of darkness or the mother of mankind, the last great frontier or humanity's greatest challenge. The Afro-pessimism of a generation ago has given way to the breathless exuberance of today, yet both viewpoints are equally skewed. In reality, we can best support the peoples throughout Central Africa by stripping away our sentimentality and seeing the region as it is—truthfully, but with compassion.

Chris Hennemeyer  
August 3, 2013

## RECOMMENDED READING LIST FOR HUMANITARIAN ISSUES

### Further Reading

Luckily, there is a small but growing list of books you can pick up where Julie leaves off. Some writers use a bit of wit to tell their stories. Others share their raw experiences in ways that are as weighty as the contexts in which they worked, whether it was the Rwanda genocide or war in the Balkans.

Examples of good reads that deal specifically with aid work include the popular book with a can't-miss-title [\*Emergency Sex: And Other Desperate Measures\*](#) by Kenneth Cain, Heidi Postlewait and Andrew Thomson. Another riveting and personal experience can be found in [\*Chasing Chaos: My Decade In and Out of Humanitarian Aid\*](#) by Jessica Alexander. [\*Backstabbing for Beginners: My Crash Course in International Diplomacy\*](#) by Michael Soussan shares the experiences of being UN staff during the 1990s oil-for-food program in Iraq. James Orbinski tells his tale of time spent with *Medicine Sans Frontières* in [\*An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action in the Twenty-first Century\*](#).

There are numerous good books about expatriate life in Africa but fewer still about aid work and its challenges there. [\*A Thousand Sisters: My Journey into the Worst Place on Earth to Be a Woman\*](#) by Lisa Shannon details fascinating efforts to assist Congolese women.

For a look at Somalia, there are two very good reads from an aid worker's perspective. First, [\*The Road to Hell\*](#) by Michael Maren is a devastating story of the acts and consequences of ill-conceived interventions in Somalia. Second, in [\*Where Soldiers Fear to Tread: A Relief Worker's Tale of Survival\*](#), John S. Burnett tells of his experiences of delivering aid during the 1990s floods in the country.

Stories about the Rwandan genocide are not easy to read, but never forgetting can be a very personal way to show respect. Two profoundly moving accounts of this period include, [\*We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda\*](#) by Philip Gourevitch and [\*An Ordinary Man: The True Story Behind Hotel Rwanda\*](#) by Paul Rusesabagina. In the seminal read [\*Shake Hands With the Devil\*](#), Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian army general in charge of UN forces during the genocide, recounts how the political and diplomatic inaction gave space for the Hutu-led government to perpetrate its crimes.

Other books on the Central Africa include [\*King Leopold's Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa\*](#), by Adam Hochschild. Also see [\*Things Fall Apart\*](#), by Nigerian writer Chiuwa Achebe and [\*A Bend in the River\*](#), a story tracing the cultural life of inhabitants along the great Congo River by V.S. Naipaul.

For an overview of Balkan history and context, see [\*Balkan Ghosts\*](#) by Robert Kaplan, but bear in mind that this later book is a controversial work because of its reliance on an “ancient ethnic hatreds” argument of history that is widely discredited. For a further story of an experience in the Balkans, see [\*Sunflowers and Snipers: Saving Children in the Balkan War\*](#) by Sally Becker. A very powerful work about the tragedy, thrill and redemptive power of modern combat is [\*My War Gone By, I Miss It So\*](#) by Anthony Lloyd. The most comprehensive historic view of former Yugoslavia, dating from the early 1930s is [\*Black Lamb Grey Falcon\*](#), by Rebecca West.

## Links and Blogs

The best, most insightful and honest blogs, read by aid workers around the world can be found at [\*Stuff Expat Aid Workers Like\*](#) and [\*Tales from the Hood\*](#). More serious sites include the blog maintained

by the [Good Intentions Are Not Enough](#), [Building Markets](#) and the [Global Development Blogosphere](#) maintained by The Guardian.

The latest news and other information about humanitarian relief at both [ReliefWeb](#) and [Alertnet](#). Learn about organizations as well as volunteer job opportunities at [Idealist.org](#).

*Compiled by Eric James, PhD, an aid worker, author and university lecturer specializing in humanitarianism and disaster response. He is the author of Managing Humanitarian Relief: An Operational Guide for NGOs (Practical Action, 2008)*