Monique and the Mango Rains: Two Years with a Midwife in Mali

By Kris Holloway

The true story of the life and death of a remarkable West African midwife, seen through the eyes of a young Peace Corps Volunteer who worked side-by-side with her, birthing babies and caring for mothers, in a remote, impoverished village. A rare tale of friendship that reaches beyond borders to vividly and irrevocably unite another woman’s world with our own.

What is it like to live and work in a remote corner of the world and befriend a courageous midwife who is breaking traditional roles? Monique and the Mango Rains: Two Years with a Midwife in Mali is the compelling story of the author’s decade-long friendship with Monique Dembele, an accidental midwife who became a legend. Monique saved lives and dispensed hope every day in a place where childbirth is a life-and-death matter. This book tells of Monique’s unquenchable passion for a better life in the face of poverty, an arranged marriage and endless backbreaking work, as well as her tragic and ironic death. In the course of this deeply personal narrative, as readers immerse themselves in the rhythms of village life, they come to know her as a friend, as a mother and as an inspired woman striving to find her place in a changing world.

From witnessing her first village birth to the night of Monique’s own tragic death, the author draws on her first-person experiences in Mali, her graduate studies in maternal and child health, medical and clinic records, letters and journals, as well as conversations with Monique, her family, friends and colleagues, to gives readers a unique view—and a friend in West Africa.

Kris Holloway served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mali, West Africa from 1989-1991, where she met her husband John Bidwell. She holds a MPH from the University of Michigan and works in writing and development for non-profit organizations. She lives in Northampton, MA with John and their two children.

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*A percentage of this book’s proceeds will be donated to a new rural women’s health clinic “Cabinet de soins Monique,” begun in Mali to honor Monique and continue her work.
Praise for
Monique and the Mango Rains

“Kris Holloway’s Monique and the Mango Rains is an astounding book. In her brief narrative, Holloway tells an exquisite story of cross-cultural friendship, of women’s commitment through their work to bettering the lives of other women, and of the contribution that can be made to a Third World society by citizens of the industrialized world when hubris is not part of the equation. This strong, tender memoir is a must read for anyone interested in pan-cultural understanding and the emerging role of women’s rights in Africa. But readers, be warned; this beautifully written true tale of hope and love and loss, will, like a great novel, break your heart and leave you a changed person.”

Marnie Mueller, author of Green Fires, The Climate of the Country, and My Mother’s Island

"There have been many accounts, mostly by sociologists and anthropologists, of studying people from other cultures. But there have been few accounts of actually being friends with them. Anyone who is curious about what such a friendship feels like from the inside should read this respectful but intimate account of the bond between Kris Holloway and Monique Dembele."

Anne Fadiman, author of The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

“This funny, poignant book connects us immediately with women in a far-off land; their triumphs become ours, their struggles become ours. It should be required reading for anyone considering the Peace Corps and for any student of anthropology, international studies, or women's health. It is a tale of the potential of cross-cultural friendship and the power of intercultural exchange."

Carol Bellamy, Former Executive Director UNICEF & U.S. Peace Corps

“Delicious like mangos in season, you will not be able to put this incredible book down. We witness the stark reality of lives in a third-world country: the fate of babies and young children, of women dying in childbirth. But we are also there for breathtaking descriptions of beauty, generosity, and intimacy.”

Brigitte Jordan, author of Birth in Four Cultures

“This is the story of two women who could easily have remained strangers, but who chose to ignore the vast differences in their backgrounds and open their hearts to each other and to their common humanity. Through their friendship we learn that ordinary people like Monique Dembele, living in an isolated West African village with few resources, can do extraordinary things. This is a message which deserves to be heard loud and clear, across the globe.”

Irene Butter, Professor Emeritus, University of Michigan School of Public Health

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“Kris Holloway's Monique and the Mango Rains is a highly readable account of a Peace Corps volunteer who strikes a lifelong friendship with Malian midwife Monique Dembele. It is one of the few personal accounts that describes the pleasures and frustrations of Peace Corps life, while simultaneously informing the reader of the realities of rural African life with its own particular joys and tragedies. I recommend this book for a variety of classes including the Anthropology of Development, Medical Anthropology, and Women's Studies, or to anyone wishing to share the sheer adventure of a young American living, working, and developing friendships in a rural African village.”

Elliot Fratkin, Professor, Department of Anthropology, Smith College

“There are many cultural and social nuances that come through this narrative. The story of Monique is the saga of a woman caught in the web of tradition. I hope the book will reach the homes of many in the West who know so little about the plight of their fellow humans battling against poverty, underdevelopment and diseases in parts of Africa. I also hope the book will also find its way back to Mali where Monique's contemporaries and fellow Malians would take heart that loving souls exist abroad and their condition is being communicated faithfully and passionately.”

Sulayman S. Nyang, Professor of African Studies, Howard University

“Monique and the Mango Rains is beautifully and frankly written, both an ethnography of Malian healthcare and a coming-of-age memoir of Peace Corps participation. I entered this book curious about childbirth in rural West Africa, and learned a great deal about gender relations as they shape the meaning of children, development resources, and the many routes to Malian modernity. Like the short, sweet "mango rains" that punctuate Kris Holloway's story, this text brings inspiration to its readers.”

Rayna Rapp, Professor of Anthropology, New York University

“I enthusiastically recommend this book, for it allows the reader to learn about midwifery and women’s issues through the lenses of two very different cultures. It is full of warmth and insight, and having it end was like losing a friend.”

Rahima Baldwin Dancy, midwife, author of You Are Your Child's First Teacher
Early Reviews

“A respectful, unsentimental portrait of a village in Mali, and a moving story of a warm friendship between an American Peace Corps volunteer fresh out of college and a young Malian health worker. Holloway spent two years, from 1989 to 1991, working alongside Monique Dembele in the tiny village of Nampossela, where Monique served as midwife. The author is immediately plunged into the birthing business by her capable new friend, whose medical resources are severely limited but whose personal assets are quite extraordinary. Trapped in an unhappy arranged marriage, Monique, who has her own household to run and has her own baby strapped to her back, works long, hard hours to bring other women’s babies safely into the world, to teach mothers how to feed and care for their offspring, and at the same time to minister to the general health needs of the whole village. Holloway does all she can to help, working at Monique’s side, weighing babies, teaching women how to make rehydration formula, striving to bring birth control to the village women and arranging for Monique, rather than her feckless husband, to collect her monthly paycheck. She seems to slip easily into village life, joining in their celebrations, sharing their food and drink, living in a tin-roofed hut without electricity or running water. At the end of the two years, she and her fiance, another Peace Corps volunteer, return home, having arranged for Monique to visit them in the U.S. the following year. (In one of the funnier moments here, inexperienced traveler Monique agrees to fly only after learning that she will be able to sit inside the plane and not cling to the outside.) Holloway does not disguise the realities of life in a poor rural African village, and yet she is never condescending. Her admiration, respect and love for Monique come across as genuine, as does her grief at Monique’s death. A poignant and powerful book.”

Kirkus (starred review)

“This tender, revelatory memoir recalls the two years Holloway spent as an impressionable Peace Corps volunteer in the remote village of Nampossela in Mali, West Africa. It centers on her close friendship with Monique, the village's overburdened midwife. When Holloway (now a nonprofit development specialist) arrived in Nampossela in 1989, she was 22; Monique was only two years her senior. Yet Monique, barely educated, working without electricity, running water, ambulances or emergency rooms, was solely responsible for all births in her village, tending malnourished and overworked pregnant women in her makeshift birthing clinic. With one of the highest rates of maternal death in the world, these Malian women sometimes had to work right up until and directly after giving birth and had no means of contraception. Holloway especially noted Monique's status as an underpaid female whose male family members routinely claimed much of her pay. Monique shared her emotional life with Holloway, who in turn campaigned for her rights at work and raised funds for her struggling clinic. Holloway's moving account vividly presents the tragic consequences of inadequate prenatal and infant health care in the developing world and will interest all those concerned about the realities of women's lives outside the industrialized world.”

Publishers Weekly