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A tribute to a friend, a hope for Africa

Catherine Preus

After the solitary pursuit of writing, author Kris Holloway clearly relishes the chance to talk about her dear friend and co-worker, the subject of her book "Monique and the Mango Rains." And Holloway radiates her passion for telling women's stories, and a persistent hope for Africa.

"Sharing Monique's story on these [book] tours has made her more alive. I feel her energy when I'm talking about her. When I was writing she seemed so dead, because writing is such an alone experience."

And no, what you've just read doesn't give away the ending; Monique's death is right there in the foreword. Which was one of the first questions put to Holloway:

A: Why did you reveal in the foreword that Monique dies?

Q: That was the question. Originally I got a bigwig agent and she said the death needs to be the center of the story. So I worked on that for about a year. The first chapter used to be the death scene. ... Then I realized it isn't about her death, and I got a different agent. But I felt not putting it in would be withholding something from the reader.

Q: What's your contact with your friends in Mali today?

A: I called [Monique's] sister last week, and I speak to her kids. ... The thing I really like about my part in this is that I'm only one piece of a whole network of people trying to continue on with her work. People have donated money to keep her kids in school, and her sister became a midwife.

Q: How did you and Monique remain close when you are from such different backgrounds?

A: Friendship is magical. ... What is unique about this story is that we were great, great friends. One thing for sure is, she was a rebel -- having a boyfriend, earning a salary -- so we were both outsiders in the village. ... Having me there was like having a mirror held up, and the things she believed finally had confirmation: "Maybe women should have birth control, maybe women should have a salary."

She had such a great sense of humor, and she would come up with these surprising things, like throwing rocks at a mango tree. She was daring, questioning, with a huge heart. ... And we depended on each other for survival.

Q: What do you miss about living in Mali?

A: I miss being outside. ... People are only in their mud huts to sleep. ... All our bodily functions are outside -- going to the bathroom, bathing, meetings, eating. I felt so connected to the earth, but also to other people.

I miss inter-generational life. Everyone from babies to the oldest wrinkled lady is always present for occasions. ...

I miss the mangos. I don't miss the goat-head meat, "rug-meat" (stomach).

I miss slowness and long greetings, appreciating life as it is happening, the value placed on human relations. When we brought gifts, people there always told us the greatest gift is presence.

Q: When you think of West Africa, is your feeling more hopeful or more sad?

A: Because I knew Monique I have so much hope. It's like, if I had the luck of being in Mali and meeting her, I know there are thousands of Moniques all over. They just need to be heard. Of course I can feel sad because it's so personal to me, but I'm also hopeful. Change can happen, I really believe it.

I really feel putting power in the hands of people at a grass-roots level, especially women, can bring about change. It's not that I think only women can do it, but I don't think women have quite had their day in the sun.

Vivid tale of women's bond in village in Mali rings true

There are many beautiful books by Westerners about living in Africa, and even quite a few by former Peace Corps volunteers. The best ones put the readers in the middle of unfamiliar terrain and make them smell it and hear it.

This is one of those books, but in "Monique and the Mango Rains," author Kris Holloway also gives us something rarer: the story of a true friendship between a middle-class American and a rural African.

Holloway, 39, has above-average abilities in language and cultural sensitivity, but the book still gives a sense of what a Westerner might experience plopped down in a mud hut with a sort of corral for going to the bathroom and health risks lurking everywhere.

Holloway is sent to the Malian village of Nampossela to work with Monique Dembele, a 24-year-old midwife with a sixth-grade education, nine months of medical training and the future of her village in her hands.

The friendship between these women grows as they share the grueling work of treating villagers and delivering babies, and slowly trust each other with their dearest secrets and heaviest grief. Fatumata, Holloway's village name, depends completely on Monique to teach her how to live and work in the village.

Monique comes to lean on Fatumata as she copes with a ne'er-do-well husband and a true love lost. Holloway is enraged by the sexism that is simply a part of life for her colleague: Monique's trifling salary gets handed over to her father-in-law, who doles some of it out to her as he sees fit, giving much of it to her husband.

Despite Holloway's anger over wrongs seemingly imbedded in the culture -- female genital mutilation, domestic abuse -- she avoids the trap of cultural superiority. Instead, she simply seeks to help those she has come to love: Monique, her family and the rest of the village.

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Author's bio: Kris Holloway

Family: Married to fellow Peace Corps alum John Bidwell; sons Aidan, 12, and Liam, 9. Has family from the Twin Cities; remembers spending summers with grandparents here.

Career: Master's in public health from University of Michigan; writing and fundraising for nonprofits

Speaks: English, French, Bambara, a West African trade language

Books she recommends: Anne Fadiman's "The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down;" Geraldine Brooks' "March," "A Year of Wonders" and "Nine Parts of Desire," Tracy Kidder's "Mountains Beyond Mountains"

More online: www.monique mangorains.com

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