



Reading Group Gold

The Civilized World

Susi Wyss

On Writing *The Civilized World*

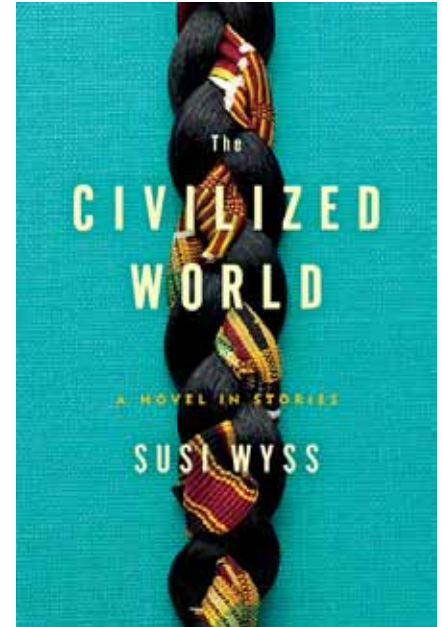
I can't point to one particular experience that inspired me to write *The Civilized World*. Instead, it's a culmination of my experiences from the time I lived in the Ivory Coast as a child through my career managing health programs in Africa.

After completing my master's degree in public health, I worked for over a decade, traveling to more than a dozen African countries and living in two of them, before the notion of writing fiction even occurred to me. During that time, I listened to people's stories, paid attention to my surroundings, and watched the world around me. I listened to a Burkinabè friend complain about being hauled off to the police station in Abidjan because he wasn't carrying any ID. I watched two Ethiopian boys fight each other with walking sticks near the falls of Bahir Dar. As a Peace Corps volunteer in the Central African Republic, I came across a flurry of white butterflies on the road from the Dzanga-Sangha Park to Bangui, and was struck by how much they looked like white snow. Maybe that was the beginning.

Or maybe it goes back further than that. Every writer needs skills of observation, and mine were honed in my childhood. I was always an outsider. As children born in the United States to Swiss parents, my sisters and I spoke Swiss-German at home. I didn't fit in at school—I wore the same clothes two days in a row, even my lunches of liverwurst on rye bread seemed all wrong. When my family moved to Abidjan, Ivory Coast, for three years, I was more of an outsider than ever, but I didn't feel the same pressure to blend in. Then we returned to the United States, and I felt like an impostor again. I learned to scrutinize my peers as a means to fit in—skills of observation that would also serve me as an adult in my international career, and, finally, as a writer.

When I began to write fiction as a way to explore my impressions of Africa, I consciously tried to represent the Africa I know and love, not the sensationalistic one people hear about in the media. Yes, famines exist, as do civil wars and AIDS. But people still live their lives, with the same joys and frustrations and desires all of us experience. I pictured characters who were like people I'd known, often struggling, sometimes succeeding—both supported and held back by their rich traditions.

By the time I wrote "Monday Born," the first story in this collection, I'd almost completed another master's degree, this one in fiction writing. Carving out writing time between trips overseas, I then wrote "A Modern African Woman." Another year passed before I received a visit from a Ghanaian friend who had moved to Malawi and told me about some of the Malawian names she'd heard. In Ghana, names are considered self-fulfilling, so she was shocked to hear people called Nobody, Why, and Grief—or, nonsensically, Address, Square, and Tonic. I knew she'd given me the seeds of a story, but it wasn't until later that the voice finally came to me to tell it—that of Ophelia, an expatriate woman with an obsession for names that masks a personal sorrow.



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Around this time, Connecticut Review published “Monday Born.” Several of my friends who read it complained that it left them hanging—they wanted to know what happened next to Adjoa and Janice. I looked over the three stories I’d written, and realized I, too, wanted to know what happened to the five characters in them. In what ways and what settings might their lives continue to intersect?

Discussion Questions

1. The main characters in *The Civilized World* are all women. What common bonds do these women share? What divides them?
2. Ophelia discusses the power of names with Philip, telling him that a name “can leave a psychological imprint.” Do you believe that’s true? Adjoa lists for Janice the qualities associated with her name—do you think her name fits her personality? Do you think it’s possible that she is who she is because of her name? What about the names of some of the other characters, such as Comfort?
3. What do you make of the mysterious pain Adjoa feels in her right arm? When does the pain seem to flare up most frequently? How does the loss of Kojo affect Adjoa?
4. Certainly there are some major cultural differences between life in the United States and in Africa portrayed in the novel; despite this, there are still also many overarching similarities. Think about Comfort and Linda, and Comfort and her mother-in-law, for instance. Can you think of other examples? What do these similarities seem to indicate about human nature?
5. At one point Janice thinks, “What did it mean to be civilized anyway?” She asks Bruce regarding the Baka women, “How do you know whether their quality of life is better or worse than ours?” What do you think? What does it mean to be civilized? Is any one way better than another? What do you think the novel has to say on this matter?
6. Janice feels most at home in Africa; Ophelia feels uncomfortable and out of place there. To what do you attribute this difference? Are they simply different women with different tastes? Or do you think they have different expectations for their lives in Africa, expectations that are in some ways self-fulfilling? Do you agree with Gifty’s assertion that: “Life is like a mirror . . . if you look at it well, it will return the look”?
7. Watching Philip at one point, Ophelia thinks to herself that she “wanted to reassure him that she would change back into the person she once was. . . . Once the baby joined them, she would be the best mother and wife he could wish for, they would be a family, and everything would be fine.” Do you think this is a reasonable thought? Does Ophelia truly believe it herself?
8. Think about Janice’s relationship with Bruce, and Adjoa’s with Kwame. Do you see any similarities between the two? Consider Ophelia and Philip as well. Do you think the women are trying to convince themselves that these relationships are something that they’re not? If so, why?
9. Why does Marvin make Linda so uncomfortable? What did you think when Peter assumed that Marvin’s friends were black? What does the situation with Marvin reveal about Linda and Peter’s



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relationship?

10. Because the novel is structured the way it is, we are able to see many characters both through their own eyes and through the eyes of the other characters. How did your views of some of these characters change after witnessing them from another perspective? Did you find any of the characters to have particularly incongruous views of either themselves or others? How does the use of this technique further illuminate the characters?

11. Each of the main characters feels fearful at one point or another—this seems less true of the male characters. Do women generally feel more vulnerable to unsafe situations than men? In the final story, Janice vows to help her daughter “grow into a fearless and self-assured young woman, despite the reality of a world that could knock you off your feet when you least expected it.” What role does this vow play in Janice’s decision at the end of the novel?

12. This novel is made up of nine stories—what does this structure lend to the novel? The final story is the only one told from two perspectives—Adjoa’s and Janice’s. What do you think the purpose of this is? Do you think the ending is a hopeful one?

Five Books Susi Wyss Can’t Live Without

- A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies
by John Murray

The stories in this collection are powerful and dense—each one reads like a novel that’s been condensed into a story. The settings range from India to the United States, the Himalayan mountains to the Rwandan border. John Murray doesn’t go easy on his characters—they struggle and suffer and usually, though not always, survive. For me, the best books are those that make me think *and* feel, and this one does just that. He has also mastered one of the most challenging aspects of writing short stories: finding the right ending. Each time I reached one of his perfect endings, I had to pause and make sure I hadn’t stopped breathing.

- Breath, Eyes, Memory
by Edwidge Danticat

This book—about a Haitian girl who moves to the United States to be with her mother whom she hardly knows—also sticks in my mind as one that made me both think and feel. The lyrical quality of Edwidge Danticat’s writing and the surprising, quiet moments of light make this book one I’ve reread several times. Moreover, I greatly admire how adeptly she renders dialogue in English when her characters are speaking in a different language. Without resorting to stilted direct translations, she nevertheless subtly makes it clear that the characters aren’t actually speaking in English.

- Swimming in the Congo
by Margaret Meyers

I originally fell in love with this collection of short stories because the setting—1960’s Congo—reminded me in many ways of my Peace Corps years in the neighboring Central African Republic.



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Since the stories are told from the point of view of a child, the daughter of an agricultural missionary, the narrator doesn't "exoticize" her African surroundings. Instead, the stories are first and foremost about growing up and trying to make sense of a complicated world.

- Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood
by Alexandra Fuller

In this memoir about growing up in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia, Alexandra Fuller's writing is both poetic and visceral. Because she doesn't glorify anything—including her parents' drinking, the death of three siblings, even the African landscape—this book is a raw, heart-split-open narrative that held me hostage from the very first chapter.

- Aya
by Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie

In this graphic novel set in 1970s' Abidjan, the title character, Aya, is an adolescent girl more focused on her studies than chasing boys—much to the disappointment of her girlfriends, who resort to boy-chasing machinations that result in bittersweet comedy rather than true romance. Although this book shows a different world than the expatriate lifestyle I led in Abidjan during the same decade, I couldn't help but feel nostalgia for the "Ivoirian Miracle" years—before the current political and economic tribulations.