

Sketches from the Periphery

MP Summers

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A well-meaning aid worker navigates political and cultural tensions while on assignment in Africa in Sketches from the Periphery, a thoughtful fish-out-of-water novel.

An American contractor faces the aftermath of the war in Darfur in MP Summers's arresting historical novel *Sketches from the Periphery*.

In 2006, Alex, a recent college dropout, joins a US State Department–funded mission to help the African Union with peacekeeping in Darfur, Sudan. Driven by restless curiosity and financial gain, his still youthful mind isn't prepared for a country riven by violence. But he appreciates the land's beauty and its people's humane spirits, which strike him as a pure contrast to his own culture. He enjoys his rapport with Henri, a fellow employee. And he meets a philosophical Belgian journalist, Cassandra, whose thoughts on geopolitics and human behavior challenge him to grow.

Accounts of Alex and Cassandra's time together trade with vignettes about locals, expatriates, and survivors of the Rwandan genocide—fertile ground for exploring the gap between outsiders' privileged views of African problems and African people's actual lives. Alex and Cassandra's encounters are quite intermittent, though, due to the demands of her work. They meet at his work camp and rendezvous while she's on assignment. The fleeting nature of their relationship makes Alex's thoughts about her feel forced. And her tendency toward impassioned speeches, though part of her allure to Alex, makes her a tedious presence at times; other facets of her character are underdrawn.

Still, Alex is an effective guide through political and sociological concerns in his role as a quintessential outsider. He befriends locals from whom he gleans important information and historical context. He also makes trips to procure illegal alcohol despite the risk under Sharia laws, illustrating how he's adapted to local customs. Frank discussions about foreign aid, misdirected altruism, rebellious factions, and tensions between Arabs and Africans flesh out the background further, and Alex tries to avoid judgments through it all.

Too much space is devoted to minor characters extemporizing at length, though, leading to lulls in the story. Further, Alex's empathetic reflections on the violence that Sudanese people endured, which he knows he cannot fully understand, are undermined by his self-congratulatory thoughts on having made the risky choice to work abroad. An abrupt epilogue set years in the future concludes Alex's tale via a priest's allegory concerning humility and justice, driving home the book's reigning messages about war's ineffable consequences, if in a jarring manner.

In the immersive historical novel *Sketches from the Periphery*, an American in Sudan awakens to the country's ongoing strife and to some of its global causes.

KAREN RIGBY (January 9, 2025)

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