

Dispatches from the Cowgirl: Through the Looking Glass with a Navy Diplomat's Wife

Julie Tully

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Dispatches from the Cowgirl is a fascinating diplomat's wife's memoir that covers exciting postings in Africa.

Julie Tully's memoir *Dispatches from the Cowgirl* is a vicarious visit to expat life in Africa.

Tully, the American wife of a diplomat, was born into a cattle farming family in northern California. She expected to take the reins of her family business. Instead, she gave up her job as a public relations executive and married John, an ambitious officer in the United States Navy. They began their life together in Great Britain and later moved on to Germany. When John's career as a foreign area officer specializing in sub-Saharan Africa took him to Cameroon, Tully and their son, Quinn, accompanied him. It was the first of three consecutive postings in African countries, to the family's delight.

In Africa, Tully and her husband were expected to introduce American culture to local dignitaries. As part of this soft diplomacy, she taught her cook to prepare traditional American foods like apple pie, and she wore cowboy boots to parties. At home, Tully and her family also embraced American culture, watching Hollywood movies and indulging in pizza. Still, she writes about being game to try grilled porcupine and to hop into a canoe on a visit to a pineapple farm.

Though Tully's experiences sometimes exemplify Murphy's Law, her narration is good-natured, even in dealing with practicalities and derailed plans. There are detailed descriptions of the preparations involved in moving to a remote posting in a developing country, including vaccinations against yellow fever, ordering two years' worth of peanut butter, procuring mosquito repellent to ward off malaria, and buying shoes with chunky heels in order to avoid sinking into the grass during outdoor parties.

The book also includes glamorous scenes, though, including Tully's memories of a reception at a presidential palace, her glimpse of Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka at an embassy party, and a fashion show interlude where the catwalk was improvised on a jetty across waters patrolled against terrorists and criminals. These show that in the "hardship" locales to which Tully's husband was assigned, even the most refined gatherings had an edge. At times, Tully's musings drift to the people living on the streets and struggling to survive nearby. The book maintains an acute awareness of Tully's family's privilege as well as appreciation of the local people and their cultures.

Throughout their stay in Africa, Tully struggled to convey her attachment to the continent to friends and family members in the United States. In that same spirit, her prose focuses on charming details about warm interactions, birds-of-paradise and other tropical flowers, and thumping Afropop blaring from taxis. It highlights resident tortoises in backyards, Nigeria's German Christmas market, and a gardener wearing a Santa hat in the ninety-degree September heat. There are itinerant baguette sellers, melodious muezzin, and colorful parakeets here, too.

Dispatches from the Cowgirl is a fascinating memoir that covers diplomatic postings in Africa.

SUZANNE KAMATA (August 10, 2022)

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