



Under a Poacher's Moon

W. Aaron Vandiver

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In the novel Under a Poacher's Moon, a woman facing an uncertain future undertakes an exciting adventure in the African bush.

In W. Aaron Vandiver's thought-provoking novel *Under a Poacher's Moon*, a divorced woman in her middle years has life-changing encounters with the people, animals, and violent contradictions of Africa.

The novel starts in the midst of a dramatic confrontation, and then rewinds back to Anna's arrival in Africa. Anna narrates, introducing herself and other guests at the safari lodge in turn. At first she comes off as a bit of a snob, mocking other guests for being "pasty" or overweight. However, as the story continues, and more is revealed about her and the losses that brought her to Africa, she becomes more sympathetic. Themes of environmental and personal redemption arise.

Anna also finds herself as intrigued by her leathery, cynical safari guide Chris as she is by the native wildlife. Chris at first seems like a fantasy figure—a rough, handsome outdoorsman with piercing blue eyes, a rugged tan, and devil-may-care swagger. But as the story progresses, it becomes apparent that there is more to him than it at first appears; poignant elements of his own story arise.

The phrase "This place will devour you" is repeated several times in the book, each time with slightly different meanings. Anna finds herself devoured by the maternal nature that she previously denied in herself, recognizing how "all the mothers of Africa were everywhere protecting and defending their young." She finds herself devoured by her desire for Chris: she mentions wanting to drop her "newly purchased cargo pants" for him. She finds herself devoured by the beautiful scenery and the eternal rhythms of the world running on a scale that dwarfs humanity, too. But the novel only truly takes off when Anna and Chris plunge into the bush, chasing after a band of poachers who committed a heartbreaking atrocity. Their pursuit is suspenseful and unpredictable.

The setting is established in a layered manner, as a place where "God and the Devil are one." The landscape is captured in beautiful prose, and is juxtaposed with details about the brutality of poaching, and of how a rhinoceros's horn is worth "more than gold" on the black market. Outrage is generated over the cruelty of slaughtering animals just to steal a small piece of their anatomy. Yet the book also addresses the human poverty that drives poachers to exploit animals: "I'll let you in on a secret Africans have known for a long time: sometimes there is no answer." The book's conclusion, though unexpected, is fitting and satisfying.

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MATT BENZING (November 11, 2021)

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