

Dear Exile

by Hilary Liftin and Kate Montgomery



About the Book

It is often said that the art of letter writing has disappeared in our high-tech age. But two women, roommates and best friends in college, devoted themselves to this "lost art" when one of them, Kate Montgomery, became a Peace Corps volunteer in rural Kenya, while Hilary Liftin sought her own post-college destiny in New York City. Their letters, brought together in **Dear Exile**, form a yearlong "conversation" that is candid and comforting, much like a personal encounter. The questions, discussion topics, and suggested reading list that follow invite you to join their conversation in your reading group, and to add your reflections on and opinions of some of the themes in the book.

Newly married and full of a desire to make the world a better place, Kate Montgomery and her husband, Dave, travel to Kenya where, after three months of language training and cultural studies, they move to various villages to teach high school. Their temporary homeland offers a breathtaking landscape of volcanic mountains, grassy plains, and the occasional free-roaming wild animal--but also an initiation into a way of life steeped in poverty and frightening unsanitary conditions, a world in which their dedication to teaching is eroded and finally destroyed by the corruption of officials, the indifference of fellow teachers, and the explosive anger of students deprived of the basic educational tools--books, paper, and safe, sound classrooms.

Hilary Liftin is a traveler of sorts, too, but in much more familiar territory. In New York City trying to find a suitable job, a decent place to live, and a companion both loving and lovable, Hilary finds the blessings of twenty-something independence decidedly mixed. A career path, she discovers, demands learning how to strike a balance between politics and productivity. Her search for a home introduces her to grown-up responsibilities like renovations and mortgages--and exposes her to more than she wants to know about the realities of her New York City neighbors. And Hilary's love life is far from perfect. From an old friend who just could be "the one" to a once-rejected but still-tempting lover, and from a cyberspace stud to a very promising blind date, reality never quite lives up to Hilary's romantic expectations.

During their year of correspondence, Kate and Hilary struggle to make sense of their lives, sharing small comforts and

asking big questions. Their letters suggest that we are all at times "exiles," whether we are crossing cultural boundaries or trying to forge an identity within a tangled network of friends and family.

Discussion Guide

1. In **Dear Exile**, Kate's and Hilary's stories unfold in their letters to one another. How does the immediacy of letters, in contrast to a straight narrative, affect your experience as a reader? Did you empathize with one woman more than the other? Did your feelings change during the course of the book?
2. Hilary says she "was afraid that Kate would disappear into married life, and she actually did disappear, almost right away . . . when the newlyweds joined the Peace Corps and went to Kenya" [p. 5]. Is Hilary only concerned about the physical separation? Are her fears about losing Kate realized to any extent, or do the friends maintain the closeness they enjoyed before Kate married? Would their relationship have been different if Hilary had not been so fond of Dave?
3. During her first weeks in Kenya, Kate writes, "I'm beginning to feel generally disoriented" [p. 16]. Are Kate's feelings an inevitable reaction to being in a foreign environment? How do the perceptions of the local people affect her perception of herself? In response, Hilary writes about her new job, saying, "So right now I hardly recognize myself" [p. 18]. Is Hilary's feeling of disorientation as understandable as Kate's?
4. Hilary feels like a guest in her father's house, admitting, "I would never feel the need to be so cautious and polite and adult if I were staying with my mother" [p. 20]. Kate is taken under the wings of older women in the villages she and Dave live in during their stay in Kenya. Discuss the role that bonds between women play in **Dear Exile**, comparing and contrasting their importance in Kenyan culture and American culture. In what ways are the lives of women in Kenya similar to the lives of women in America?
5. Except for Dave's short notes at the end of Kate's letters, the men in **Dear Exile** are seen only through the eyes of two women. What are your impressions of the men Hilary discusses in her letters: her close friend, Josh Stack; her brother, Steven; Jason, her old boyfriend; and William Strong, the doctor she falls in love with? How do Hilary's romantic notions influence her reactions to men?
6. When she arrives in Ramisi, Kate writes, "For the time being, Kenya has totally kicked both of our butts" [p. 40]. What adjustments--both practical and psychological--help her feel more at home? What does she mean when she says "my feeling of independence is really not from deprivation but actually from privilege and wealth. I can feel lighter, relieved of the load of a life of luxury" [p. 45]?
7. In several letters, Hilary makes wry observations about the differences between her life as a single woman [p. 52] and the lives of couples [p. 64]. In your opinion, do her assessments reflect only her personal experiences or are they valid in a more universal sense? To what extent do they stem from her admiration and even envy for Kate's and her brother's marriages?
8. Kate is very unsettled by the atmosphere in Kenyan schools--from the rigid style of teaching to the acceptance of harsh physical punishment. Are Kate's expectations about what she can accomplish as a Peace Corps teacher unrealistic? Is her idealism a privilege that only can be enjoyed by well-educated, "comfortable" people? Do you think her

unwillingness to accept local standards of behavior is right or wrong? How do you feel about her statement that "it's all about what a person is raised to believe, it could all be called culture, but I wasn't raised to believe this, and I can't be open-minded about it" [p. 73]?

9. When the Peace Corps reports that the drinking water in Ramisi is unfit for human consumption, only Kate and Dave take the news seriously. Kate says, "It's tricky to be telling people that their ways aren't good enough. I don't know if they don't want to hear it from us whites, if they don't want to contest 'God's will,' or if they just don't care" [p. 69]. Do Kate and Dave--and Peace Corps volunteers in general--have an obligation to teach basic rules of sanitation which would lessen the incidence of disease and death despite the resistance of the local people?

10. Hilary worries that she is caving in to the standards of American office and beauty cultures. Is renouncing the promises she made in college--"never to wear panty hose or painful shoes, never to have manicures . . . or pay more than twenty dollars for a haircut or carry a purse" [p. 78]--a necessary part of becoming a "grown-up"? Do these outward signs of change mean that she is being untrue to herself?

11. What was your reaction to Hilary's sexual adventures in cyberspace? Do you think she should have continued the virtual affair once she discovered that she knew her chat-room lover? Do you think they should have pursued their relationship in real life?

12. At Kwale High, the second village school Kate and Dave are sent to, conditions are just as bad as the conditions in Ramisi schools. Have Kate's attitudes about the canings and verbal assaults--integral parts of African education--changed in any way during her nine months in Kenya? Do you think that her fellow teachers' image of "American schools full of weapons, violence, and disrespect for authority" [p. 119] justifies their dismissal of Kate's teaching style? How would you respond to their claims that treating children severely in school is a natural, necessary extension of the traditions set at home?

13. Kate and Dave meet a volunteer who has thoroughly assimilated to the Kenyan way of life [p. 120]. Is his approach to living in a foreign country more appropriate than Kate's and Dave's? Is his willingness to embrace the negative aspects of the culture morally reprehensible?

14. Kate compares the exorcism in Kwale to the Salem witch trials, yet the witch doctor's rituals do cure the "curse" on the young girls. How do you explain the success of these ancient rites? How would similar problems with adolescent girls be treated in this country?

15. What do Hilary's weird neighbors--the woman upstairs who moves furniture in the middle of the night and the man downstairs who screams frightening threats--as well as some of her less successful dates, represent in the context of the book? What insights do Hilary's reactions to them reveal about her ability to cope with the real world? Do you sympathize with Hilary's fears and uncertainties, or do they seem trivial in comparison to Kate's? Why yes or no?

16. Kate remains on the sidelines as the tensions at school mount and eventually escalate into violence. Should she have taken a more active role--either in dealing with the "powers that be" or with the students themselves? As part of the community, was it really possible for her to be an "innocent bystander"?

17. Kate and Dave decide to leave Kenya because they don't have the spirit and energy to move to another village. Do

you think they could have adapted by drawing lessons from their experiences and developing new attitudes? What experiences have you had with culture clashes? Discuss how--and if--it is possible to adjust to another culture without betraying personal values.

18. Dear Exile ends with a postscript and an epilogue by the letter writers. How do these finishing touches enhance the impressions you formed of each woman through their letters? Which woman changed more during their year apart?

19. Do you think the intimacy Kate and Hilary developed as correspondents will be sustained now that they live in the same city? Does writing letters offer opportunities for introspection and honesty that can't be matched in telephone conversations and face-to-face encounters?

Author Bio

Hilary Liftin grew up in Washington, DC. In 1991 she graduated from Yale University, where she was the editor of the Yale Literary Magazine. She has worked in book publishing as an associate editor of nonfiction and literary fiction and as an editor/producer at several websites. She currently develops online products for Muze, a provider of digital information about music, videos and books, in New York City.

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