



Facing the Congo: A Modern-Day Journey into the Heart of Darkness

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Faced with an identity crisis in his work and his life, seasoned traveler and journalist Jeffrey Tayler made a bold decision. He would leave behind his mundane existence in Moscow to re-create the legendary British explorer Henry Stanley's trip down the Congo in a dugout canoe, stocked with food, medicine, and even a gun-toting guide. But once his tiny boat pushed off the banks of this mysterious river, Tayler realized he was in a place where maps and supplies would have no bearing on his survival. As Tayler navigates this immense waterway, he encounters a land of smothering heat and intense rains, wary villagers, corrupt officials and dead-eyed soldiers demanding bribes, jungle animals, mosquitoes, and, surprisingly, breathtaking natural beauty.

Filled with honesty and rich description, **Facing the Congo** is a sophisticated depiction of today's Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country brought to its knees by a succession of despotic leaders. But most important, Tayler's stunning narrative is a deeply satisfying personal journey of fear and awakening, with a message that will resonate with anyone who has ever felt compelled, whether in life or in fantasy, to truly explore and experience our world.

Facing the Congo: A Modern-Day Journey into the Heart of Darkness Details

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Trish says

It's funny, but I actually want to look up other things Jeffrey Tayler has written, to see if he really is as depressed as he seems to be. He planned and took this godforsaken trip (in the 1990's) to the Congo to break a personal downward spiral, and lo! it just got worse. He has the grace to admit it was a very bad idea, but we all have to admit he wouldn't have known that until he tried it. He is brutally frank: "My drama of self-actualization proved obscenely trivial beside the suffering of the Zaireans and the injustices of their past." He never finished the trip--taking a barge up the Congo River to Kisangani and then taking a pirogue down again to Kinshasa--the longest navigable stretch (1,084 miles) recreating a portion of Stanley's historic journey.

This is similar to the trip taken by British author Tim Butcher (in 2004?) in *Blood River*. Butcher had Tayler's work to learn from, and acknowledges that earlier attempt, though the scope of his trip was a little different and ten years later. Sadly things seemed only to have gotten more harrowing in the Congo, a country completely ungoverned and lawless. How does man function in such a state? Very badly indeed. I can't imagine what it would take for residents to unlearn the distrust and suspicion that has kept them alive in such a place and actually begin to cooperate with each other to achieve something better.

Eriq says

This is a fantastic story of a bored author looking for meaning in his life (and something to do with it). He decides he's going to ride the length of the Congo to the mouth of the Atlantic. It's such a great book, and unlike other books, because he doesn't avoid contact with the people in favor of his goal, in fact he needs them to complete his task.

As I read, I began to get a sense of the people of this country and their lives. It's an insight you must experience for yourself.

Dave says

A very interesting story in a very interesting place. I can't say the second half of the book was as good as the first but It is a true tale of adventure, and those should never be taken lightly.

Steve says

Tayler decides to travel by pirogue down the Congo River from Kisangani to Kinshasa, but realizes that much like Henry Morton Stanley before him (the last person to complete such a journey) he has made the trip for all the wrong reasons. The book serves as a good warning against those who might want to use a third world country as "a playground to satisfy [their] rich boy existential problems".

I picked the book up partly to help me in my desire to demystify the DRC--the huge and persistently puzzling area that dominates the map of Africa, the hub around which the other countries seem to be situated. Tayler's travelogue was thoughtful, self-critical, and politically astute. There is considerable compassion in his writing, which even leads to a sort of self-hate for bringing such wealth into a country of immense poverty. I enjoyed the read, but I'm thinking my interest in the Congo's politics would be better served by finding a good book on its history.

Connie says

I could not put this book down. I love Africa, but this is a journey I will never take. Being an armchair traveler is ok sometimes. The River Congo was and still is one of the last "outposts" in the world. Jeffery Taylor is either brave or crazy, but his account and observations made for a very entertaining read!

Benny says

I liked this book not because it gives great insight into the Congo (which it doesn't), I liked it for the naivety of its author, like a little boy looking at a map, studying then borders and rivers and then embarking on a crazy journey to try and follow one of those lines on the map.

Jess says

As a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer myself, I was excited to read another RPCV's journey in Africa. I was, however, disappointed.

Taylor wavers between existential musings and descriptions of his own physical sufferings indiscriminately. He questions why Africans do certain things with absolutely no demonstrated understanding of their history and culture.

He comes across as pretentious throughout, trying to give his journey on the Congo some spiritual meaning, when he doesn't hold any of these beliefs himself, yet he despises the faith of his guide and the work of the missionaries of the past and present who have real purpose, no matter how misguided it may have been. One quote which demonstrates why I dislike this book comes from page 57, "I unzipped the door and inhaled, mosquitoes danced their way inside, I zipped up. I had only my musings in the dark, and I returned to the one truth, the truth of time and finitude: we each see a finite number of dawns and dusks, then it is all over. We fill our days with comforting fictions--with religions and customs, with conventions and goals and hopes and hobbies and plans--that help us pass the time and give us the illusion of achievement and order, but the purpose of these fictions is to hide the Truth. I was about to abandon these fictions, to cast off from their shore." No more mention of this "Truth" is made again.

There was no real resolution. One of his statements at the end sums up what I feel about the entire book, "I had exploited Zaire as a playground on which to solve my own rich-boy existential dilemmas." (pg 249). Exactly. So why write a book about it?

Nick says

Whoa! Never saw this one coming. What an incredibly well-written book! I thought this would be a cheesy copycat of the Heart of Darkness, but this book just seeps with raw feeling and jagged description of a wild land. I never would have guessed that a journey down the Congo would still be as terrifying as on the movie screen or what I read about back in high school. I recommend this to any thrill-seekers and world wanderers!
~NR

Elisa says

Travel memoirs of this type are my favorite: the narrator sets a challenge for himself, far outside his or her comfort zone and sets out for an unknown land to achieve it.

Jeffrey Tayler, suffering from a bad break up, possibly depression, and dissatisfaction with lack of life direction, decides to take a 1000+ river journey through land rumored to be cannibal country in a pirogue. He travels to Zaire, where he stands out as a white foreigner. He gets through all of the red tape and paperwork, and for some unknown reason is befriended by an official with connections to Mobutu, the country's brutal dictator. This general helps him hire a guide for the trip, etc. and they set off.

Tayler describes the mosquitos, encounters with unfriendly natives and unfamiliar food well, but his writing style seemed a bit removed - it seemed like he was not in the moment, and that much time had passed between the journey's end and the writing of the book. It was not a book I had a problem putting down. He is fluent in at least three languages, so perhaps this was the reason.

Coming out of his journey, he says one important thing he learned was that you must value what you have and fight to preserve it. I am thankful that I am not one that needs to endure the extremes of river travel through the jungle to figure that out.

Jrobertus says

Tayler is an American who lives in Moscow. Facing an identity crisis he decides to take a journey into the Heart of Darkness – he plans to take a pirogue down the Congo River in 2000. He takes the infamous barge up the river from Kinshasa to Kisangani, under the protection of an army colonel. This allows him to describe the corruption, poverty, and misery of the failed Zaire state after its long and brutal civil war. In addition to this political mess, it is clear the jungle is rife with debilitating heat, humidity and disease which makes efforts to create a modern state even more difficult. He buys a boat in Kisangani and heads down stream with a guide. He turns out to be a raving Christen looney and only partially good at his job. Part to river is populated by murderous tribes and so Tayler need to hire an armed guard. The guide gets deathly sick and the trip is shortened. Tayler writes in a lush prose and the story is interesting, albeit a bit depressing when the misery of this huge country is exposed.

Nancy Thormann says

Jeffrey Tayler was very brave travelling to Zaire. It's not a journey I would have made.

Omar Manjouneh says

"You see, the Belgians ate a lot of people here and the people are afraid of mondeles."

"What do you mean by 'ate'?"

"I mean ate. The Belgians used to eat people. They especially liked to eat young boys. The Belgians built houses in the forest, and if you went near them, they would lure you inside. This is history. They've found the houses with cellars filled with bones. You see, if you're alone, the people will think you're a Belgian, maybe you're a mercenary on a special mission. You may lure people with friendly words, then stab at them with a big syringe. This has happened with whites around here. This is history. We know this. Everyone here knows it. The people in the village know, and they never even go to school. The old tell the young."

We fill our days with comforting fictions

-with religious and customs, with conventions and goals and hopes and hobbies and plans- that help us pass the time and give us illusion of achievement and order, but the purpose of this fictions is to jide the Truth. I was about to abandon these fictions, to cast off from their shore. But I did not sense liberation at hand. No, I sensed an abyss, as a blindgilded man walking a gangplank perceives the void beneath his feet.

In the morning I wrote a long letter to Tatyana. My eyes flooded with tears- I could not stop them- and I was rent and exhausted by the time I finished it. Why couldn't I pull out of my journey, admit that I had made a mistake? There was no way back now, I told myself. I had left everything to come here, and the only way out was to stay the course, to exercise my will, and provide my own direction. Having come this far, I had to go on to the end. This was the fiction I had created for myself.

I do not after all, regret my time in Zaire. The best we can do is to exorcise our demons through action, for time will be short, and there is always much to be learned from living -even when the lessons prive to be deeply painful.

Amy Moritz says

The book recounts the 1995 expedition of former Peace Corps worker Jeffrey Taylor who decides he needs to seek his life's purpose by traveling the Congo in a dugout canoe. I picked up this book upon the recommendation of a friend and as I started it, I was skeptical. Sure the writing was beautiful and his images of then-Zaire, of both the physical and political landscape, were haunting. But did my friend really steer me to a book about another 30-something white male who needed to out on adventure to find himself?

I kept with the story because at points he hinted at this self-reflexive truth.

I literally cheered out loud when in the final pages of the book, after he had to abandon his journey due to the illness of his guide, he wrote, "I found myself stung by my failure and trying to deny what I would later come to see as obvious: that I had exploited Zaire as a playground on which to solve my own rich-boy existential dilemmas."

And therein lies how this is more than just an adventure travel memoir. It gave me pause to consider the luxury of free time, to consider the suspicion that accompanies a history of violence and exploitation and another lens through which to look at the world. I am lucky in that I do not live hand-to-mouth, that every day is not about the fates of survival, even in a modern American context. I do not have that life experience. But I can cultivate empathy. And perhaps, in fact, being able to cultivate empathy is a luxury of my relative wealth, health and safety.

Szplug says

Tayler is an interesting dude—fresh off of a spell as manager of a bodyguard firm in the newly unleashed free-market-chaos of Moscow, and suddenly single after a painful breakup, he decided to *test himself* by traversing the 1,736 kilometre stretch of the equatorial Congo River between far-inland Kisangani and near-coastal Kinshasa, a voyage down the endless, jungle-limned, liquid serpent traversing the breadth of that vast, horrific nation-state clusterfuck alternately called the Democratic Republic of the Congo or, at the time of the journey, the Republic of Zaire. More-or-less fluent in French, and having taken a crash course in Lingala, a *lingua franca* for much of that part of Equatorial Africa, during the dry season of 1995 Tayler embarked into his own personal *Heart of Darkness* by crossing the Lower Congo from the comparatively stable and prosperous city of Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of the Congo, into the miasmatic hell of Kinshasa, the decrepit capital of the Republic of Zaire. Tayler's quest was undertaken during the waning days of the rule of the charismatic tyrant Mobutu Sese Seko—the *Big Man* of Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*—when, the Cold War having melted away, those competitive dollars from the Soviets and the Americans had all but dried up, leaving the ruler and his coterie to plunder whatever remained of value and still functioning in the grossly humid environment.

Tayler's description of his passage from Brazzaville to Kinshasa is stomach-clenching—as a privileged white male from a wealthy North American democracy, I could completely commiserate with the author's burgeoning consternation at the ever-increasing crowd of angry and/or desperate blacks who crowded the docks upon spying a white man voluntarily heading into their crumbling capital via the river ferry. Assuming him to be an American, and thus wealthy beyond the dreams of any, the cries for attention and for money, that here was a *blanc* in the flesh, hit him like a hammer-blow. It was Tayler's first glimpse of what exactly he had chosen for himself, the grinding poverty that he was about to witness first hand, and it shook him up. The author displayed a fair amount of naiveté whilst accustoming himself to the daily ways of life in a struggling Kinshasa before, after a chance encounter, deciding to accept the offer of a Zairean colonel for a protected passage to Kinsangani. Ignoring the disbelieving stares from other whites he had informed of his decision, Tayler set out on the trip, a pallid standout amidst a vast crowd of Zaireans who clung to every available inch of open space on the ancient, puttering vessel that churned its way upstream and through the thoroughly omnipresent, mystical, and, at times, terrifying jungle. During the trip Tayler picked out a man to serve as his guide during his return voyage, but he also discovered a hard truth—the brutality that these people have to endure just to provide enough food, and scratch up enough wealth, to get their families through another day; and the resentment and suspicion with which they regard a comparatively wealthy white foreigner who *voluntarily* immerses himself within their condition, though he can leave any time he might wish to. Such a person *must* performe be either crazy or engaged in illegal activities; and in either case, of a wealth that he can surely spare a few dollars to whomsoever might ask, especially as a couple of dollars in this equatorial nation goes an awfully long way.

Eventually Tayler arrives in Kisangani, where he, his guide, Desi, a capable but somewhat distant

Congolese, and a hired (and armed) soldier—the latter taken on when the author realizes both the serious danger of what he is proposing to do, and that he must satisfy certain elements of nepotism and corruption from government officials along the way—board their canoe-like pirogue and set out for the capital. This is a crazy part of the book, the pirogue zigzagging amidst the island-walled channels of the great river, and where they encounter helpful and hostile fishermen, become lost in the maze-like river branchings and streams around the halfway-point where they are pursued by fiercely aggressive locals with rumored cannibal tastes, find the soldier has absconded in the night, and that Desi has become progressively more removed—and angry—over what he perceives to be an unfair bargain struck with his employer. When Tayler becomes sick and rapidly weakens, the sight of that old iron-draped bucket-of-bolts plying the Congo on its return voyage seems like the direct intervention of a God who wanted him to survive his wholly mad and frivolous undertaking.

This was a very good read—I never found myself warming to Tayler, but I appreciated at all times that he presents himself as he believed he was, warts and all. His great fortune was in finding the Colonel—who, despite all of the misgivings and warnings of the fellow whites whom Tayler met in Kinshasha, proved invaluably helpful—aiding and protecting the author in getting out of the capital and then watching over him during his voyage upriver, seemingly quite amused by this madman's riverine compunction and the fact that he was not there to further plunder the Colonel's creaking and devastated homeland. The guide, Desi, was also presented as an intricate fellow, one who continually engaged Tayler in conversations about God, philosophy, marriage, the West, the cultural differences between the latter and his country, and his family—all the while never able to get past his failure to understand *why* Tayler would willingly subject himself to such hardship and deprivation without an ulterior motive—like diamond smuggling, or gun-running—and, thus, continually pressured within to demand more money and more guarantees from his increasingly worried and flagging employer. I felt that Tayler tried to fairly portray the Zairean people, of a disparate variety of ethnicities and languages, and their unflagging spirit in the face of continuous adversity, even if one never senses that he felt fully at ease around them—the cultural barriers were always there, no matter how intimate the setting. Certainly it was a fascinating and eye-opening read for myself, one of those books in which you can marvel at and absorb the natural wonder and mystery of this amazing place, at the great adventure undertaken, while all the time appreciating even further how lucky and blessed you are to have been born into—and to live in—the part of the world that you do.

thereadytraveller says

Facing an existential dilemma and dissatisfied with his western lifestyle, Tayler attempts to paddle close to 1,800 km down Africa's second longest river, the Congo.

Tayler's journey and story, divides itself neatly into two. The first comprises his trip by boat up the Congo and he wonderfully describes the dangers he faces in the Democratic Republic of Congo, both on land and on the river itself. During the second part of his journey by pirogue/dugout down the Congo, Tayler vividly describes the difficulties he faces with his companion Desi, evoking steaming images of the surrounding jungle countryside for which Africa's heart of darkness is known.

Taking place in 1995, after which Zaire was still recovering from Les Pillages du Zaire and about to enter the First Congo War, that resulted in the overthrow of the despot Mobutu Sese Seko, Tayler's journey was audacious to say the least and he has presented us with a great adventure story.
