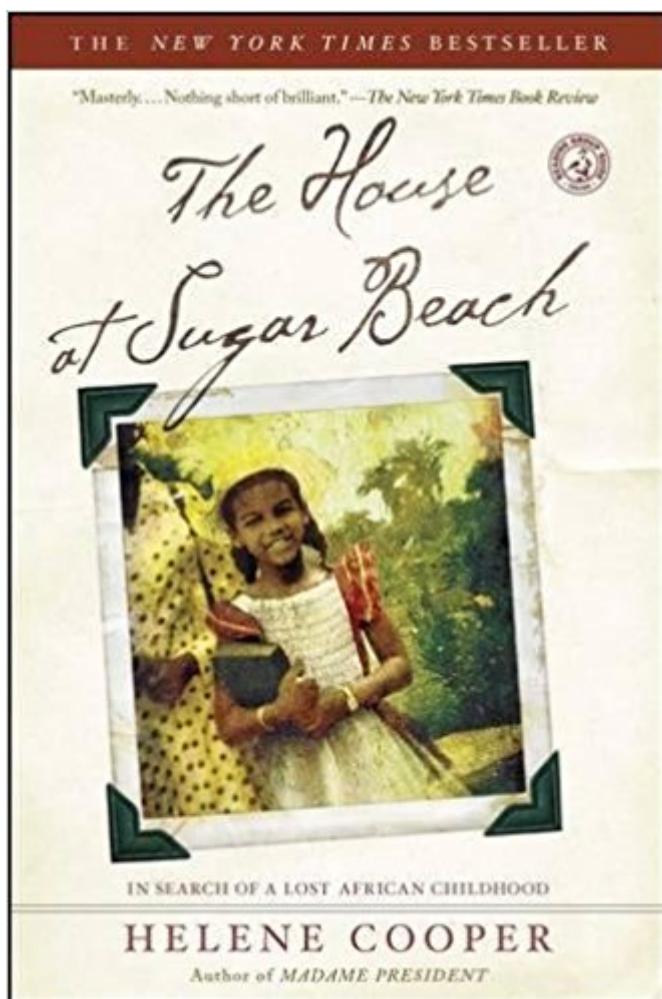


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# The House At Sugar Beach: In Search Of A Lost African Childhood



## Synopsis

Journalist Helene Cooper examines the violent past of her home country Liberia and the effects of its 1980 military coup in this deeply personal memoir and finalist for the 2008 National Book Critics Circle Award. Helene Cooper is “Congo,” a descendant of two Liberian dynasties traced back to the first ship of freemen that set sail from New York in 1820 to found Monrovia. Helene grew up at Sugar Beach, a twenty-two-room mansion by the sea. Her childhood was filled with servants, flashy cars, a villa in Spain, and a farmhouse up-country. It was also an African childhood, filled with knock foot games and hot pepper soup, heartmen and neegee. When Helene was eight, the Coopers took in a foster child—a common custom among the Liberian elite. Eunice, a Bassa girl, suddenly became known as “Mrs. Cooper,” the daughter. For years the Cooper daughters—Helene, her sister Marlene, and Eunice—blissfully enjoyed the trappings of wealth and advantage. But Liberia was like an unwatched pot of water left boiling on the stove. And on April 12, 1980, a group of soldiers staged a coup d’État, assassinating President William Tolbert and executing his cabinet. The Coopers and the entire Congo class were now the hunted, being imprisoned, shot, tortured, and raped. After a brutal daylight attack by a ragtag crew of soldiers, Helene, Marlene, and their mother fled Sugar Beach, and then Liberia, for America. They left Eunice behind. A world away, Helene tried to assimilate as an American teenager. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill she found her passion in journalism, eventually becoming a reporter for the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. She reported from every part of the globe—except Africa—as Liberia descended into war-torn, third-world hell. In 2003, a near-death experience in Iraq convinced Helene that Liberia—and Eunice—could wait no longer. At once a deeply personal memoir and an examination of a violent and stratified country, *The House at Sugar Beach* tells of tragedy, forgiveness, and transcendence with unflinching honesty and a survivor’s gentle humor. And at its heart, it is a story of Helene Cooper’s long voyage home.

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## Customer Reviews

Journalist Cooper has a compelling story to tell: born into a wealthy, powerful, dynastic Liberian family descended from freed American slaves, she came of age in the 1980s when her homeland slipped into civil war. On Cooper's 14th birthday, her mother gives her a diamond pendant and sends her to school. Cooper is convinced that somehow our world would right itself. That afternoon her uncle Cecil, the minister of foreign affairs, is executed. Cooper combines deeply personal and wide-ranging political strands in her memoir. There's the halcyon early childhood in Africa, a history of the early settlement of Liberia, an account of the violent, troubled years as several regimes are overthrown, and the story of the family's exile to America. A journalist-as-a-young-woman narrative unfolds as Cooper reports the career path that led her from local to national papers in the U.S. The stories themselves are fascinating, but a flatness prevails—perhaps one that mirrors the author's experience. After her uncle's televised execution, Cooper does the same thing I would do for the rest of my life when something bad happens: I focus on something else. I concentrate on minutiae. It's the only way to keep going when the world has ended. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In her warm, conversational tone, Helene Cooper vividly evokes the sights, sounds, and smells of Liberia for readers as she describes the customs, history, and culture of her native land. Indeed, she has a great deal of background information to convey to Western readers unfamiliar with the country, but she folds this material masterfully into the narrative. An accomplished storyteller, Cooper relates the arrogance and excesses of her family during her early years without losing her readers' sympathy, and she likewise depicts the joys of friendship and the horrors of war without becoming melodramatic or maudlin. Like the best nonfiction—and journalism—Cooper's gripping coming-of-age story enlightens and inspires, often reading like a novel. In sum, it is a very personal and honest memoir from a gifted writer. Copyright 2008 Bookmarks Publishing LLC

The House at Sugar Beach is an autobiographical novel (it may also be considered quite simply a novel) written by the journalist and diplomatic correspondent of the New York Times, Helene Cooper. Cooper is a woman of Liberian origin who, over time, acquired American citizenship. In the novel, Cooper recounts her childhood and adolescence whilst she provides us with a historical account of the birth of Liberia, which takes place upon the arrival of freed slaves, of African origin, from North America, known in Liberia as "Congos". Family plays a central role in Helene's life. Helene is fruit of a marriage between two Congo families: the Dennises and the Coopers. It is her father's second marriage. The children of his first relationship also live at Sugar Beach. I enjoyed The House at Sugar Beach. It may be that I'm particularly fond of it because it was the first book I read written by an African woman. Indeed, after reading the novel, I realized that up until then, both while reading and writing, I had always had a white audience on my mind. It wasn't until I read The Sound and the Fury, that I realised that the protagonists of a work, didn't necessarily have to be white. On the other hand, as I have been saying, The House at Sugar Beach, helps us to understand Liberian history much better, leading to a better understanding of how a Liberian, an African, thinks. Also, it proves that Liberia's history is very cruel. Clearly, the Congos (with the US turning a blind eye) created a failed state designed solely to further their interests, creating millions of citizens without any education, future nor soul. Indeed a failed state that was also born through corruption and betrayal (the bribery (extortion?) of King Peter), an inherent practice since then in Liberia which explains a lot about how things are done in this country. It must also be said that the novel depicts life in Liberia from a bourgeois perspective, as that was Helene's life, without there being many references, therefore, from the point of view of the middle or lower class. On the other hand, this is a story written in the first person where the aim is finding oneself: Helene needs to return to Liberia to find herself, an impulse that many readers can identify with. From a technical and structural point of view, Cooper combines the story of her life with the history of Liberia, which seems like a good idea to me. Therefore readers, on the one hand, do not get bored (as it jumps from one story to another) and on the other, it also helps them understand the context better. In turn, the scenes portraying childhood, youth or any other aspect, are very well chosen and are always exposed in a fresh, flowing and dynamic style, not without occasional humour. As for the "surprises", something that struck me about this book (a classic among the expat community in Liberia) was the fact that malaria, a typical "paranoia of the Whites" is barely mentioned. I

was also surprised by the importance of tribes such as the Deys or Condoes in the birth of Liberia, as they are tribes, which we hear very little about nowadays. Regarding the novel's aspects that I didn't really fully enjoy, I must say that perhaps the narrative begins with the wrong phrase when it says that, "this story is about rogues." It appears that Cooper proposes a path that is then not consistently followed. Furthermore, the novel is certainly interesting, but curiously when it becomes more cosmopolitan (Helene's trips around the world) it becomes less appealing because the novel soon becomes dispersed and suffers a certain loss of focus that confuses a reader who was already really into Liberia. Moreover, I appreciate Helene Cooper's honesty when she really speaks her mind (she even says that her family may have been involved in "dodgy businesses) and when she recognizes that she received help in writing the book. All writers who publish in big publishers receive this help but only very few recognize this. What would many novels be like without the help of the publisher? On another level, whilst I was reading the novel it often reminded me of *The Shadow of the Sun*, the work on the African continent written by Kapuscinsky. I often thought that the great Polish reporter had, not only exaggerated his vision of Liberia, but had also introduced inaccurate information. For example, in *The Shadow of the Sun* it is said that Doe and his men gained power by chance after having been to the Executive Mansion to collect their wages and suddenly noticing Tolbert's defencelessness. This goes against *The House at Sugar Beach* version where the coup sergeant and his men's intentions were clear right from the start. Also, the conquest of Liberia was not as easy or as quick as it appears when reading *The Shadow of the Sun*, it was in fact, a long and hard struggle. In defence of Kapuscinsky, I must say that we cannot compare the access of information that the Polish reporter had at the time, with what we have now. In any case, it's well worth re-reading the Liberian part of *The Shadow of the Sun* and draw new conclusions. In short, it is well worth reading *The House at Sugar Beach*.

This is a fascinating memoir by Helene Cooper, a girl born in Liberia, who escapes her homeland to come to the United States as a young teenage. Helene's family are called "Congo People," the privileged descendants of freed American slaves, who founded Liberia in 1822. Her adopted sister, Eunice, is native, or "Country People," and joins the Cooper family as a young girl when her mother gives her up in hopes she will find a better life. Living under the same roof, the girls become the closest of friends, like ordinary pre-teens... before the government upheaval occurs. Cooper not only tells stories of her youth, but explains the history of her home, especially the politics that surrounded

her childhood. She divides the book into two parts, Liberia and America. In Liberia, she lives with her family in a 22-room mansion on Sugar Beach, goes to a private school and knows many men in her family who hold high positions in the government. After the coup in 1980, she arrives in Knoxville, Tennessee, with her mother and younger sister. Later, she moves to Greenville, North Carolina, and lives with her father. When she graduates from high school, she enters journalism school at Chapel Hill. I won't go into too many details, because I don't want to ruin the story for those who want to read the book. One thing I kept wondered about was how Helene was going to follow her dreams and be a foreign correspondent, with all the legal implications of being a Liberian resident. She doesn't go into too much detail about the trials of citizenship, but does tells a story about becoming an U.S. citizen on May 13, 1997. When I started the book, I had a hard time reading her "Liberian English" and thought it was unnecessary. Halfway through, though, the rhythm of the Liberian voices grew easier to understand, and by the end of the book, I understood her reasoning behind the language she used. What a wonderful story - I highly recommend it! To learn more about Helene Cooper, listen to an interview she did with Tavis Smiley on Sept. 24, 2008.

The story started out slow with childhood memories, and I was worried that I wouldn't want to finish it. But it picked up speed when the author, Helene Cooper, and her family had to leave Liberia and move to the United States. I finished it easily, and am glad I didn't give up because I learned a lot about Liberia, and Cooper's family story is very interesting, and somewhat tragic, in so many ways. I would recommend this book to anyone who feels, like I did, that I just don't know enough about Africa, its history, and its people.

"The House at Sugar Beach", written by a well-known journalist, is about Liberia, founded by freed American slaves. This group searched for territory in West Africa, purchased it with some "wheeling and dealing", and established their colony in Africa. They created a very comfortable life of luxury in the midst of tribes who did not have the financial and business know-how they did. Living in this comfort, they became an upper class that appeared to be oblivious to the hatred their attitudes and conspicuous opulence would cause among those Africans they lived beside. The story is about this journalist's childhood in this bubble of consumerism, luxury cars, beautiful homes, imported foods and clothing, and fun outings to the beach. The stories of how they lived, the childhood myths and fears of boogymen that had some basis in truths, unfold. The end of this life style comes swiftly as surrounding tribal groups, and those who were serving this upper class, rebel and slaughter the leaders. This is an interesting historical view of the area of the world that is now suffering with the

Ebola outbreak, poverty, and the lack of coherent government structure to deal with the current crisis.

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