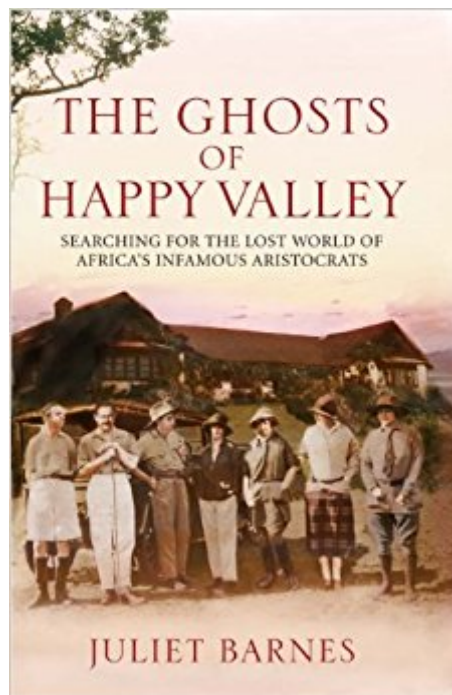




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The Ghosts Of Happy Valley: Searching For The Lost World Of Africa's Infamous Aristocrats



Synopsis

“Happy Valley”™ was the name given to the region of Kenya’s Central Highlands where a community of affluent, hedonistic white expatriates settled between the wars. Including the writer Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), the pioneering aviator Beryl Markham and the troubled socialite Idina Sackville whose life was told in Frances Osborne’s bestselling *The Bolter*, the Happy Valley set’s notoriety was sealed in 1931 with the sensational – and still unsolved – murder of the Earl of Errol, the investigation of which laid bare the extent of the set’s decadence and irresponsibility, and made for another bestselling book in James Fox’s *White Mischief*. But what is left now? Juliet Barnes, who has lived in Kenya for many years, has set out to explore Happy Valley in a remarkable and indefatigable archaeological quest to find the homes and haunts of this extraordinary and vanished set of people – grand residences like Clouds up in the hills that once hosted opulent and scandalous parties. With the help of African guides, and guided by the memories of elderly expats she tracks down to the Muthiaga old enough to have first-hand memories of the likes of Idina and Lord Errol and the lives they led, what she finds – ruins reclaimed by luxuriant bush, tumbledown dwellings in which an African family ekes a subsistence living, or even a modest school – is a revelation of the state of modern Africa that makes the gilded era of the Happy Valley set seem even more fantastic. A book to set alongside such singular evocations of Africa and its strange colonial history as *The Africa House*, *The Ghosts of Happy Valley: The Biography* is a mesmerising blend of travel narrative, social history and personal quest.

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Customer Reviews

To correct a misconception, Happy Valley is not named after all the shenanigans that went on there in the 20s and 30s. Geoff Buxton, the first colonial farmer in the area, had moved up from the dry arid Rift Valley with its meagre rivers and a relentless dusty wind that gave Gilgil its name. And so, after finding his ideal farming country, he delightfully called this new haven, 'Happy Valley'. Everyone I mentioned the book to said 'Oh no, not another book about the unsavoury goings-on in Happy Valley so long ago; and please don't tell me there is a new theory about the death of Lord Erroll.' Well, in the main, it is none of the above, thankfully. The book is essentially about the old homes of both well-to-do aristocrats and impecunious colonial farmers in the early days of the Kenya Colony, through to independence and the 21st century. It's about who farmed where, who built those lovely old homes (the few that survive), the histories of those who lived there all those years ago. We meet Simon Gitau, the author's erstwhile travelling companion and guide - an arch conservationist who dangerously campaigns to save the ever-diminishing indigenous forests and the last few troops of Colobus monkeys that live in the valley. This book is both travelogue and social history lesson; anthropological in parts; and above all, a personal quest. Her descriptions draw you to the story which is well structured, interesting and informative. The research that has gone into this book is mightily impressive; facts have been checked and re-checked, and I found no glaring errors or omissions.

This book has so many layers, it is a brilliant and engaging journey through time, a social commentary, a personal quest, a travelogue and above all it is a deep philosophical view of the human condition and our relationship with the environment. At the surface level it is the journey through time of the old homes of colonial farmers and aristocrats: from the days of the Kenya Colony, through independence to the 21st century. I have always been fascinated by the potential stories that spill out of ruins and old houses, and this book delivers meticulously researched and engaging histories about those ruins and old houses. I felt as though I was right there, living and breathing this book - Barnes is brilliant at drawing the reader in and making you feel as though you are part of the story. She has an extraordinary eye for detail and it's those seemingly trivial details that leave an indelible impression that stays with you long after you have put this book down. The pacing and structure of the book is absolutely captivating - Barnes very cleverly builds situations and develops characters so that the reader is carried along and it lays open our own struggles, flaws, and strengths as we travel on this journey with the author and her extraordinary guide - Simon Gitau. I was really drawn to the story of Simon Gitau. It is through him and his interactions with the other characters and the environment that the reader is made to reflect upon the human

condition and our place in the environment. Simon is one of those rare conservationists who does not deal in theory and abstractions, but who works tirelessly (and dangerously) at "ground zero" -- right where the work needs to be done, he puts himself at risk for the greater good.

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