

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. The first sentence of Helene Cooper's memoir is, "This is a story about rogues." Did you find this statement to be true? What sort of rogues did Helene fear she would encounter in Liberia?
2. Why do you think Helene chose to title her memoir *The House at Sugar Beach* even though she spent only seven years of her life there? What about the house is metaphorical for her entire childhood? Her entire life?
3. Discuss the role of religion in Helene's childhood. When did she pray? For what did she pray?
4. Throughout her childhood in Liberia Helene wishes to become a "been-to." When she moved to Knoxville in 1980 it "seemed like a place where [she] was trapped, prison far from home." How does she eventually make the States seem more like home?
5. Discuss Helene's relationship with Eunice in the house at Sugar Beach. What were some of the experiences they shared that made it clear that Eunice was more than a "live-in playmate"? How does the relationship evolve over the course of their lives?
6. Why do you think Helene and her sisters played, "when war time come"? Did Helene paint anything about the national unrest going on in Liberia? Did circumstances or events she experienced in her early life portend war?
7. Helene spends her childhood fearing seemingly harmless entities like negee and heartmen. Then we learn that her classmate Richard was indeed chased by a heartman, and only narrowly escaped. How did it change your understanding of the young Helene to learn that her fears were not unfounded? What forms have the imaginary boogiemen of your youth taken in adulthood?
8. Discuss the distinction between the native Liberians and the "Congo people." How did you react to Helene's cousin CeRue saying, "don't call me Congo, my grandma da Vai woman"? What does the national observance of Matilda Newport Day say about the relationship between native Liberians and Congo people? When war hit Liberia how did the distinctions become even more evident? Contrarily, how were the lines further blurred? Pg. 83-84
9. How did the mixing in of Liberian history help you to contextualize Helene's story? What about her story and the way she told it was universal?
10. Discuss Lah's rape. Do you admire her for what she did to protect the girls? She reports that the last thing the soldiers said to her before they raped her was, "You think the Americans are going to come and help you? Well, they back us." As an American, how did you react to this accusation?
11. Why do you think Helene decided to intersperse her articles with those being written about Liberia in Chapter 23? What effect did this have? Do you think she felt burdened by her homeland? Or guilty about her life as a journalist in the States?
12. Discuss the role of men in Helene's life. How did the Liberian cultural view of marriage affect the Cooper family? In what ways was Helene's father an ideal father figure? How did he let her down?
13. How does Helene's reunion with Eunice in the final chapter put her life in the States into perspective? How do you think Helene might have fared had she not left Liberia when the war began?
14. How does Helene's memoir differ from others you have read? Which stories will stay with you? What do you wish she had expanded on?

* Compare book to *First Darling of the Morning* - Whitney Umbriger
** Author's Notes

House at Sugar Beach (Cooper)

Labels: Memoir, Immigrant experience, Sisterhood, Africa

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The House at Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood

Helene Cooper, 2008

Simon & Schuster

384 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780743266253

In Brief

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 neege. 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's 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'etat, 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. (*From the publisher.*)

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About the Author

- Birth—1966
- Where—Monrovia, Liberia
- Education—University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Currently—lives in the Washington, D.C., area

Helene Cooper is the diplomatic correspondent for the *New York Times*. Prior to that assignment, she was the assistant editorial page editor of the *New York Times*, after twelve years as a reporter and foreign correspondent at the *Wall Street Journal*. She was born in Monrovia, Liberia, and lives in the Washington, D.C., area. (*From the publisher.*)

More

Helene Cooper was born in Liberia, the descendant of Elijah Johnson and Randolph Cooper—freed American slaves who were early settlers of Liberia. She is now an American journalist who has been the diplomatic correspondent for the *New York Times*, based in Washington, D.C., since 2006. She joined the *Times* in 2004 as assistant editorial page editor.

At the *Wall Street Journal*, Cooper wrote about trade, politics, race and foreign policy at the Washington and Atlanta bureaus from 1992 to 1997. From 1997 to 1999, she reported on the European Monetary Union from the London bureau. From 1999 to 2002, she was a reporter focusing on international economics; then Washington bureau chief from 2002 to 2004.

Her 2008 memoir, *The House at Sugar Beach*, largely concerns the Liberian coup of 1980 and its effect on Cooper's family, socially and politically-elite descendants of American freed slaves who colonized the country in the 19th century. (*From Wikipedia.*)

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Critics Say . . .

At its heart, *The House at Sugar Beach* is a coming-of-age story told with unremitting honesty. With her pedigree and her freedom from internalized racism, Cooper is liberated to enjoy a social universe that is a fluid mix of all things American and African...While Cooper's memoir is mesmerizing in its portrayal of a Liberia rarely witnessed, its description of the psychological devastation—and coping mechanisms—brought on by profound loss is equally captivating.

Caroline Elkins - New York Times

The House at Sugar Beach is her dramatic memoir of Liberia in the years preceding and after its savage revolution in 1980...a brilliant spotlight on a land too long forgotten. Through Cooper, we breathe Liberia's coal smoke and fish-tangy air; we taste its luscious palm butter on rice and hear the charming patter of Liberian English. We trot to church, to the family plantation and to Grandma's house.

Wendy Kann - Washington Post

Among Cooper's aims in becoming a journalist were to reveal the atrocities committed in her native country. With amazing forthrightness, she has done so, delivering an eloquent, if painful, history of the African migratory experience.

Ms. Magazine

This stunning memoir by journalist Helene Cooper relates her early years living at the Sugar Beach estate in Liberia until a coup d'état drove her mother, sister and her to America, where they attempted to fit in. The story is a sprawling, epic tale of struggle and survival in the face of adversity, and Cooper relates it with a genuine and emotional voice. As Cooper's tale unfolds, her intimate reading draws listeners into the family as their journey begins. Cooper may not read with a lot of frills and thrills in her somber voice, but the experience is affecting and indelible.

Publishers Weekly

Cooper, a *New York Times* diplomatic correspondent, writes of her life as a privileged Liberian ultimately forced to emigrate to the United States. Sometimes humorous, at other times shocking, she is always engaging and informative although not highly reflective. Cooper describes her comfortable life in an elite Liberian family, introducing her relatives, the family servants, and Liberian language, culture, and society. In 1980, when she was a teenager, Samuel Kanyon Doe's coup d'état ended it all. The horrors of those times—the televised executions (whose victims included friends and relatives) the rapes (of her mother and schoolmates), and the recruitment of children as soldiers—are all clearly rendered. The most compelling chapters in Cooper's memoir, which goes up to her revisiting Liberia in 2003, profile a Liberian named Eunice whose tribe was living in the country when Cooper's American ancestors arrived. Her parents took in Eunice as a companion for Helene, and they became lifelong friends. Eunice's life swung from poverty to wealth (with the Coopers) and back to poverty (when the Coopers moved to America); why she did not go with them is not clear. A great book discussion selection; recommended for academic and public libraries.

Tonya Briggs - Library Journal

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.... 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.

Bookmarks Magazine

A contemplative memoir of a privileged life in a poor place. The house of the title stood, and perhaps still stands, 11 miles from Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. Born there in 1966, *New York Times* special correspondent Cooper (whose beat is now Condoleezza Rice) had the run of that "perfect and perfectly grand paradise," with its five bedrooms and three bathrooms and baby grand piano, all "protected from the ravages of West African squalor and poverty by central air-conditioning, strategically placed coconut trees, and a private water well." Yet, though perched on a hill above the rest, the house was no fortress. As Cooper writes, it was a magnet for rogues-burglars, that is, as distinct from thieves, who "worked for the government and stole money from the public treasury." Lighter-skinned than many of her compatriots, Cooper was also an "Honorable," one of the ethnic and social elite who lorded it over the poorer "Country" people of Liberia. A Country man with a Harvard doctorate, notes the author, would still rank below an Honorable "with a two-bit degree from some community college in Memphis, Tennessee." In childhood games, it was the Honorables who got to shoot the Country people, and the Country people who got to play dead. Such are the perfect ingredients for a civil war, and civil war is what came. When it did, led by Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, members of Cooper's family were killed, her mother raped, an adopted sister lost, her family scattered and sent into exile in America. These terrible events occur at the book's midpoint. What remains—rendered with aching nostalgia and wonderful language ("Wartime come, when they be evacuating people, you will be glad I not try into get on no helicopter in heels")—is a voyage of return, through which the author seeks to recover the past and to find that missing sister, even as the war deepens over the years to come. Elegant and eloquent, and full of news from places about which we know too little.

Enhancing your Book Club:

1. Prepare peanut soup, a traditional Liberian dish, and serve it for your book club:

Peanut soup (ground pea soup)

1 ham hock
1 pound stew beef
1 pound chicken pieces (thighs, wings, drumsticks)
4 chicken boullion cubes
1 onion, diced
1 bell pepper, diced
1 celery stalk, diced
1 habanero pepper, minced
1 piece dried fish (optional)
Salt and pepper to taste
2 large potatoes, cut into 1 inch pieces
½ pound okra
½ jar peanut butter

Fill a soup pot halfway with water and add ham hock. Bring to a boil for 15 minutes. Discard the water, put the ham hock back in the pot, and refill with water, again halfway up. (This gets some of the oil out of the ham hock). Bring to a boil, and add beef, chicken, boullion cubes, onion, pepper, celery, habañero pepper, dried fish (if using), and salt and pepper. Cover and cook for about 30 minutes. Add potatoes, cook another 15 minutes. Add okra, cook 5 minutes, add peanut butter, cook 5 minutes more until peanut butter is melted into the soup. Taste and adjust seasonings. If soup is watery, add more peanut butter. If its too thick, add water.