

A Literary Ventures Fund Book

The Leper Compound

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Book Synopsis A stunning debut novel by a psychiatric nurse in which illness unleashes the uncanny and essential of human identity, featuring an American missionary's daughter who grows into womanhood amid the social and political conflict of 1980s southern Africa.

"The Leper Compound succeeds remarkably in giving a sense of how, during the last years of white rule in southern Africa, the daily experience of ordinary people was interfused with the larger historical drama."

- J.M. Coetzee, 2003 Nobel Laureate for Literature and author of *Slow Man*

Included in this Press Kit

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http://literaryventuresfund.org/books/the_leper_compound



Praise for *The Leper Compound*

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Paula Nangle's debut novel, "The Leper Compound," is a beautiful and complex work. Set during the final years of the Second Chimurenga—the guerrilla uprising that ended white-minority rule in Rhodesia in 1979 and gave rise to modern Zimbabwe—it is about much more than just the war. Indeed, the conflict occurs out of sight, the spit and crackle of violence leaping from the surface of the narrative before falling from view. This is, of course, Nangle's intention, reflecting the willful denial of white Rhodesians, as well as her protagonist's dreamlike disconnection from the world. We meet Colleen, the daughter of a white farmer, as a child in the feverish throes of malaria... Indeed, the early pages of the novel hum with a hallucinogenic quality, of visions flickering in corners, at a distance from the world outside... Nangle underscores both the passage of time and Colleen's indifference to momentous political and social change with a single sentence: "'Zimbabwe' doesn't exactly roll off my tongue yet." There is no resolution in "The Leper Compound," no moment of self-realization for Colleen, no reconciliation with her past, her lost homeland or the Africa of the present or future. It is a ruthlessly honest study of an individual—a decent person—who hears, but does not hear, who sees, but does not see, in order to get by.

—*The Los Angeles Times*, January 2008

Paula Nangle's "The Leper Compound" interweaves the study of a historic moment with a lovely depiction of one African girl's development as affected by that moment. Like the main characters of most bildungsromans, Colleen grows up in turbulent times, the period from Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 through the eventual attainment of independence in 1980, and the nation's change of name to Zimbabwe. The novel opens with Colleen's guilt at forgetting to take a day's dose of quinine; she then comes down with malaria, an illness that sends her—along with the novel about her—into a long series of episodic dream... Nangle beautifully describes the way acute self-awareness can distort one's perception, fusing daily consciousness with a near-dream state. In her waking life, Colleen watches herself with a consciousness similar to that of light sleep, where one senses, but can never be sure, that this might just be a dream. Sometimes the reader must wonder which is which, though Nangle rarely lets the strangeness of Colleen's mind become too opaque... Nangle's prose allows for varied interpretations; if anything, the story asks, rather than tells, what kind of person Colleen is... Like the children in Nadine Gordimer's "The Lying Days" and J.M. Coetzee's "Boyhood," who grow up in British colonies in Africa, Colleen is a symbol for the liminal zone between two eras. What makes her unique is her extreme sensitivity, which enables her to forge strong connections with those who might ostracize her even as she feels the exclusion from their world.

—*San Francisco Chronicle*, January 2008

Praise continued

"Zimbabwe and South Africa at the last half of the 20th century provide the complex backdrop for Nangle's melancholy debut. Structured as a series of snapshots in the life of Colleen, daughter of a white farmer and a former missionary, the book looks at the harrowing transitions from white to black rule. As a child, Colleen survives malaria in then-Rhodesia, which leaves her with a lifelong legacy of hallucinatory dreams that may or may not have a real-world basis. She also learns to cope with her younger sister's schizophrenia. The guerrilla warfare of the 1970s creates a tacit barrier between Colleen and her many Shona friends (the Shona people make up a majority in Zimbabwe). Their reluctance to tell Colleen the truth about their political activities causes her to inadvertently betray them. Over time—and with a few harrowing adventures of her own as she studies nursing in South Africa, marries and gives birth to a son—the number of black Africans in Colleen's life dwindles. She is herded into a purely white world, despite the end of apartheid. While a simple coming of age tale on the surface, Nangle's poetic and often heartbreaking story exposes racism's insidious effect on all concerned."

—Review in *Publishers Weekly*

"Paula Nangle writes prose that in its elegant yet raw intensity reminds me of the poetry of Sylvia Plath. The Leper Compound will impress itself on the mind and remain with the reader long after the book has been closed.

—Stuart Dybek, 2007 MacArthur Fellow and author of *I Sailed with Magellan*

"Nangle looks at the suffering body with a concentration that yields almost hallucinatory detail. Like Gordimer, she must witness; like Coetzee, she bows to the discipline of her own helplessness. What she writes is a stunning realism like no one else's, explosively quiet, painful, and beautiful."

— Jaimy Gordon, author of *Bogeywoman*

"A difficult adolescence and young womanhood are lived out during Rhodesia's violent transition into contemporary Zimbabwe, in Michigan author Nangle's compelling first novel. [...] A fine debut, and a welcome glimpse of a troubled world which one hopes Nangle will explore in fuller detail in future work."

—*Kirkus Reviews*, December 2007

Author Biography



Paula Nangle was raised by missionaries in the United States and southern Africa and lives in Benton Harbor, Michigan with her husband and two children. A graduate of Western Michigan University's MFA program, she works as a psychiatric nurse, and has published fiction in Michigan Quarterly Review, Glimmer Train, Crab Orchard Review, Blue Mesa Review, Primavera, and Weber Studies. Her story, "Swabs," in Glimmer Train's Spring 2006 issue, was listed in Best American Short Stories' "100 Most Distinguished Stories of 2006."

Why I Wrote The Leper Compound

I constructed the book around several particularly strong images that remained clear in my mind and seemed best told through one voice. A few years after Zimbabwe's independence, my father and I were invited to tea at the home of a nationalistic schoolteacher. There were several people there who told us how we were protected during the war, and disclosed events that we had not known about. It was a relieved, almost happy time, and the underlying malice in the chapter "The Last Day at Nyadzi" evolved out of that. I remember wondering what could have happened differently and under what circumstances.

As a psychiatric nurse, I seem to have acquired a technique for subduing scenes of violence and discomfort in my own mind, setting them aside, or viewing them clearly from a distance. This has always seemed essential, since, due to confidentiality, one is unable to talk about events that occur at work, or in patients' lives. In the same way, living in the United States after Africa also requires, even demands, a certain renouncement of all things once familiar. Writing *The Leper Compound* has allowed me to fictionalize some of the crises I've witnessed, and to feel familiar again in a place that has mattered so much to me.

-Paula Nangle

Reading Group Guide

1. In what ways does historical change shape the events of the novel?
2. What is the central theme of *The Leper Compound*?
3. Why has the leper compound near Ndima been chosen as a title when the place itself is confined to one chapter, and the novel is not grounded here?
4. Paula Nangle is a psychiatric nurse. How have Julia Chonongera and other nurses influenced Colleen? What impact does nursing have on the novel?
5. In "Svikiro," Colleen dreams of an accident in which the dying Miss Maenga walks away: "She acknowledges Colleen briefly before she goes." The novel ends with her dead father giving her arbitrary advice (or does it have meaning?). How has the African belief in spiritism influenced her thinking, or receptiveness, to the dead, the comatose, the dying?
6. How are Colleen's father's responses to the war, and to Sarah's emerging mental illness, similar or different?
7. Discussing Sarah's illness with Colleen in "The Last Day at Nyadzi," Vaida says, "What could you do? It was beyond your control." Are there actions the reader wishes Colleen would take with Sarah? With Hereseke? Should she have crossed the border?
8. The Africans' unwillingness to fully include Colleen is based on a mutual mistrust that seems inevitable during a guerilla war. Give examples. Hereseke says, "But this is what I mean, Colleen. You don't know whose side you're on." Is this a fair accusation?
9. Events, like her sister's delusions, may or may not be real. In "The Visit," she realizes "she might never know." Few things are definite. How does this tentative acceptance of an uncertain reality coincide with the states of emergency in both Rhodesia and South Africa, where the governments controlled the media?
10. Beyond Vaida's nationalism, what motivates her? Is Vaida revealing the whole truth of what happened in her confession? Does Colleen take full responsibility for the events at Mhekwe? Should she?
11. What is the significance of the corpses in *The Leper Compound*? How does Colleen react to death?
12. Compare the character of Malcolm to Hereseke, Len or Nick.

Reading Guide continued

13. Why are movements such as ‘I Live’ and rebirthing so attractive to Colleen’s South African friends? Colleen cannot rebirth -- why?

14. Muteness and immobility are observed by Colleen throughout the novel. In the first chapter, as she is recovering from malaria, there are “long silences when she pretended to be deaf.” Why does she persistently attempt to identify with people whose communication and movement are compromised?

15. Does Colleen fear that she might develop schizophrenia like Sarah? She experiences vivid dreams after the malaria. But schizophrenia has been called a waking dream. Without sleep after Gavin’s surgery, Colleen begins to hallucinate. Could she have smothered the other baby, Ramona? The incident is never reflected upon in later chapters. Although she seems to have accepted what the nurse assures her – that it is a dream, her part in the baby’s death – how does she live with herself and continue to function as a mother?

16. Does Colleen accept her stepmother’s role in Sarah’s life?

17. Paula Nangle is the daughter of evangelical missionaries. The novel is not a memoir. Beyond Colleen’s reluctance to actively participate in any movement requiring zeal, what evidence of the writer’s background remains in the novel’s exploration of religion?

Additional Information

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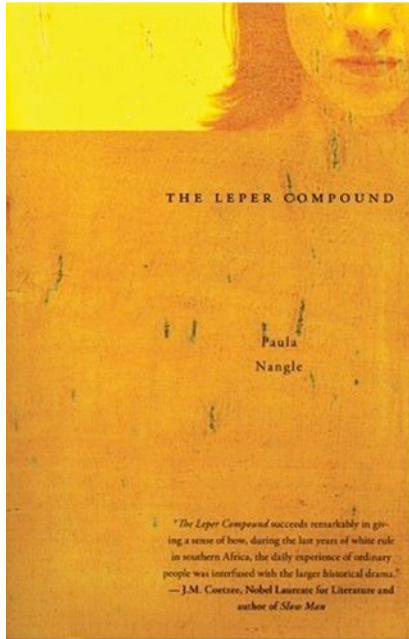
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by Paula Nangle

A stunning debut novel by a psychiatric nurse in which illness unleashes the uncanny and essential of human identity, featuring an American missionary's daughter who grows into womanhood amid the social and political conflict of 1980s southern Africa

The setting of this extraordinary novel is Rhodesia in the throes of the conflict that will give birth to Zimbabwe, a transition that Nangle witnessed when she lived there. Colleen, motherless from the age of seven, is left alone with her father, an American expat coffee farmer, and her younger sister, whose mental illness removes her from the family. The Leper Compound is the record of Colleen's passage into adulthood across an Africa in transformation. Extending beyond the usual parameters of a "coming of age" story, it is, simultaneously, about the forging of personal and national identity.

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<http://www.ingrambook.com>

Paula Nangle was raised by missionaries in the US and southern Africa and now lives in Benton Harbor, Michigan, where she works as a psychiatric nurse. This is her first novel.