

# BOOK REVIEW

**Pamela Reynolds.** *The Uncaring, Intricate World: A Field Diary, Zambezi Valley 1984–1985.* Edited by Todd Meyers. Duke University Press, 2019. xiii +193 pp. Acknowledgments. Foreword. Introduction. Afterword. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$25.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-478-004677.

*The Uncaring, Intricate World: A Field Diary, Zambezi Valley 1984–1985* was a wonderful book to read. Pamela Reynolds has a long-established career as a leading expert on the experiences of youth and children in southern Africa. Her career trajectory is a testament to this, progressing from the head of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Social Anthropology Department to Professor Emerita of John Hopkins University and now Life Fellow of UCT. Her work on children and child labor has been seminal in developing the field in the region. This diary, however, gives a glimpse into the realities behind doing research and the happenings in-field that both help and hinder such research.

This field diary documents the research field trips that Reynolds undertook in 1984 and 1985. This research contributed to two books, *Dance Civet Cat: Child Labour in the Zambezi Valley* (1991) and *Lwaano Lwanyika: The Tonga Book of the Earth* (1991, with Colleen Crawford Cousins). These texts have become foundational for researchers looking to work on similar topics in Zimbabwe and the region, and continue to be important reading for students and scholars alike.

The diary was edited by Todd Meyers; it includes a comprehensive introduction from Reynolds herself, which details much of the historical background: the building of Lake Kariba and the consequences, the research area in a village called Chitenge; and the realities for rural populations in this part of the world. The book also contains two afterwords, by Jane Guyer and Julie Livingston. Both reflect on the diary and its value for current and future researchers, noting that time has not diminished the relevance of the observations by Reynolds for today's researchers and students.

Reynolds's diary is full of insights not only about the research at hand (child labor, child experiences, village life) but also about the realities of living in the field and the challenges of doing anthropological research. These range from the deeply frustrating and minor ("I keep losing pens")

[51]), to the vexations of cancelled interviews or drunk participants, or the more unique challenges of sharing accommodations with snakes, rats, and other wild animals, and the pain and sorrow of people dying in the village in which she was living and working. Reynolds is also explicit on the mental gymnastics involved in spending time away from home studying other people, and trying to make sense of the world in front of one. The time away from her own children and family are front and center in her thoughts, and the diary ends with the statement: “I leave clutching four bags of field data. An odd sight to the very last. I go both glad and sad: glad to return to my children and sad to leave these children” (170). All the relationships and time spent in Chitenge and her house (nicknamed Manhattan) reduced to a few bags of notes represent both everything and nothing.

The frustrations of the work itself often bubble up in the diary. At various points Reynolds is clearly questioning her research, her actions, and her reasons for being in the field. She is not the first or the last to have such thoughts, but they are expressed so earnestly and so eloquently they often catch the reader out in the book, presented with little or no foreshadowing. At one point she notes, “Human rules, the stuff of anthropology, are like African paths in the long, brittle grass of early summer. Devious” (59). Later, her feelings are much more directed at her own folly: “This vain attempt. This foolish endeavor to seek to explain others’ lives. By whose leave? How pathetically? .... What do I know about the church, the believers here? Nothing. What is an anthropologist? A necromancer” (120). Pertinently, for the strange post-fact world we seem to inhabit, she asks, “Life is so full of fiction: Where are the facts anthropologists as scientists gather?” (61).

The day-to-day business of research is clearly documented in these accounts. The all-consuming thoughts, the relentless work with an often-opaque goal, the relationships we all make with the stuff and people we study are front and center. I never kept a diary and I had different forms of research gathering, yet the memories of my own research came flooding back while reading *The Uncaring, Intricate World*: the canceled interviews; the bad interviews where we kept missing each other and the transcripts made no sense; the painful revelations about children, racism, violence, and trauma in oral accounts; and the late night thoughts that intrude on sleep, recreation, family time, and other parts of “normal life.”

While this diary documents happenings from nearly forty years ago, many of the observations are still relevant today. This is a vital source of insight for current students and researchers. It is beautifully written and edited and provides glimpses into a world many of us who study and write on Zimbabwe are familiar with. Many of the core issues in the academic work that came out of this time in Chitenge (the impact of large-scale development projects such as Kariba, the kinship ties in rural Zimbabwe, the seen and unseen experiences of children) reverberate in Reynolds’s

diaries. As such, they provide tantalizing insights into how the main research arguments are made and formulated and the genesis from first thought to detailed scholarly work.

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