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THE DARLING

By Russell Banks

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If they knew the horrors it causes or terror it sponsors throughout West Africa, girls would pick another best friend. Diamonds lay at the root of countless villagers' limbs hacked off and increasingly finance the activities of Hezbollah and Al-Quida.

Liberia's recently deposed despot Charles Taylor, like Afghanistan's Taliban, offered terrorists a protected sanctuary.

With its unique place in American history and far-from-unique role in U.S. policy, Liberia provides the setting for most of multiple-Pulitzer nominee Russell Banks' *The Darling*.

Just before Sept. 11, 2001, Hannah Musgrave returns to Liberia to learn the fate of the three sons she'd been forced to abandon ten years earlier.

She'd originally gone to Africa in 1975 to elude arrest for her Weather Underground activities.

Conflicted between returning home or building an independent life in Africa, Hannah forfeits both options by marrying American-educated Woodrow Sundiata, assistant minister in the government of Pres. William Tolbert. Hannah settles for dutiful wife in this nation founded in 1822—when even most U.S. abolitionists could not imagine separate races living harmoniously—as a haven for freed American slaves.

What was old became new again, with a twist. Expatriated slaves replicated America's plantation system, harvesting rice and rubber, with themselves now holding the whip. "One percent of the population..." Hannah reports, "owned the other 99 percent, and a huge chunk of the profits generated by the back-breaking labor of that 99 percent went straight to the board rooms of America."

After America began buying its rubber elsewhere, Liberia became of interest only as a pawn in the Cold War as a CIA African listening post.

In Africa, Hannah feels complicit in a legacy of Western imperialism. Africans “were made poor and weak so that I could be rich and powerful; they watched their babies shrivel in their arms so that my children...could be inoculated against the plagues and run in the sun and someday go to Harvard.”

Hannah finds Liberia’s economic base is trickle-down corruption. “No one cared if roads financed by U.S. aid weren’t built or buildings never finished...as long as the money to build, finish, and repair kept moving from one hand to the other.” Anyone who asked probing questions “simply disappeared.”

“The comforting and most useful thing about total corruption is that it’s total” and therefore predictable. But in 1979, unwisely turning his extorting from foreigners to his own poor people, Tolbert imposed a sales tax on rice, sparking riots. Tanks rolled through city streets, citizens were slaughtered and their bodies dumped in vats of hydrochloric acid, as government soldiers’ committed rape, butchery and possibly even cannibalism. When Tolbert could no longer pay them, their services went up for sale.

Charles Taylor, friend of Woodrow and Hannah, forms a rival political party. Crafty politician Woodrow, ever strong upon the stronger side, doesn’t join him.

In Africa, politics means playing not with fire but with napalm. When Tolbert is imprisoned, eviscerated and thrown out his office window, his ministers tied to telephone poles and shot, Woodrow is beheaded before his sons’ eyes. Hannah flees to America where Taylor seeking safety had wound up in jail.

Hannah helps Taylor escape and return to take power in Liberia. It will be years before she learns Taylor’s escape had the C.I.A.’s blessing, as he was to be our new man in Africa. Taylor told her he planned to establish “a socialist democracy... the kind of localized, tribe-based socialism that lay at the heart of every African tradition.”

Bankrolled by Liberia's diamond veins, Taylor became instead another of the brutal African dictators who ebb and flow by the moon, elected president by people "who voted for him to stop him from killing them"

When Hannah returns to post-Taylor Liberia, she finds its people "had been severely traumatized by the horrors of war, and many of them had reverted to Islam and ancient forms of animism."

Liberia's story is both important and disquieting, but Hannah's story shows why Banks ranks among our boldest artists. He creates a narrator we believe despite finding her neither likable nor credibly self-aware.

A diligent mother, she confesses she's not a loving one. Returning to America in 1983 leaving husband and sons behind, she realizes that's "exactly what I had wanted all along.... They weren't as real to me as I was to myself."

Always far more clear about what she's alienated from than a part of, Hannah's life is a perpetual pushing away, defined not by where she wants to be but where she's run to.

In her counterculture days she wore a "mask of idealism" behind which was a "privileged, angry kid who, in the name of peace, justice, and racial harmony, had declared war against the state" and her parents' entire generation attracted "only to middle-class black and Jewish boys, anyone not like Dad."

Yet the world of political terrorism is round, and if you go far enough left or right, you arrive at genocide. Different from a Timothy McVeigh only in politics, not tactics, Hannah eschewed moderation and lusted for excess. Why simply protest a war when you can burn down an ROTC building? She joins a conspiracy to bomb the Federal Building in Boston.

Her flight to Africa provided both escape from arrest and one more in a lifelong series of changes of scene necessitated by becoming bored by the last, a failure to infuse any of her life's scenes with meaning, a life she concedes was like "walking from one empty room into another."

As with anyone complaining of boredom, Hannah's actually confessing: "I am boring." Like Camus, Banks risks a challenge few dare: to make engaging the tale of a character dead at her core. And like Camus, he succeeds.
