

“In supple and spare prose, Lauer-Chéenne dissects what it means to be both in love and caught between cultures. *Souvenirs* is that rarest of books, powerfully exploring our shared humanity while at the same time acknowledging the deep rifts that divide us. Knowledgeable, lyric, and always a pleasure to read, *Souvenirs* is Peace Corps writing at its finest. I highly recommend it.”

Paul Eggers, author of *Saviors* (Harcourt Brace & Company) and *How the Water Feels* (Southern Methodist University Press)

“Julia Lauer-Chéenne has written an exquisite story of a doomed love affair. Told in spare and elegant prose, *Souvenirs* is set against the lush backdrop of a small Ivory Coast village where Ruth, the female protagonist, a naïve Peace Corps volunteer, is unwittingly caught between forces desiring progress and those committed to tribal customs. What Ruth cannot know is that Kwassi, the man she loves, is central to the latter, and that their love at the heart of the conflict is bigger than both of them. *Souvenirs* is a wonderful debut, and its publication sends a signal to the literary world that this is a writer to watch.”

Ladette Randolph, author of *This is Not the Tropics* (University of Wisconsin Press)

“Julia Lauer-Chéenne creates a rich portrait of the Ivory Coast, seen primarily through the eyes of young Peace Corps Volunteers in the seventies. A suspenseful love story, replete with lush descriptions and memorable characters, *Souvenirs* explores the meaning of place, culture, and memory against the backdrop of encroaching westernization while giving careful attention to the passions and prejudices of the times. This book is a real page-turner!”

Garnett Kilberg Cohen, Distinguished Artist, Columbia College Chicago, author of *Lost Women, Banished Souls* (University of Missouri Press), winner of Crazyhorse and Lawrence Foundation Fiction awards.

“*Souvenirs* is an evocative, pungent novel, an intriguing reflection upon what happens when hearts and cultures collide.”

Warren F. Motte, author of *Fables of the Novel* (Dalkey Archive Press)

“If you like romantic fantasy, you’ll enjoy this story’s mating dance between a proverbial Peace Corps coed and an African national set in the Ivory Coast. Sound bites of life and love resound in *Souvenirs*.”

Shirley Maley, author of *Love Affair with the Americas* (Day of Grace)

“A spiritual journey of love and self discovery, Ruth and Kwassi’s story is moving and expansive. There’s magic, mystery, and tropical heat that burns up the page. *Souvenirs* is a poetic meditation on youth, idealism, and the power to heal. A lovely first novel that resonates long after the final word.”

Cari Callis, author of *Life and Death on The Dub Side of the Moon, Pink Floyd and Philosophy* (Open Court)

“When Ruth and Kwassi cross paths, the attraction is mutual and immediate, and the trajectory of their romance inevitable. As their relationship runs its course, both learn that the most enduring souvenirs are not the trinkets or treasures one bargains for, but the sensual particulars of place that etch themselves into memory and the people one meets along the way.”

Grace Bauer, author of *Retreats and Recognitions* (Lost Horse Press)

“Fast moving and insightful, impossible to put down.”

Kris Clark, *Tipton Conservative Newspaper* (Tipton, Iowa)

# **SOUVENIRS**



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JULIA LAUER-CHÉENNE

**Community  
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locals is entirely coincidental.

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*à Dominique*



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# **SOUVENIRS**



Ruth met him in the rainy season when the jungle was claustrophobic with green and mildew. One afternoon she brushed her golden hair up into a bun, grabbed an umbrella and sunglasses, and stepped out into a curtain of rain.

She strolled in the storm, pleased to escape the villa full of roommates: she was weary of dominoes, English lessons, and Martini & Rossi. When she turned a corner and sank into mud, she slid out of her sandals and continued barefoot.

She waded across puddles and walked up wooden steps onto a stucco veranda to join her friend, Leslie, a young nurse from Ohio who was playing mankala with an African. The stranger picked up all his stones and dropped them one by one into a circle of twelve holes carved into the painted board. They clattered on the hard wood, blending with the downpour.

Leslie stood up and motioned Ruth to take her place. Ruth put her sandals on the floor and shook out the rain from her umbrella as the African rose from his chair.

*“Enchanté, Mademoiselle.”* Kwassi took Ruth’s hand and raised it to his lips. Ruth murmured a greeting, and for an instant saw herself reflected in his ebony eyes.

“Well,” Leslie cleared her throat. “Have fun playing.” She exited, relieved at the opportunity to leave. Like most African men, Kwassi made her feel uneasy, although she couldn’t explain why.

Kwassi gestured towards the mankala board on a round coffee table, and they sat down, face to face on wooden chairs.

Ruth moved a group of stones around the board as she practiced her French.

*“D’où viens-tu? Comment t’appelles-tu?”*

He told her he was studying for his Masters in English at the University in Abidjan. By next year he would earn his diploma and begin teaching at a high school. He had come to Bouaké to learn Western pedagogy.

“It is an honor and pleasure to train with the American Peace Corps.” Kwassi switched to his favorite language and paused, contemplating his next move.

“Your English is very good. Where did you study?”

“London.” He picked up the pebbles and soon captured three of Ruth’s holes.

“We’ve only been here a month,” Ruth explained, brushing back stray wisps of wavy hair. “We’re still trying to adjust to the climate. And learn French.”

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“I’m sure you’ll be popular with your students. You’re very beautiful.”

“*Merci, monsieur.*” Ruth hesitated, unsure how to proceed. Finally she raised her head and met his eyes.

“You’ve already taken most of my stones.”

“It’s a matter of strategy.” Kwassi’s toes tapped to the rhythm of tom-toms in the distance.

“I don’t have a head for tactical games. I can’t plot,” she sighed.

*Deep enough to drink from or drown in,* Kwassi daydreamed, lost for a moment in the American’s startlingly blue eyes.

Ruth blinked. She thought she saw a spider, black as coal, in Kwassi’s pupils.

“Mankala is a national pastime here in the Ivory Coast. You must forgive me for taking the advantage.” Kwassi’s smile was disarming. “I’m afraid I’m not making a very good first impression.”

“I’ll be offended if you let me win out of duty, or even worse, pity. Besides, there are other games, other ways to win.” What did she care about tossing stones in a board full of holes anyway?

“This is true. Acquiescence should not be confused with defeat.”

They turned their attention back to mankala. The game ended shortly with Kwassi’s victory.

...

When the rain let up, Ruth and Kwassi walked into town on gooey red earth to the open-air market. They weaved their way through crowded, wooden stalls of fruits,

vegetables, pots and pans, ebony masks, ivory, bronze, leather, and bolts of cloth. Ruth stopped at the bead vendor and stood mesmerized, scooping up glass stones that ran through her fingers like colored water.

“Beautiful! Look at the patterns—crimson, amber, cobalt blue! So many!” Ruth spread the jewelry out on the ground to have a better look. Should she choose randomly or coordinate the colors and designs? It took a long time to decide—she wanted them all! But finally she made a selection and began to bargain.

*“Combien?”*

The wrinkled vendor perched on top of a stool behind his wooden table, his eyes as hard as the beads at his feet. He stared at Ruth’s straw bag and refused to lower his price.

“Why won’t he deal?” Ruth asked Kwassi impatiently after several minutes.

“He knows you.”

“No, he doesn’t. How can he?”

“He knows your kind.”

Ruth shrugged and wandered off to look at ivory carvings. Pretty beads were plentiful in the Ivory Coast; she’d find another vendor. Kwassi stayed at the table.

“My Brother, please reconsider your price,” he said in Djoula, the Muslim’s market language, tossing a bead up and down in his palm.

“My Friend, I must eat too. Twenty-five francs is not an unreasonable price.”

“Fifteen. Look. There’s a little chip in this one.”

“That is nothing. In fact, it enhances the value. These are

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old stones, from my father's people. Surely you appreciate the magic of the ancients. Twenty francs. You can afford that."

"Dear Brother, seventeen if you insist. This is a fair price even for such precious stones."

"You'll need more than this for that fair one!" The vendor laughed as he got out a fine leather strap to string the beads. "Eighteen and it's a deal. You will be deeply loved by whoever wears them in your favor."

Kwassi smiled and got out his money.

...

On the way home the sun slid out from clouds and the world blurred with evaporation. Ruth wore the market beads around her neck, touched by Kwassi's kindness. They stepped around large puddles, wandered past clay huts, stucco villas, palm trees, and children. Vendors here and there sold peanuts, fruit, watches, and batteries.

"Two francs, two francs," an African woman dressed in an orange boubou motioned Ruth and Kwassi over to her mango stand.

"Two francs?" Kwassi laughed. "Two mangoes for two francs then." The woman winked. Kwassi grinned and gave her two coins.

"Two for the price of one. I'm impressed." Ruth commented, dropping hers into her bag.

She watched Kwassi eat, transfixed by widely spaced teeth tearing into tender, yellow skin, powerful lips sucking out sweet juice. He held out the dripping fruit to her, and Ruth tentatively took a bite.

When they stopped in front of Ruth's black iron gate he

asked her to go dancing.

“I’ll take you to *Chez Abdoula*. Have you ever been?”

“I don’t go out much. I’m too tired,” Ruth yawned. “It’s the heat.”

“I’ll come by for you this evening.”

Ruth said good-bye, her eyes riveted on Kwassi’s wide flared nostrils and the carved designs on his cheeks.

...

A few hours later she slipped out of the villa and met him at the corner.

At *Chez Abdoula* an orchestra under a thatched roof had Africans in a dancing frenzy. Ruth and Kwassi, the only black and white couple, were welcomed enthusiastically as the clientele whistled and clapped. Kwassi taught Ruth some steps, holding her waist and guiding her hips. She imitated as best she could, enjoying the syncopation of bongos and xylophones until she became distracted by so much color and noise. All this swirling and swaying began to make her dizzy until Kwassi’s unbuttoned shirt caught her eye, his dark chest beaded with sweat. When the music became soft and romantic, they danced slowly cheek to cheek. His face was dark and rough with fine texture just the way she liked. She thought of her father so far away and felt somewhat reassured. Kwassi’s fingers tangled Ruth’s damp ringlets at the nape of her neck. He wanted to kiss her, but refrained. She belonged on a pedestal for all to admire. How could he possibly keep such a beauty from slipping away?

After a few more songs they left the floor and sat down on a wooden bench off to the side. Kwassi went to the bar

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and returned with two warm gin and tonics and a pack of Craven cigarettes. The music drowned out any attempt at conversation, so Ruth sipped her drink dutifully, longing for ice cubes. She thought hard about a question and how to formulate it in French.

*“Pourquoi les noirs dansent-ils mieux que les blancs?”*

Kwassi did not try to hide his glee; this ridiculous question was so typical of Americans, always trying to be sincere. How could they be so stupid? Of course black people danced better than white people. But why? This would take a lifetime to explain.

“Dancing is the poor man’s recreation,” he replied, using the opportunity to move closer to Ruth. “Dancing is also a mystical expression of our religion,” he whispered in her ear.

“My father’s a clergyman,” she retorted. “My ancestors were missionaries in Africa. I know all about religion.”

Kwassi pressed closer. “That’s what you think.” This time he couldn’t resist. His lips found hers as his hand touched her bare knee.

*“Va-t-en! Va te faire foutre!”* Ruth pushed him back, offended.

“That’s not very Christian!” Kwassi laughed, enchanted by how expertly she swore and the surprising strength of her arms. “Don’t worry, you dance better than most white people.”

Ruth tossed her head indignantly, picked up a Craven, and waited for Kwassi to strike a match. They danced all night and left near dawn, walking Kwassi stopped and held

Ruth's face in his hands.

*"Je t'adore."*

"You don't even know me," she scoffed. How many times had she heard this line?

"I don't have to know you. Don't you believe in love at first sight?"

"How can you love someone you don't even *know*?"

"In our culture, there are different ways of seeing, different ways of knowing. Besides, you can't escape my charms."

"What do you mean? I'm not easy to satisfy."

"Oh, my beautiful American! You'll see what I mean. I know all about love."

From then on Kwassi was her shadow. He followed her everywhere; he told everyone he adored her. Ruth hid in her room, avoided his path, and banged doors in his face. But he was faithful to his heart and would not go away.