



# **The Civilized World: A Novel in Stories**

*Susi Wyss*

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**The Civilized World: A Novel in Stories** Susi Wyss

**A glorious literary debut set in Africa about five unforgettable women—two of them haunted by a shared tragedy—whose lives intersect in unexpected and sometimes explosive ways**

When Adjoa leaves Ghana to find work in the Ivory Coast, she hopes that one day she'll return home to open a beauty parlor. Her dream comes true, though not before she suffers a devastating loss—one that will haunt her for years, and one that also deeply affects Janice, an American aid worker who no longer feels she has a place to call home. But the bustling Precious Brother Salon is not just the "cleanest, friendliest, and most welcoming in the city." It's also where locals catch up on their gossip; where Comfort, an imperious busybody, can complain about her American daughter-in-law, Linda; and where Adjoa can get a fresh start on life—or so she thinks, until Janice moves to Ghana and unexpectedly stumbles upon the salon.

At once deeply moving and utterly charming, *The Civilized World* follows five women as they face meddling mothers-in-law, unfaithful partners, and the lingering aftereffects of racism, only to learn that their cultural differences are outweighed by their common bond as women. With vibrant prose, Susi Wyss explores what it means to need forgiveness—and what it means to forgive.

## The Civilized World: A Novel in Stories Details

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Author : Susi Wyss

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# From Reader Review **The Civilized World: A Novel in Stories** for online ebook

## **Andrea Blythe says**

Shifting from the Ivory Coast to Ethiopia to Ghana to America, this novel presents the lives of five very different women. At the heart are Adjoa, who hopes to open the cleanest, friendliest beauty parlor in Ghana, and Janice, an American aid worker. Both women, though they may not realize it, are bound by singular event of violence and tragedy. Other women include Comfort, a strong, no nonsense African matriarch, who must make what peace she can with her American daughter-in-law Linda, and another woman (whose name I can't remember), who feels lost and unsteady following her husband embassy post to embassy post throughout Africa.

These stories present Africa without the sensationalism, offering stories of daily living. Even the writing itself is understated, attempting to simply describe what is, rather than over-dramatize, and allowing the reader to fill in the empty spaces. These women feel very real, and I can imagine them now, living their lives in Africa.

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## **Nancy says**

I am wavering between 4 and 4.5 stars. This is a beautifully written book that is presented in a number of short stories that can stand alone but when told together, the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts.

Each story gives a snapshot of the women and their struggles and concerns of that time. The stories are written chronologically and the characters weave themselves throughout the book and between the pages of the other characters' stories. The author gives a vivid and colorful snapshot littered with visual symbolism like butterflies, beauty products, and African landscape.

My personal favorite featured Comfort as she visited her son and new grandchild. Comfort's African culture directly clashes with her American daughter-in-law while her son, Peter, finds himself pulled in both directions. Like the other stories, the conflicts are not overstated. The reader is given the benefit of the doubt is left to connect the dots and intelligently predict possible outcomes, although closure is provided.

Excellent book. Loved it.

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## **Becky Fowler says**

If you are comfortable with uncertainty, you can be comfortable with--and thoroughly enjoy--Wyss's storytelling. Plots/subplots, characters, scenes are very clearly and vividly presented, and yet you almost have the sense that the stories are happening in real-time/real-life and that nothing is guaranteed or all worked out, further along in the pages, simply waiting for you to discover it. To me, that is exciting. You are as much on your own as are the characters in trying to navigate their own paths through complex personal and social situations. But Wyss makes sure we have time to do a little sight-seeing along the way--treating us to many beautiful and provocative views of the unfamiliar (to many of us) African countries where most of

the novel takes place. Looking back on the book, I am always struck by how visual my recollections are, as happens with a good movie whose most powerful images and moments file themselves away among those from your very own life, as though you went through them yourself. I can understand the previous reviewer's comment about passion, but each of the main characters in Wyss's book is whole-heartedly pursuing her desires. However, she is doing so--whether through wisdom/experience, self-discipline, wariness, whatever--with a healthy respect for things that are beyond her control or understanding. And there are many. This is a truly unique and worthy read.

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## **Jael says**

"...all of her half-formed thoughts about Africa became as clear and sharp as the air around her, and she understood at last why she hated living there. It wasn't, as she had once thought, the poverty and constant harassment for money. It wasn't the heat or the dirt or the cacophony of foreign tongues. What she finally understood was that nothing felt safe to her -- not her marriage, not her physical self, not even her sanity -- and without that feeling of safety, she could never create a home for herself and her child." -- Pg. 125

That was my favorite quote from *The Civilized World* by Susi Wyss. Ophelia and her husband Philip have lived in Africa for years because of his job. Her marriage lacks the passion it once had. They have been struggling with fertility, and Ophelia thinks a child will cure everything. Even on the cusp of adopting a child, nothing seems right. A child can't solve the overwhelming feeling that something is missing. What's missing is a sense of security. And that's just one of the stories in this book.

Adjoa and her brother Kojo are twins living on the Ivory Coast, trying to save money to open a hair salon. Adjoa works for Janice, a white woman, as a masseuse. Janice sees Adjoa as more than just an employee, she sees her as a friend. Adjoa sees Janice as the white lady who asks too many questions. Why would this white woman care about her? Adjoa has dreams of a better life, but Kojo loses his way. Instead he goes for the quick fix, robbing Janice and several others. Janice is unaware it's Kojo, but Adjoa learns the truth she keeps the secret from her family and her friends. Why tarnish his name? It's a secret that eats at her soul even after Kojo's death. Does she owe Janice the truth? Does Adjoa owe it to herself to tell the truth? Janice, like Ophelia, loses her sense of security.

Just when you get into Adjoa's story, you meet Comfort, a widow from Ghana with several children, including one living in America. Her American daughter-in-law frets about everything. Comfort can only hold her tongue, while hoping her son Ekow will still preserve family traditions. Comfort is the matriarch that every family has. She believes in respecting your elders, cooking in the traditional way, and dispensing wisdom no matter how much people don't like it.

How does everyone come together? At Adjoa's salon, The Precious Brother Salon. Kojo is gone, but in way he is still with his sister. He is gone physically, but Adjoa can still feel the loss physically.

Each chapter is a snapshot in their lives. A snapshot, that's vividly written by Susi Wyss. I can just picture all of the women sitting around the salon swapping stories and gossiping.

Rating: Superb

Note: I received a copy from the publisher (Macmillan) in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Kathy Hiester says**

Susi Wyss unites a great collection of stories with varying perspectives. As an American, it was very fascinating to read the rational depictions of foreign aid workers and how they are perceived by African citizens. These stories present Africa without the sensationalism, offering stories of day by day living. Even the writing itself is modest, attempting to simply describe what is, allowing the reader to fill in the blank spaces. These women feel very real and natural and I can picture them now, living their lives in Africa. The differences in culture between the Author and the women are evident but not as acute as some reviewers have made them out to be. I enjoyed these stories and thought they were wonderful.

4 Stars

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### **Marilyn Pronovost says**

This is a well written book. The stories of the women draw the reader in. They are all strong women, who for no their strength in their time of weakness or worry. The stores come together to give a sense of the culture. Although the customs may differ, between African and American cultures, the concerns and feelings remain similar, loss of loved ones, need for security, goals that need to be achieved, need for resolution. The characters are Everywoman yet the display distinct parts of our personalities. I truly enjoyed the feel of Africa this book gave, the warmth and the closeness of people, yet embraced by a need for privacy.

A book I would recommend to others. Lovely story.

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### **Meg says**

Susi Wyss' *The Civilized World* is everything I love about literary fiction: vivid prose that reads like poetry; memorable, multifaceted characters with whom you cheer and grieve; settings so alive you can feel the grit between your teeth; language that is both accessible and beautiful. A book with words that linger, creating a world marvelously alive to you.

Told through a series of vignettes over many years, each leap finds us visiting Adjoa and Janice at another point in their storied lives. While other characters come and go, these two women — one African; one American — felt like the true main characters. They were the ones to whom I was emotionally bonded, and I couldn't help but feel Adjoa's hurts and frustrations. Her twin brother was someone I never "clicked" with, knowing he couldn't possibly be up to any good, but I cared for him because Adjoa did. She's a hardworking, tenacious and brave woman — someone you can't help but like.

The atmosphere of *The Civilized World* is engrossing, and I'm a bit abashed to note that I knew (and know) little of Africa before reading this book. Though not exactly well-versed now, I'm more on my way — and definitely intrigued. This peek at life in Ghana and Malawi is unvarnished. Wyss' work is described as "influenced by her twenty-year career managing women's health programs in Africa, where she lived for more than eight years," and I felt like the character of Janice — a white American — could be an extension of the author. Janice was broken, a little bit jaded — but ultimately someone I felt for. Her passages with

Adjoa were easily my favorites.

At just over 250 pages, *The Civilized World* was a quick read that really got me thinking. Regardless of the differences that kept Adjoa and Janice separate, their bonds — the need for love; the searching for acceptance; the grief for things that were and are not now — was palpable. Though the extraneous characters didn't mesh as well for me, I loved Ophelia's obsession with offbeat, nonsequitor African names (like "Nobody" and "Comfort"). By turns deeply sad and uplifting, the common threads that bind these characters were fascinating.

Fans of literary fiction and those interested in Africa, female relationships, race relations and other dynamics will find a memorable, lyrical story in *The Civilized World*. I only used the publisher description above because it's hard to pinpoint, to classify; it is truly a story all its own.

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## **Bookworm says**

I actually received *The Civilized World* from the publisher months ago and shame on me for taking so long to read and review it.

This novel is quiet and beautiful and it drew me into its pages straight away. I finished reading it in a single day. It will make it to my top reads of 2012 and I'm happy to have found a favorite so early on in the year.

I enjoy stories set in Africa and this novel swept me away for a little while. It is written in the form of intertwining stories surrounding five different women. I liked that I didn't know where the stories were going and I felt as if the stories were slowly revealing themselves to me.

As I read, I got to see how these women's lives were somehow interwoven. Each of these women seemed real to me and each story felt real. This book just flows, the narrative style is engaging. Where one story will wind off, another will pick up and yet another, until a previous one will start again where it left off. None of it was jarring however, it all reads smoothly.

For the most part, the stories revolve around motherhood and family, strife, heartache and forgiveness. The stories take place in modern day Africa as well as in America. An infertile American couple who want to adopt an African baby, a grandmother from Ghana whose son married an American woman and left for the States to raise his family, an African woman whose twin and soul mate was killed too young; these are just some of the people inside these stories.

I highly recommend *The Civilized World* to fans of quiet women's fiction. This is a book will slowly draw you into its pages and that you will savor as you read. It's not a long book, but at 226 pages, I wish it was longer. The author makes you care about these characters.

On a final note, I love this book cover. It's simple yet beautiful, just like the book itself.

"What did it feel like to have such a strong sense of home, a bond to a place as strong as an umbilical cord?"  
p. 63, *The Civilized World*

read my full review here

<http://thebookworm07.blogspot.com/201...>

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## Neil Crossan says

This is a collection of related stories of women related to Africa in some way that would endlessly annoy me with their complaining. Am I supposed to like people? I'm not PRO-home invasion, but just because something really bad happened to you doesn't make you a good person ... Janice. And if I found my mother-in-law trying to 'shape' my infant child's head to Ghanaian expectations you can make damn sure my mother in law wouldn't be with my infant daughter unsupervised. And Ophelia is clearly spending WAY too much time alone. I didn't find these women compelling except in the sense it compelled me to put the book down and read about less annoying people. Maybe I am outside of this book's target audience but what are these women struggling with? If 'feeling safe' is such an issue then maybe you should get out of Central Africa. I grew to like Adjoa by the end of the book and I wonder if this book was re-envisioned with Adjoa as the first person character throughout would I have enjoyed it more?

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## Heather says

This book is a collection of stories intertwined together by people and places. Adjoa is a young Ghana woman, trying to make a better life for herself and her family. Janice is a single American woman who has been working in Africa most of her adult life. Comfort is a widowed Ghanaian woman with a son and new grandbaby in Washington D.C., and daughter-in-law Linda has her own issues. Ophelia is a young childless wife hoping and trying for a baby.

I loved this book. The characters and their different stages in their lives held my interest. This story followed the characters at different points in their lives over an 8-10 year period. Some of the characters were more likable than others, and I found that I liked different characters at different times, and was less fond of them at other times of their lives.

Much of this book really revolves around motherhood: desiring it, striving for it, achieving it or not. There is pain, the disillusionment that often comes with age, as you discover that life is not all milk and honey after all. There is friendship and love, and there is forgiveness.

A beautiful, stirring melange of stories, I would strongly recommend this one to everyone.

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## Jill says

What does it mean to need forgiveness – and what does it take to forgive? In this extraordinary literary debut, Susi Wyss examines this question through the intersecting lives of five unforgettable women, whose lives intersect in unexpected ways.

The opening and closing chapters bookmark these connected short stories – not unlike *The Imperfectionists* or *Olive Kitteridge*. We meet Adjoa, a Ghanaian woman living in the Ivory Coast. She is a trusted masseur to Madame Janice, a seemingly affluent American working in Africa for the health service. Adjoa reflects, "Madame Janice had choices – she could live anywhere she wanted yet she didn't seem to belong anywhere." The desire for home is a theme that comes back, again and again.

Adjoa has a dream: to return home to Ghana from the Ivory Coast and open a beauty parlor. That dream

eventually sees the light of day when she opens the bustling Precious Brother Salon, the “cleanest, friendliest, and most welcoming in the city.” It’s a place where lives begin to intersect and where a feeling of camaraderie grows among the women. In important ways, it, too, is “home” in the deepest sense of the word.

The Ghanaian “auntie” Comfort comes there, a well-meaning busybody who has recently arrived back home after a disastrous visit to America to visit her son and his white American daughter-in-law, Linda. Linda has her own demons; she is hiding a secret from her past and she also is unable to navigate the cultural differences between her world and that of her husband.

The feeling of vulnerability – the fearfulness that one must face and conquer – is something that affects each of these women, white or black. Each has been the victim of crime, loss or betrayal. Each has to make the journey to a psychic or physical place that is her own “home.” And each is seeking a form of self-forgiveness. The author implies that the intrinsic qualities that connect women to each other far outweighs the cultural distinctions that might set them apart.

When Janice adopts an Ethiopian daughter, symbolically merging her American and African lives, she vows to help her daughter “grow into a fearless and self-assured woman, despite the reality of a world that could knock you off your feet when you least suspected it.” Hope and growth and fresh starts in life emerge victorious. I thoroughly enjoyed this debut, an affirmation that, in life, “there are no accidents.”

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### **Alexa says**

I loved it - one of the best books I read this year. Definitely not Precious Ramotswe's Africa, but still sweet and moving in parts, gripping and shocking in others. I couldn't put it down, and I've already recommended it to other readers.

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### **Lisa Hura says**

The Civilized World: A Novel in Stories describes itself as “a novel in stories.” To some extent, I think that’s true of all novels, but it is very pronounced in The Civilized World. Each chapter is a distinct story, although the stories overlap in a way that gives a much broader picture. Like real life, you don’t know every detail of every story, which sometimes leaves you wondering about how things happened. The stories draw you in — they are interesting on their own, and they leave you wondering how and when they will tie in with the first storyline.

The main characters in The Civilized World are all women; there are men that influence their lives, but the real driving force in the book is female. We start with the story of Adjoa. She is living in Abidjan, in the Ivory Coast, with her twin brother, Kojo, after leaving Ghana to find work. They are saving their money to return home and open a beauty salon, but Kojo is impatient, and his impatience leads to a lifetime of regret for Adjoa. One of Adjoa’s clients is Janice — in future stories, we learn more about Janice and the life she creates for herself. We learn about Comfort, her ties to Ghana and to her son in Washington, D.C. We meet



Linda and Ophelia. Their lives intersect in happy and unhappy ways.

One of my favorite stories was “A Modern African Woman,” about Comfort and her daughter-in-law, Linda, in the US. Comfort has come to help out after the birth of her grandchild and the differences between her life and Linda’s are startling. I have seen friends of mine struggle with meddling mothers-in-law, who come from a different era and different child-rearing traditions, but those conflicts are nothing compared to an African woman who is concerned about re-shaping her grandson’s head, and an American woman who worries about formula and SIDS. The husband and father, Ekow, is caught in the middle but he is really inconsequential; the women need to work out their own differences.

“There Are No Accidents,” the final story in the book, brings our characters full circle. Here, the final elements of the story come together and we learn few final truths. It’s an excellent wrap-up, illustrating that there are some things you never really escape.

This is an interesting format for a book. It tells the reader some parts of the story; other parts take place behind the scenes. The stories are tied together by the women who drive the book forward and author Susi Wyss made me feel connected to them, even those — maybe especially those — leading very different lives.

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### **Elina Salminen says**

A book that starts unassumingly and has awkward colonialist overtones, but also in the end brings together seemingly unrelated short stories in a satisfying way. A nice, easy read.

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### **Kasey Jueds says**

I loved, loved, loved this book. I was so glad I had lots of time in the past couple of days to read it (thank you, jury duty), because I really didn't want to put it down. The characters seemed, by the time I got to the end, like people I actually knew--plus reading this gave me that wonderful contradictory feeling of wanting to finish (because you want to know what happens, and you just want to keep reading) and not wanting to finish (because then the amazing experience of being inside the book will be over). Anyway, these are stories, but linked, so in some ways it reads like a novel, like an incredibly satisfying whole. The shifting perspectives--each story is narrated by a different character--felt especially engaging to me, since you see all the women both from the inside and the outside, the way others see them and the way they view themselves. The cover image, of a beautiful braid, seems perfect to me now I've finished; the book is, in part, about how the lives of the characters are woven together across time and distance--and that, as a theme, is very moving to me. I was fascinated by the book's focus on things I didn't know and haven't experienced (African culture and politics, specifically) and, at the same time, stirred by what did seem familiar and true to me about the things the characters hope for and fear, all their questions about relationships, children, and the meaning of home. The book is so gracefully written, too: the prose doesn't call attention to itself but, in a quiet way, works itself inside you--and because of that quietness the more emotional moments and images seem to reach out and slap you in the face. I heard Susi Wyss read recently and she's working on a novel, which makes me very happy: something to look forward to.

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