



# A Different Sun

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## **A Different Sun** Elaine Neil Orr

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. When Emma Davis reads the words of Isaiah 6:8 in her room at a Georgia women's college, she understands her true calling: to become a missionary. It is a leap of faith that sweeps her away to Africa in an odyssey of personal discovery, tremendous hardship, and profound transformation.

For the earnest, headstrong daughter of a prosperous slave owner, living among the Yoruba people is utterly unlike Emma's sheltered childhood—as is her new husband, Henry Bowman. Twenty years her senior, the mercurial Henry is the object of Emma's mad first love, intensifying the sensations of all they see and share together. Each day brings new tragedy and heartbreak, and each day, Emma somehow finds the hope, passion, and strength of will to press onward. Through it all, Henry's first gift to Emma, a simple writing box—with its red leather-bound diary and space for a few cherished keepsakes—becomes her closest confidant, Emma's last connection to a life that seems, in this strange new world, like a passing memory.

A tale of social and spiritual awakening; a dispatch from a difficult era at home and abroad; and a meditation on faith, freedom, and desire, *A Different Sun* is a captivating fiction debut.

## **A Different Sun Details**

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Author : Elaine Neil Orr

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## **From Reader Review A Different Sun for online ebook**

### **Kim H. says**

The only disappointing thing about A Different Sun by Elaine Orr was that it ended.

Orr's characters become close friends to the reader in this vivid tale of a missionary's wife who travels with him to Africa in the 1850's. Full of evocative descriptions and emotions, I found myself compelled to keep reading in order to find out what would happen to Emma and the African "family" and friends she makes along her journey. When the novel ended in what felt like mid-stream, I wanted more.

What happens to the young couple? To their child? The future is left up to the reader's imagination. What you come to know of Emma, Henry, and the others will help you as you imagine the way their lives unfold--perhaps that is enough.

I'm thankful to Goodreads' FirstReads for the ARC I won that allowed me to read this wonderful novel. I will recommend this to my book club as a future selection!

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### **Nora Gaskin Esthimer says**

Lovely writing. This book is one that will stay with you. It is an intriguing look at a time and place, with a well-drawn and compelling heroine.

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### **Donna Dayer says**

I loved this book. I quickly stopped comparing it to Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible because it stands alone. It is beautifully written and I could barely wait to see what would happen in situation after situation. The fact that it had a strong historical component and was written by Elaine Neil Orr who grew up in Nigeria herself gave it stunning authenticity. It was a very quick read for me. I did not want to read it a few pages at a time, but wanted to wait until I could devote myself to reading it through, large sections at a time. The denouement was everything I had hoped and more and came as a surprise in a way that spoke volumes of truth that both Christians and non-Christians alike might use to illuminate their own lives. Emma's matured realization of herself and her family's role in America's slave-holding, and regarding the slave trade itself evoked how difficult it is to grasp that we are not always as evolved, as righteous, as good as we hold ourselves up to be, that prejudice is obstinate and generational but that intelligence and hard worn experience with placing oneself in another's culture can have intellectual and healing powers to those whose spirits prove ultimately to be strong and brave enough to learn from these experiences. It was a progression beautifully captured.

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### **Laura Davenport says**

Chillingly beautiful. This novel filled me with compassion for its characters, admiration for their faith and

pioneering, and a sense of spiritual wonderment I hadn't experienced since reading Toni Morrison's Beloved. I can't say enough good things about this book. It brings Africa to life and makes me want to move there.

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### **Rebekah says**

I found this book to be beautiful and moving. Seeing Africa through the eyes of Emma made me long to be there with her myself. The interwoven tale of Uncle Eli and her own Homecoming were touching and brilliant.

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### **Melissa Pritchard says**

I've given a blurb for Elaine Neil Orr's novel *A DIFFERENT SUN*, and I meant every word of praise. It is a compelling story, finely researched, delicately told, compassionate and heartfelt. It has a quality I treasure, that of being like one of the "good, old-fashioned novels" I grew up reading and being shaped by...there is no emphasis on pyrotechnic language, the author does not draw attention to herself through stylistic embellishments, instead, she quietly attends to the life of Emma Davis, a 19th century American missionary wife who travels with her husband to Africa - a young woman who learns deep lessons of love and endurance from the very people she had assumed she was crossing an ocean to teach - I recommend this novel to anyone who loves being cast under the spell of a time and place lost to us, with a woman at its center, at its heart, as contemporary and as alive as you or I.

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### **Shannon says**

*A Different Sun* is an epic, atmospheric and compelling a novel as *A Passage to India* mixed with something of a mid-1800's version of *Cry, The Beloved Country*. Set in the slave South, the novel follows the life of Emma Davis, a native of Georgia, but no Scarlett O'Hara. Emma feels called to mission work and dreams of traveling to the Africa of her imagination gathered from stories of a beloved slave.

As fate would have it she meets Henry Bowman, who like Emma is called to missionary work and is soon wedded and bound for Yorubaland (Nigeria) in West Africa. Not surprisingly, upon arrival Emma is overwhelmed by West Africa and immediately takes to her new home. Her husband, however, is afflicted by a variety of ailments and is restless to go in search of more challenging missionary work. He challenges her desire to build a church and does not approve of her friendships with the locals.

Indeed, Emma finds herself in a netherworld of her past and her present. She has unintentionally stepped from one world where white people own black people in a rigid caste system, forbidding them to learn to read or write, depriving them of family relationships and where they are bought and sold as livestock and into another where black people are their own people, with their own culture, with its own community and social structure, they are property owners and possess a wisdom of which she had heretofore lived entirely ignorant.

Truly, Emma faces an overwhelming realization that her life was never what she thought it to be; nothing she believed in or accepted is rooted in truth. Truly, a precipice that few ever face in their lifetime and yet here is

this young woman, virtually alone with her discovery. Faced with her realization and as she begins to work through her conflicting emotions the reader is able to watch as Emma becomes a woman. Her life now set against the captivating majesty of Africa Emma never falters from her dedication to work as a missionary. Indeed, the novel very convincingly portrays the struggle and hardship of that calling.

As a student of African History I was anxious for Orr to address how the move to West Africa had affected Emma's ideas of slavery, it is after all an institution she grew up surrounded by and accepted without question. When Orr does address these issues she does so in a way that I found not only original but profoundly thought provoking for the reader. Emma comes to realize that slavery dehumanizes not only the slave, but the slave trader, and the slave owner, including herself and all her family, because it is not and can never be a benevolent institution, nor is it in keeping with the teachings of the Bible.

*A Different Sun* is a masterfully written novel that manages to deal with the atrociousness that was the West African slave trade through the eyes of a compassionate young woman who has slowly discovered, not only the truth, but of her part in it. In truth, Orr takes a political complex subject and makes it human and approachable and in so doing it loses its taboo. It is through Emma's looking back and looking into the future that Orr is able to compare and contrast the two worlds of the slave south and West Africa. In this examination Orr so skillfully leads her reader through a discovery of life's intimacies and losses, wonderful moments of a character's personal insight and the appreciation of the majestic natural beauty of Africa, a land that God created. I hope her beautiful narrative of this wonderfully diverse continent will inspire those that have the pleasure of reading her novel.

When I was reading *A Different Sun* I was struck by how masterfully and skillfully Orr had presented the struggles of a fictional character against a larger historical backdrop. I have to admit I nearly fell out of my chair when I finally discovered that these characters actually existed. Lurana Davis Bowen (Emma), was indeed the daughter of a Georgia plantation owner, who married Thomas Jefferson Bowe (Henry) and travelled as missionaries West Africa in the mid nineteenth-century. Indeed, they were the first Southern Baptist missionaries in Africa. Orr relied heavily on Lurana's journal for her narrative, but the novel's wonderfully descriptive and transporting description of Africa is due to Elaine Orr's own upbringing in Nigeria.

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### **Barbara says**

It's not easy these days to find a novel that offers both a good story and elegant prose, but Elaine Orr's *A Different Sun* does just that. I was hooked on Emma's story from the first pages and followed her transition from naivete to awareness, from child to woman through page after page of compelling narrative. Her growing understanding of the African people, language, and traditions, and finally her acceptance and practice of the religion developed convincingly. Also satisfying was the realization of her own complicity as the child of slave-owners, particularly in regard to Uncle Eli and the power of the gift he gave to her. *A Different Sun* is not an easy read nor is it a quick one, but it is most definitely worth picking up and delving into for a rich experience.

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### **Theresa says**

I am going to read this book over again.

In the historical note in the back of the book, the author tells about her desire to write about the first Southern Baptist missionary couple to Africa after reading and getting inspiration from the wife's diary.

*"I first imagined a work of creative nonfiction in which I would seek to expand Lurana's story, using all the historical evidence I could find, as well as my own experience. I found instead that fiction was the best medium for conveying not Lurana's story per se but my own vision of what might have happened when a young, well-to-do woman from Georgia fell in love with a former Texas calvaryman and traveled to Yorubland. What motivated her? What did she long for? What were her limitations? How did her marriage evolve under the duress brought on by illness and profound loss?"*

Elaine Orr's attempt at answering these questions (and more), I believe, from a fictional standpoint, were quite successful! "A Different Sun" is about a young bride, Emma, who accompanies her missionary husband to Africa.

"A Different Sun" is not only a missionary-to-Africa story, it is also a novel about marriage and survival amidst hardship. It includes themes on slavery, tolerance, and inter-cultural relationships. It develops minor themes such as variety within cultures and learning to adapt to a foreign society's customs, religion, superstitions and missionary zeal, and human frailty and weakness... and portrays challenges within ever-more-expanding themes such as friendship and loneliness, temptation, illness and bearing children in a foreign land.

Elaine Neil Orr, a child herself of missionary parents and a professor of English and native born in Nigeria, writes insightfully, competently and engagingly (where DID she get her style from? hence my need to give this a second read in future), about Emma and Henry Bowman, missionaries to Africa in the 1850's. At first I wasn't sure I would be able to progress with the novel but the more I read, the more I found I wanted to read.

As the novel continues we are impressed with the love of Africa and its people that grows on Emma, but the reader also can't help but wonder, "why does Henry seem to treat his African native servant, Jacob, with more respect than his own wife?" "what is this pull that Uncle Eli seems to have on Emma's childhood memories, and the corresponding link with her life in Africa?"

*"My own parents were missionaries. I knew how large and complex our lives were. But in this young woman's diary I found sentences so compressed, they seemed nearly to explode.*

Elaine Orr's writing is lovely and you will not regret reading this novel, although you may find it frustrating at times to be able to read it in sympathy with the characters' foibles and decisions.

By the end of the book, I liked Henry and Emma a lot better. They had grown and learned from their experiences. Rather than be defeated by the challenges they faced, they learn to adjust and take stock of where they are and where they want to be. Henry learns to be more patient. Emma learns humility and about hypocrisy.

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**Octavia Randolph says**

Some writers of historical fiction are masters of capturing a time period, others at transporting us to a certain place. Rare are those novelists who are equally skilled at both, as Elaine Neil Orr is. *A Different Sun* is the story of Emma Davis Bowman, who we first meet in 1840, a child of eight thirsting for knowledge and just become painfully cognizant of the injustices in her privileged world: her parents are slave-holders in rural Georgia. She yearns to be educated beyond the social pleasantries expected of a young woman of her class; she yearns even more for direction in her life, for the earnest work of redemption through service. (The novel is inspired by the vestigial diaries kept by the first Southern Baptist missionaries to Africa, and the author's own experiences as daughter to modern day missionaries in Nigeria.)

The act of writing, and the sacredness of that art, is a theme from the beginning. Young Emma is at last given the paper, pen, and ink she has asked for. As she begins to make a journal, she looks at the words she has written and thinks, "This is mine." As a wedding gift, the handsome preacher who has won her presents her with a beautifully crafted letter box with a little drop down writing surface and secret compartment. This, and her diary within, becomes a focal point to Emma's life in Africa.

*A Different Sun* has three narrators, and the main body of the book covers the two years the Bowmans spend in Africa as missionaries. Emma herself tells much of the story; her husband Henry Bowman, an enigmatic, charismatic and deeply troubled former Texas Ranger, is the second narrator, and the third is an African, Jacob, who serves as assistant, guide, and friend to them both in their adopted land. Much to her credit, Orr keeps each very much a child of their own time, sex, and country. There are few things more disappointing in a work of historical fiction than to have that fictive dream shattered, when suddenly the illusion is destroyed by a character's having an all-too modern viewpoint. Orr is equally skilled depicting men as women; Henry and Jacob tell of their lives and feelings in their own way and with an admirable authenticity. She also has a light touch with description, everything economical and wonderfully fresh. Here is the newly-wed Emma, on way to taking ship to Africa, encountering a big Eastern city for the first time:

"In Boston all of the houses were tall and smashed together like books on a shelf. The horses seemed to prance higher as if they had no where to go but up."

And here is Jacob, recounting the horror of being captured and sold as a slave as a child:

"Ah. That day from boyhood. At first, he thought it might be some spirit festival he had fallen into - the way he tripped and was pulled into the air, as if a great bird had captured him. The world went upside down, all the trees coming out of the sky instead of up from the ground. His head spun and he screamed. Those ugly men shouting in rude tongues....He had fallen into a very bad world."

*A Different Sun* is the story of a missionary adventure, yet it wears its religion lightly. There is no smug moralizing. The three main characters are ardently, quietly Christian in their own ways, suitable to their own sensibilities. Henry Bowman turned to preaching in reparation after a wild and violent youth of soldiering and carousing. Because we now know much about the harshness imposed upon native peoples by whites trying to Christianize them, Henry's innate kindness, respect, and humaneness comes as a graceful and pleasant surprise. Intelligent and passionate Emma seeks a life of service, the spectre of her father's slave-holding always over her. And Jacob readily embraced the faith of the English who had redeemed him from his slavery and educated him.

Emma, Henry, and Jacob are exceptional personalities, fully drawn with rich interior lives we are granted access to. Each faces profound moral challenges, and are guided by their faith through the greatest temptations and trials. But even the minor characters - "Uncle" Eli, an old slave on her parent's plantation who Emma realizes has set her life's course; and in Africa, the local, often times comical, king and his harem

of wives; the native healer, the powerful Iyalode, a village woman of wealth and sagacity; and the native children all leave a deep impression on the reader. As does the wild and demanding African landscape itself, by turns parched and flooding with seasonal rains.

I had wished for one thing more of this book, and that is a map of Africa as it was known in the 1860's, which I wish the publisher had included. A few physical benchmarks showing the Bowman's progress through what was then known as "the Dark Continent" would have been welcome and often referred to.

This is a story of surpassing beauty. As the book nears its conclusion, it tunes to a higher and sharper key, with language so intense that the imagery shimmers. It is a tour de force of imagination, emotion, and spiritual longing.

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### **Kathleen Thompson says**

Elaine Neil Orr's *A DIFFERENT SUN* is a zinger of a historical novel about a zinger of a missionary to Africa! Fans of Orr's memoir set in Yoruba will be familiar with this amazing setting of Yoruba again, albeit fiction. But they may also be surprised, and delighted, to have any preconceived notions of the word "missionary" turned topsy-turvy.

Emma marries Henry Bowman, a Baptist missionary, and they go from Georgia to Yoruba to "save" the people of Yoruba. Emma is certain that she knows exactly how to best assist Henry. The loss of her own child and an unexpected affinity for Jacob, their house helper in Ijaye, intervene. It is she, ultimately, who needs "saving." Jacob says it best, "You speak of God as if you are an only child. Ah!"

Orr manages to inhabit the characters with the unique voice and sensibility required of each character. In so doing she manages to set forth universal truths rarely set down in fiction. One example is as follows: "In Emma flowed the tide of sorrow women feel when husbands tout their power but expose only weakness."

Fellow writers will identify with the importance of Emma's precious writing box, and how it, at one point, becomes the focal point of written conversation between her and Jacob.

And get ready, readers! You will love reading about Emma's emotions of a physical attraction so delicately understated, so sensitive and needy, yet rightly kept in check. Jacob is the catalyst for Emma's own salvation with the rituals of his culture and religion.

More lasting than a fantastic read is the scholarship that undergirds the fiction in this novel. Orr, already well known for her published work as a scholar, has an impressive listing of her research on this topic of missionaries in Africa.

Scholarship, however, is not distracting or heavy as it can be in some fiction set in a past time; on the contrary, it seems as natural as Orr's varied voices. And what better credential for writing about another country, another culture, than to have lived there?

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### **Jamie says**

This book is full of beauty, and yet some difficult truths. It is deeply personal and you feel fully integrated into the story and a part of the characters' lives. I enjoyed it completely.

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### **Marjorie Hudson says**

Elaine Orr's *A Different Sun* takes a 19th century woman, a child of slave-owners, and opens her heart and mind to African people in Africa, fracturing the easy assumptions and moral questions of her time. Traveling with her missionary husband, Emma lives among the Yoruba people, with a Muslim man for a helper, and Yoruba women as spiritual guides. This novel turns her life on its head, letting in the light of a different sun, a brighter sun. Beautifully written, compassionate, and accurate, the novel draws on historical research into the life of a missionary woman and the author's heart-home in Africa, where she was raised, a young white American, among Yoruba people. A truly satisfying tale in a morally complex world.

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### **Richard Goodman says**

Elaine Orr's *A Different Sun* is absolutely exquisite. I haven't read a book this skillfully and convincingly written in a long time. Highly recommended.

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### **Peggy Payne says**

This is for anyone who loved *The Poisonwood Bible*: what it's like to be living in a remote jungle village when your missionary husband starts to unravel.

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