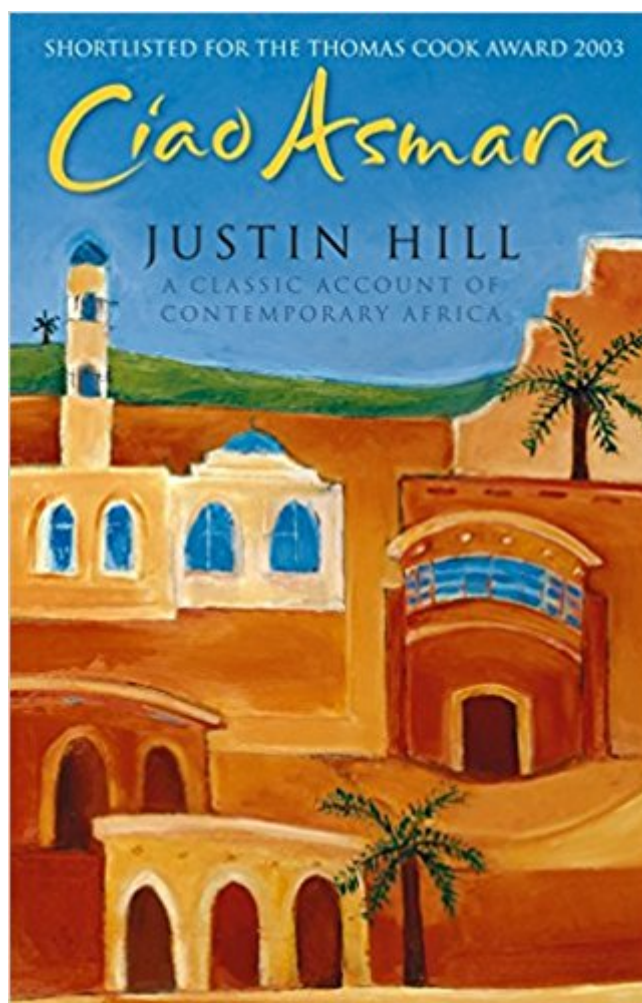


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Ciao Asmara: A Classic Account Of Contemporary Africa



Synopsis

Asmara is the capital of Eritrea. It is a surreally Italian city at the center of an ex-Italian colony that has, for more than ten years, been at war with its neighbor Ethiopia, which claims sovereignty over Eritrea. Amidst the broken palaces of the late Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, nomadic desert encampments, and war-devastated towns, Justin Hill found a people remarkably resistant to everything fate has thrown at them.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Hill leaves Britain to become a teacher in Eritrea. Culturally, tiny Eritrea marks a transition point between the Middle East and Africa, its language Semitic, its spirit African. Because of Eritrea's years as an Italian colony on the strategic Horn of Africa, its capital city, Asmara, has an unexpectedly rich art-deco architectural heritage. Eritrea had long sought independence from neighboring Ethiopia, and in 1993 it achieved its goal; but Ethiopia could not accept the plebiscite. In 1996 Hill plunged headlong into Eritrean life, sharing the privations of a nation at war but also finding great hopes and dreams among its people. Hill traces the country's history from its fabled biblical past through its subjugation first to European, then African domination. Hill does not idealize those he encounters, and he tells graphic stories of female mutilation practiced by women upon each other, mothers on daughters. Although this is an autobiographical account, Hill focuses his text on Eritreans themselves, not on himself. Photographs help the reader visualize the exotic settings.

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A tapestry woven with fact and testament, a captivating memoir tinged with tragedy. •GOOD BOOK GUIDE
The book is a love letter to the country he had to leave...The tone is low-key, but the story is anything but that: a brief and beautiful moment of calm in between storms •SUNDAY TIMES
Hill is a great and passionate storyteller, and his account is both readable and important •INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY
Exquisite...CIAO ASMARA tells of hope deferred... His valediction has all the bittersweet anger and gratitude of Orwell's escape from Barcelona •INDEPENDENT

Author Justin Hill has written a compelling book on his time and experiences as a teacher in Eritrea prior to the 1998-2000 Border war with Ethiopia. He travelled to Eritrea to work as an English teacher and while the book mentions the capital of the State of Eritrea, he also spent some time travelling in Eritrea, working in the beautiful mountain top town of Keren, as well as Massawa on the Red Sea coast. He describes his encounters with everyday people in Eritrea and the places he visits elaborately and the reader can picture these places he visits quite vividly, plus the people with whom he relates with. He writes with a very observant eye and this detail manifests itself throughout the book, making the story all that more interesting, from the first page to the last page. He describes people, places cafes, rooms and the surrounding countryside so vividly. This I feel captivates the reader and for anyone who has travelled to Eritrea and experienced its contrasts between urban Asmara and the countryside within, it is a great read. I particularly liked this book, as I spent 6 years living and working in Eritrea and was able to experience the country and its people in the aftermath of the Border war. The serene beauty of the mountain town of Keren and the heavy stifling heat of Massawa, contrast with the capital, Asmara and its fascinating array of period buildings and architecture. Justin's account of his time in Eritrea probably best describe why people who visit this timeless land tend to fall in love with the country and its people. The beauty of its countryside and the difference between urban living in the main towns and the countryside. It tends to cast a spell over the visitor. Like my experiences, Justin's eventual departure from Eritrea as the Border war erupted was coated with reluctance and tinged with sadness. His frantic departure was a high point to the book as it comes to a close. I was captivated by his time and shared his sadness at the need to depart and say goodbye to the many people he had forged strong friendships with. Like Justin, I had journeyed to Eritrea for a reason; he came to teach and I came to assist with the landmine and unexploded ordnance problem. In summary a well written book, rich in descriptions of places and people. A fascinating journey to an amazing land. Well done, Justin Hill, a great life experience and a story well told!

Looking at a map of Africa, this country with so much coast line should be prime real estate. There should be harbors, hotels and snorkeling galore. Unfortunately, what it has had has been war. Maybe even more to come. Last year I read Michela Wong's "I Didn't Do It For You" which details Eritrea's very sad history. Justin Hill's "Ciao Asmara" brings the country much more to life. His light prose style belies strong content and incisive observations. Through his experiences teaching (teachers chase the students into the classrooms with sticks; class size may be 75 students; with only a few rooms schools have 2 shifts) making friends among the those from "The Field" (who seem to have something like a post partum depression) and meeting various long and short term travelers (from those studying rare fish to those seeking a retirement home), you learn what it is like in the aftermath of a 30 year war. Not only have the people been physically and emotionally damaged, education is hard to come by, and even if you have it, with the economy in shambles, you can't use it. Those who are best off are those with relatives abroad and the veterans who have managed to secure gov't jobs. The book has some photos that leave you wanting more. You can get more elsewhere on the net (esp. the Art Deco buildings) by searching Eritrea. The description of Hill's evacuation is great ("Don't jerk me around!" "Fill out the BLUE FORMS!" "I can't deal with this.") and how luggage maximums are reduced by the hour. If, like me, you're like "travel" books that introduce you to different people more than the food or sites, this book is for you. Other good reads describing day to day life include South of the Clouds (China), The Califf's House (Casablanca) and Es Cuba.

I noticed this book by chance on a library shelf while searching specifically for something else; it looked interesting, so I got it out as well. Pretty comprehensive look at post-independence Eritrea at a grasp-able level, including photos. Would make a great book to take along while traveling, etc.

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