

Swimming in Air

Alone together across Africa



BOOK CLUB KIT

PARKER GRIFFON

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

In the late 1980s, I moved from Silicon Valley to Munich, then in West Germany, to start a company. A physicist with far more confidence than my background warranted, I didn't even speak the language. On the same day, a linguist named Vivian moved from the German colony in Argentina to Munich to start a business that would give her independence.

When I needed a German teacher, and she needed a temporary gig to support herself while she built her business, I found more than a German teacher. With an uncanny business sense, she became my mentor in navigating the complexities of European business. Then she became more still.

Both carrying emotional baggage that kept us from acknowledging the depth of our relationship, we agreed: no commitment. Our careers came first.

After a year together, I had to return to the US. Vivian refused to follow me because there was nothing for her there except me. Our relationship reached a breaking point. Unable to stay together and unwilling to break up, we took one last gamble, putting everything on hold for a year to backpack from Cairo to Cape Town on twenty dollars a day. We encountered child soldiers, witch doctors, and families with almost nothing except extraordinary generosity. All of it challenged what we believed about love, independence, and what gives life meaning.

In Malawi, exhausted by the travel and unsure of our future as a couple, Vivian sent me back to Europe. Alone, living out of a tent with only sixty dollars left, she contracted malaria and faced the cost of independence.

Swimming in Air is a literary memoir about the half-truths we tell ourselves, the unexpected places that change us, and the process of seeing what was always hidden in plain sight.

Warm regards,

Parker Griffon

BEHIND THE SCENES

Vivian Falkenberg

Vivian is a 25 German-Argentine linguist who grew up in the tight-knit German colony of Buenos Aires, educated at the Goethe Schule, and shaped by a family history of men who wandered. Speaking five languages, she moves to Germany to build her business as a translator and interpreter. Her work for large deals and government-level negotiations, allows her to build an understanding of complex business negotiations that is unusual for someone her age. She is striking, direct, and completely disinterested in being rescued by anyone.

Her independence is not a pose. It was constructed carefully, over years, from specific losses she rarely discusses. She will tell Parker what she thinks before she tells him what she feels, and she will tell him what she feels only when she has run out of alternatives. She is the most capable person in almost any room she enters, and she knows it without needing to say so



BEHIND THE SCENES

Parker Griffon

Parker is 31, a physicist from Illinois farm country who moved to Germany to start a software company, a country he has barely visited and whose language he doesn't speak. He is curious, slightly reckless and perennially restless. He has organized his emotional life around the conviction that love is a con, a story people tell themselves to explain choices they'd have made anyway.



Mac

Mac is the German owner of a Munich tearoom. He crossed the Sahara after losing his wife without warning and has been living deliberately ever since. He is funny, slightly broken in the ways he has made peace with the world, and the only person in Parker and Vivian's orbit who can see them clearly enough to tell them the truth. His English is somewhat imprecise, but his advice is not.

PARKER GRIFFON

THE TIME AND PLACE

Germany & The Cold War

In 1986, half the German population were alive to experience the destruction of World War II. The Cold War isn't just a geopolitical chess match between superpowers; it is a lived reality defined by a wall, divided families, and the constant presence of foreign armies on both sides of the border.

There is regular tension between the younger Germans who want foreign, and especially nuclear forces out of the country, and the older generation who only want to live their lives in peace.



Demonstration Against US Nuclear Missiles, Munich, 1986

Munich

In 1986, Munich is a city of balancing its identity as a traditional "village of a million people" with its rise as a high-tech powerhouse. It is a year of peak Cold War atmosphere, punctuated by the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion which rained radioactive materials on the landscape. It was earning its nickname of the "Isar Valley," a play on the name Silicon Valley.



Siemens, Munich
Alvaro Franco, WikiCommons

THE TIME AND PLACE

Sub-Saharan Africa

While sub-Saharan Africa is a land as diverse as Europe was in the 1500s, broadly speaking in 1987, it is a region navigating a "lost decade" of post-colonial economic hardship, the peak of the Cold War's "proxy" conflicts, and the explosive growth of an incurable wasting disease called AIDs but locally named "slim."

Against that backdrop you find warm, giving people who have much to teach those who would listen.



South Africa

In 1988, South Africa is a nation nearing what everyone expected to be a breaking point. It is the height of the "State of Emergency," a period where the Apartheid government use absolute police and military power to maintain control, while internal and international pressure increase. This leads to a siege mentality among the white population.



THE TIME AND PLACE



Lucho Rizzo, Wikicommons

Argentina

Five years after the end of the military dictatorship and the “Dirty War,” the initial euphoria of freedom has been replaced by the grim reality of hyperinflation and social unrest. In 1988, Argentina is a nation struggling to stabilize its young democracy while being strangled by a massive economic crisis.

Argentines themselves focus on family, friends and living a full life, all the while maintaining a slyly comical but cynical view of their country.

San Francisco

In 1988, while Silicon Valley is booming to the south, San Francisco is not yet a “tech city.” People move there for the culture, the climate, and the activism, not necessarily for a job at a startup. San Francisco is a city in a state of profound transition, with rising prices, caught between the lingering idealism of the “Summer of Love” and the developing realities of the late 20th century as AIDS devastates the gay population of the city.



Ulli 2mecs, Wikicommons

FOOD & DRINK

MAKING THE EAST AFRICAN SAMOSA

A Literary Companion Guide

1. The Spiced Meat Filling

'Beef/Lamb'
Cumin, Turmeric, Chili
Scallions & Cilantro
Dry-fry filling; allow to cool completely.

2. Preparing the Wrapper

Cut thin pastry strips (like spring roll wrappers).

3. The Triangle Fold



4. Sealing the Edge

Apply 'Flour Glue' to seal edge tightly.

5. Frying to Golden Brown

Deep-fry at approx 350°F (175°C) until crisp.

MAKING AND SERVING THE EAST AFRICAN CHAPATI

A Literary Companion Guide

1. Prep the Dough (simplified)

Water, Flour, Oil
Basic Chapati Dough.
Knead a simple dough with flour, water, salt, and oil/ghee.

2. Layer and Coil

Coated with Oil/Ghee.
Brush rolled-out dough with oil/ghee. Roll into a rope, then coil into a tight spiral.

3. Rest and Flatten

Rested Spiral.
Let coils rest, then flatten into a disc with a rolling pin.

4. Dry-Fry and Garnish

Hot Pan, Touch of Oil.
Pan-fry with a touch of oil on both sides until golden and layered.

5. Utilitarian Serving

Instead of a loaf, serve East African Chapati. Stack multiple chapatis to keep warm.

6. Functional

Use as a Functional Utensil.
Reflecting the utilitarian nature of travel, use the chapati to scoop and eat food.



Images created by AI.

FOOD & DRINK

MAKING A SIMPLE DAWA COCKTAIL
A Literary Companion Guide (Simple Mixed)

1. The Base Preparation **2. The Alcohol and Ice**



Fresh Lime

Muddle one whole lime, cut into quarters, and 1 tablespoon of sugar in the glass.



Vodka

Add 60ml vodka and fill the glass with crushed ice.

3. The Quick Sweetener **4. Quick Stir and Serve**



Dawa Stick

Honey

Prepare a Dawa stick (or wooden muddler) coated in fresh honey.



Briefly stir all ingredients with the honeyed stick and serve immediately.



Image created by AI.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The questions below are organized by theme. Most clubs will not cover all of them in a single meeting. Choose the sections most relevant to your group's interests and use the follow-up prompts to go deeper when a question sparks discussion.

A note on approach: *Swimming in Air* is a memoir, not a novel. The events in it happened. Parker Griffon was a real person. Vivian Falkenberg was a real person. Please hold that thought and let it enrich the conversation.

Theme 1: Vivian

1. *Swimming in Air* is written in Parker's first person, but Vivian is its subject. How would you imagine her story if Vivian was writing in the first person?

↳ *Consider: What do we know about Vivian directly, and what do we only know through Parker's perception of her?*

2. Vivian speaks five languages. She says that thinks and feels differently in each language. What does this suggest about identity? Is there a 'true' self beneath the languages, or does language help create the self?

↳ *Has your own experience of code-switching, between professional and personal or between cultures or communities, for example, changed how you present yourself?*

3. Vivian watches the women in her family become dependent on men who eventually leave, and she makes a private decision not to repeat that pattern. Was her self-protective independence admirable, self-defeating, or both?

↳ *At what point, if any, did you feel her independence had crossed into self-limitation?*

4. Vivian's brother Tomas died in a violent accident when she was a girl, and she was injured in the same event. She builds a private cosmology around his survival in Ushuaia. How did this detail change your understanding of her?

↳ *What does the Ushuaia dream reveal about how children process tragedy?*

5. Vivian's character is shaped by her experiences growing up in the German colony in Argentina. How does this background influence her interactions with others, particularly Germans?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Theme 2: The Arrangement

1. Parker and Vivian agree early: careers first, no commitment. The arrangement feels deliberately considered. Did it feel honest to you, or like a sophisticated form of avoidance?

↳ *Have you ever made a similar arrangement, either formal or informal, with someone? Did it hold?*

2. What does Vivian and Parker's agreement suggest about the relationship between commitment and independence?

↳ *Is there a version of love that doesn't require surrendering one's independence?*

3. The armor begins to crack as they open themselves to each other — Parker's abusive childhood, Vivian's sexual assault, Tomas's death. Why does shared vulnerability accelerate intimacy? Is that acceleration trustworthy?

↳ *Consider whether vulnerability shared under pressure as honest as vulnerability chosen freely.*

4. When Parker is fired and asks Vivian to move to California, she refuses. He cannot stay in Germany; she will not leave. Is this a story about two people failing each other, or about two people honoring themselves? Can it be both?

↳ *Who, if anyone, did you think was right in this standoff?*

Theme 3: Mac and the Third Way

1. Mac has lost his wife suddenly, in her twenties. His advice, 'find a third way' comes from that specific grief. How does his loss give his counsel its authority? Would the same advice from someone who hadn't suffered feel different?

↳ *Think of a time when advice landed because of who was giving it rather than what was said.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

2. The Africa journey is not a solution to the problem Parker and Vivian face. It is a postponement, a repositioning, a way of getting far enough away that the problem looks different. Did this feel like wisdom or avoidance to you?

↳ *Are there problems that genuinely look different from a distance, and problems that only seem to?*

3. While Mac is a minor character in the book, he plays an outsized role in the story. What does it mean that the person who saves them is someone on the outside of their relationship? Is it because he can see what they can't?

↳ *Think of a time when someone outside a situation helped you see it more clearly than you could from the inside.*

Theme 4: Africa

1. The Africa journey takes place in 1986, pre-digital, on \$20 a day. How does the era shape your reading of the adventure? Could this journey happen today in the same way?

↳ *Consider what is lost and gained when a journey can be Googled in advance and documented in real time.*

2. In Uganda, Vivian discovers that her value in that culture is measured by how many children she has. How did she respond to this, and how did that response reveal her character?

↳ *How do we maintain respect for a culture whose values conflict with our own?*

3. The mountain gorillas in Zaire require eight days of waiting in amongst extreme poverty. What does protracted waiting for something you cannot accelerate do to a person, and to a relationship?

↳ *Think of your own experiences of waiting for something important. What did the waiting reveal?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

4. Parker's impetuousness regularly creates situations Vivian has to navigate. How did this dynamic make you feel toward each of them?

↳ *Did this dynamic change over the course of the book? Did their roles reverse in the end?*

Theme 5: Malawi and the Turn

1. Vivian asks for two weeks apart. What did you understand her to be protecting? What was she risking?

↳ *Have you ever needed distance from someone you loved in order to understand what you felt?*

2. Parker says 'I love you' as he leaves for the airport — at the worst possible moment, when it changes nothing about what is happening. Why do we say the most important things at the wrong time?

↳ *Could he have acted differently? Should he have?*

3. Alone in a tent with malaria and with \$60 left, Vivian understands what a life built entirely on independence actually costs. Parker cannot verify what happened inside her during those two weeks. He is assembling it from what she wrote that he read afterward, in fragments. How does this gap between his knowledge and her first-hand experience affect your reading of this section?

↳ *What does it mean to tell someone else's most important story from outside?*

4. Vivian's malaria forces her to confront the most basic version of the question she has been avoiding: what does it feel like to face the possibility of death alone?

↳ *Did this feel like a genuine turning point to you?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Theme 6: Commitment and the Risk of Love

1. The book's central question: Is the risk of love worth the cost? is asked explicitly and answered implicitly throughout. How did you answer it before reading the book? Has your answer changed?

↳ *Is the answer the same for everyone, or does it depend on what you've already survived?*

2. Parker spent most of his adult life convinced that love was a myth rooted in his abusive childhood. Vivian built her independence from witnessing the women around her being betrayed. Both of their defenses were rational responses to real experience. At what point did you feel their defenses stop protecting them and start limiting them?

3. Vivian says she loves Parker for the first time after malaria has clarified what she stands to lose. Parker says it for the first time at an airport, afraid he won't get another chance. These are very different conditions for the same declaration. Do the conditions under which we say the most important things affect their validity?

Theme 7: Memory, Memoir, and Vivian's Voice

1. Parker is writing about Vivian from memory, from grief, from love, and from the passage of nearly forty years. What are the obligations of a memoirist writing about someone who can no longer speak for themselves? Did you feel he honored those obligations?

↳ *Is there a version of honoring someone's memory that is also, inevitably, a form of claiming them?*

2. Vivian wrote a poem on the flight from Cairo to Nairobi. What did reading something in her direct voice — rather than Parker's rendering of her — do to your experience of her as a person in the book?

↳ *How do our feelings of Vivian change when we hear from her directly, not in dialogue?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

3. Parker wrote *Swimming in Air* in part to keep Vivian's memory from fading away, while he also acknowledges that she was just another person who lived and died. How does someone hold those two ideas your mind at the same time?

↳ *What then is the purpose of memoir? Is it therapy, a delusion or an act of respect?*

4. The book's title is *Swimming in Air*. The preface and the epilogue end with the statement: *This is air*. What does it mean? Do Vivian and Parker finally understand the air in which they swim?

Theme 8: Ushuaia

1. What was Parker's true motivation to travel to Ushuaia on the summer solstice? To keep a promise to Vivian? Because he thought he'd find her there. Something else?

↳ *What does it mean to keep a promise to someone who can no longer know you kept it?*

2. Vivian's childhood story about Tomas in Ushuaia is what a child tells herself to survive an unsurvivable loss. Did it strike you as deluded, as beautiful, or as something else entirely?

3. Parker writes home: "I am in Ushuaia. The Argentines call it *El Fin del Mundo*, the End of the World. Vivian isn't here. It's time to go home." He then puts on his backpack and heads north, hoping Vivian found Tomas. What did this ending leave you with? What questions remained?

↳ *Did it feel like a resolution, or like an acceptance that some things don't resolve?*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Parker Griffon is a former technology executive and currently a flight instructor. He lives with his family in Northern California.

PARKER GRIFFON

A romantic couple stands in a vast, open savanna landscape under a warm, golden sunset sky. In the foreground, two large, rugged backpacks are positioned side-by-side, suggesting a long journey or adventure. The couple is seen from behind, embracing each other, looking out over the horizon where acacia trees and distant mountains are silhouetted against the bright light. The overall mood is peaceful and adventurous.

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