Swimming in Air

Alone together across Africa



BOOK CLUB KIT

PARKER GRIFFON

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Swimming in Air is a story of unintentionally finding grace: A stranger's kindness. A chance meeting. Help you can never repay. We weren't looking for any of it. It found us anyway, as we learned to see the air we swam in.

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 and a half 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 people 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.

Warm regards,

Parker Griffon

BEHIND THE SCENES



Vivian Falkenberg

Vivian is a 25-year old 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, but sometimes feels the need to prove it.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Parker Griffon

Parker is a 31-year old physicist who moves to Germany from Silicon Valley 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 his wife suddenly died 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.

THE TIME AND PLACE



Demonstration Against US Nuclear Missiles, Munich, 1986

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.

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.



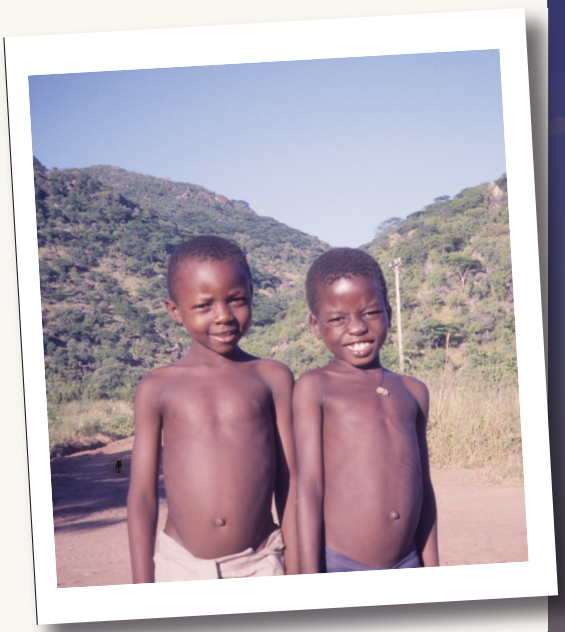
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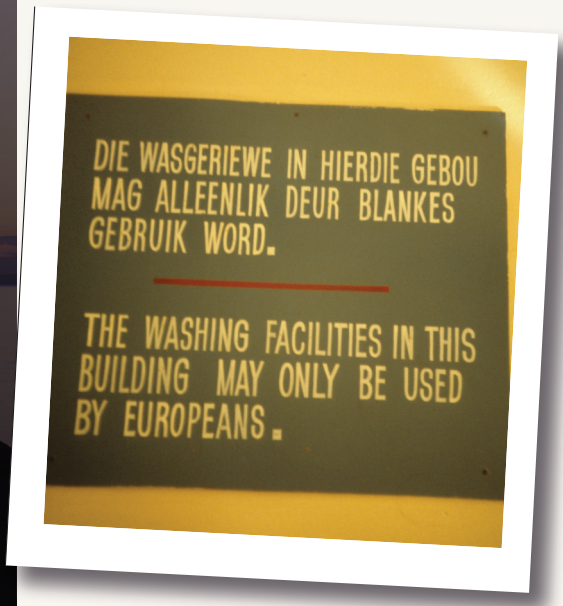
THE TIME AND PLACE

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 when the apartheid-based 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.

Argentinians 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 while AIDS devastates the gay population of the city.



Ulli 2mecs, Wikicommons

FOOD & DRINK









Images created by AI.

PARKER GRIFFON

FOOD & DRINK





Image created by AI.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A note on approach: *Swimming in Ai*r 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.

A note on content: The book includes childhood abuse, sexual assault, the violent death of a child, and serious illness. Some members of your group may have their own history with these subjects. Let people know at the start that they can pass on any question.

How to use this kit: You will probably not cover everything in one meeting. Choose the sections that fit your group and use the ↳ prompts to go deeper when a question sparks discussion.

Theme 1: **The Risk of Love**

- The author asks whether the risk of love is worth the cost. Before reading the book, how would you have answered that question? Has your answer changed?
  ↳ The answer varies based on a person's background. Should it.
- If when they first met, Parker had seen their future together, do you think he would have accepted his eventual pain in exchange for their time together? Would you?
  ↳ What does "All love ends in tragedy if you wait long enough," mean to you?
- Parker spent most of his adult life convinced that love was a myth rooted in his abusive childhood. Vivian built her independence from watching the women around her be abandoned. Frederick Buechner says fears can be reasonable and justified. When are fears reasonable and justified? When are they not?
  ↳ Were Parker and Vivian's fears reasonable and justified?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Theme 2: **Attention**

[**Facilitator**: this theme is written to connect with Wallace and Buechner's idea of "listening to your life," that the mundane and terrible events are worth paying attention to. The questions below are meant to work for members of any faith or none.]

- Where do Parker and Vivian fail to pay attention to each other, and where do they succeed? Is attention part of what the book means by love?
  ↳ Which scene shows the clearest example of one of them really seeing the other?
- How do the events (the abuse, Tomas's death, the malaria) in the book support or refute Buechner's view that in terrible things there is grace?
  ↳ Did Parker and Vivian find grace in these events, or close themselves off from them?
- The arrangement of "careers first, no commitment" is also a decision about where their attention goes. Were Vivian and Parker listening to their lives when they made that arrangement, or were they hiding from their lives?
  ↳ Were Vivian and Parker's motivations for that arrangement valid?
- The preface and the epilogue both end with the words "This is air." What do you think it means? Do Vivian and Parker finally see the air they swim in?
  ↳ If "air" is what surrounds us so constantly that we stop noticing it, what is the air in your own life?
  ↳ The phrase is a variation of David Foster Wallace's "*This Is Water*," another meditation on attention. Does the comparison help or get in the way?
- Do you agree with Buechner's assertion that terrible things are an opportunity to break through our fears and experience grace in life?
  ↳ What does grace mean to you?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Theme 3: **Vivian**

Parker writes in the first person, but Vivian is in many ways the book's subject. Almost everything we learn about her comes through his memory.

- We only learn of Vivian directly through her poems, diary entries and letters. These have been curated by Parker in writing the book. Does this affect your confidence in what you think you know of Vivian as a person?
  ↳ How would Vivian have written the story? If Parker had died and not her?

- Vivian speaks five languages and says she thinks and feels differently in each. 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 life or between cultures and communities, changed how you present yourself?

- Vivian watches the women in her family become dependent on men who eventually betray them, and she promises herself 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 crossed into self-limitation?

- Vivian's brother Tomas died in a violent accident when she was a girl, and she was injured in the same event. How did learning this change your understanding of her?
  ↳ Which earlier moments in the book did you think of differently once you knew?

- Vivian grew up in the German colony in Argentina. Choose one scene where her background shapes how she deals with someone, whether German or not. What did it show you?
  ↳ When you first heard the term German colony in Argentina, what was your reaction to it and how did it change your view of Vivian?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Theme 4: **Parker**

- Parker describes an abusive childhood and the belief, formed early, that love is a myth. How does that belief follow him into his adult life?
  ↳ At what point did you feel this myth became self-limiting?
- Parker's impetuousness regularly creates situations that Vivian has to navigate. How did this make you feel toward each of them?
  ↳ Did that dynamic change over the course of the book?
- When Parker is fired, he cannot stay in Germany. What do you make of how he handled that moment and the choices that followed?
  ↳ How much of what we see is Parker at the time, and how much do you think is Parker looking back?
- How reliable did you find Parker as a narrator of his own younger self? Where did he seem hardest on himself, and where did he seem to give himself the benefit of the doubt?
  ↳ What did his honesty, or the limits of it, do for your trust in the book?

Theme 5: **The Arrangement**

- Parker and Vivian agree early on: careers first, no commitment. What did the arrangement protect each of them from? What did it make possible for them?
  ↳ Have you ever made a similar arrangement, formal or informal, with someone? Did it hold?
- What did the story tell you about the relationship between commitment and independence?
  ↳ Is there a version of love that does not require giving up independence?
- As Parker and Vivian tell each other about their pasts (his childhood, her assault, Tomas's death), the relationship changes. How did being trusted with those stories change their relationship?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

↳ How should you receive someone's intimate and difficult stories? Where did you see each of them doing that?

- When Parker is fired and asks Vivian to move to California, he cannot stay in Germany, and she will not leave. What would you have wanted each of them to say?
  ↳ Do you think they were being honest with each other?

Theme 6: **Mac and the Third Way**

Mac, a minor character, has lost his wife suddenly, in her twenties. He advises Parker and Vivian to find a third way to stay together.

- Mac's counsel comes from a specific grief. How does his loss give his words their weight? Would the same advice from someone who had not suffered feel different?
  ↳ Think of a time when advice landed because of who offered it than what was said.
- Mac plays an outsized role for a minor character. What does it mean that Mac is outside their relationship? What can an outsider see and say that the two people inside cannot?
  ↳ Think of a time when someone outside a situation helped you see it more clearly than you could from within.
- What did you understand "a third way" to mean?
  ↳ Would you have taken the "third way" if you were Parker or Vivian? Was it helpful or were they merely avoiding making a decision?

Theme 7: **Africa**

The journey begins in 1987 on $20 a day, before the internet, GPS, and smartphones, 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 researched in advance and shared in real time.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Parker and Vivian pass through many countries and communities as two Western travelers on a tight budget. What did they see, and what might they have missed? How does Parker's distance of nearly forty years affect what he can tell us?
  ↳ Where did you notice the book paying attention to the people and places themselves, and not just to what they meant for Parker and Vivian?
- In Uganda and throughout the journey, Vivian learns that a woman's standing is measured by how many children she has. How did she respond, and what did the response show you about her?
  ↳ How do we stay respectful of a place whose values differ from our own?
- Getting to the mountain gorillas in Zaire meant eight days of waiting. Was it the waiting, the difficulty of Zaire, or both, that led to Vivian sending Parker away?
  ↳ Was the Malawi breakup, in some form, inevitable from the start of the trip?
- Did the journey solve anything, or did it change the conditions in which the problem could be seen? What did it resolve, and what did it postpone?
  ↳ Are there problems that really do look different from a distance, or do problems only seem to?

Theme 8: **Malawi and the Turn**

- 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?
- Alone in a tent with malaria, with $60 left and with Parker in London, Vivian faces a potentially fatal illness alone. He reconstructs those two weeks from the letter she wrote and what she later tells him. How does that 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 the outside?
- Vivian says she loves Parker for the first time after she recovers from malaria. Parker says it for the first time as he leaves for the airport. Do the conditions under which we say important things affect what those words mean?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

↳ At or before the airport, should Parker have acted differently? Should Vivian?

Theme 9: **Ushuaia**

- What was Parker's real reason for traveling to Ushuaia on the summer solstice? To keep a promise to Vivian? Because he thought he might find her there? Something else?
  ↳ What does it mean to keep a promise to someone who can no longer know you kept it?
- Vivian's childhood story about Tomas in Ushuaia is what a child built to carry an unbearable loss. What did the story do for her? What did it mean for Parker to carry it forward?
  ↳ Have you ever built a story to hold something you couldn't understand?
- 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 do not resolve?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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


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