Swimming in Air

Alone together across Africa



MEDIA KIT

PARKER GRIFFON

THE BOOK

"An unexpected encounter can shape a lifetime. Where Swimming in Air begins does not prepare us for how it ends. Read it for its honesty, for a taste of foreign lands, or for the love story."

Susan MacDonald
Founder, Printers Inc, Palo Alto's legendary independent bookstore

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A chance meeting. A stranger's kindness. Help you can never repay. Neither of them was looking for any of it. It found them anyway, once they began listening to their lives.

A physicist who believes love is a myth. A linguist who has watched the men in her family leave. They agree on one rule: careers first, no commitment.

Then comes Africa.

Cairo to Cape Town in 1987 on twenty dollars a day, with a backpack apiece and no plan past the next border. No GPS, no internet, only telexes and a guidebook.

A park ranger on Mt. Kenya assures them that the lion that ripped through their friends' tent was simply confused. Their friends were inside. A soldier with an assault rifle, who looks about fourteen, studies her passport upside down. A man crouches by the roadside for hours, "visiting his sister" in spirit. He sometimes comes back with fine gossip.

Their agreement starts to unravel.

In Malawi, she sends him away, to London for a job that wants him more than he wants it. She stays behind, alone in a tent, with sixty dollars and a bank transfer that hasn't arrived.

Then she gets malaria.

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 the independence she craved.

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. Beautiful and terrible things happened.

We put everything on hold for a year to backpack from Cairo to Cape Town on twenty dollars a day. No GPS, no internet, only telexes and a guidebook. After six months, skeptical 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.

Both beautiful and terrible things can bring clarity, if we choose to listen to them.

Warm regards,

Parker Griffon

BOOK DETAILS

TITLE	*Swimming in Air*
AUTHOR	Parker Griffon
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TRADE TERMS	55% discount; returnable
SETTING	Munich, 1986; Cairo to Cape Town, 1987 to 1988; Buenos Aires, 1988; Berkeley / Palo Alto, California 1989-1990

FAST FACTS FOR STORIES

- A true story of a year on the road, 1987 to 1988: Cairo to Cape Town, a backpack apiece, and $20 a day.
- Travel before GPS, smartphones, and the internet. Communication was by telex and guidebook.
- The story begins in Munich in 1986, with two people who agree on one rule: no commitment, careers first.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Parker Griffon is a former technology executive and currently a flight instructor. He lives with his family in Northern California. *Swimming in Air* draws on four years as an expat in Munich, West Germany (1986), traveling from Cairo to Cape Town (1987, 1988), and Argentina and the San Francisco Bay Area (1988 - 1990).

PROLOGUE EXCERPT

March 1988. I reached to the other side of the bed for Vivian, but felt only cold, empty sheets. Still groggy after the eleven-hour flight from Johannesburg to London, I settled back, stared at the ornate ceiling of my Edwardian-era hotel room, and thought about how we live each day as a slight variation of the last, until it isn't.

A month earlier, Vivian and I were in French-speaking Zaire, sitting outside our tent, eating dinner and swatting mosquitoes. Partway through yet another meal of bland rice and unknown meat, she set down her plate.

In a voice so quiet it made me pay attention, she said, "I'm tired of nothing working. I'm tired of handwashing my clothes every day. Of looking like a rag lady and constantly translating for you."

At first, I wondered, *Why now?* We had been living out of backpacks for six months, and this day was no different from the others. But then I thought about what the last few weeks since we left English-speaking East Africa had cost. Every small task fell to her because, as she said to me at one point in frustration, I couldn't even order *escargots* in French.

She was right. I had no defense, so I said nothing, hoping she was done. She wasn't.

She looked at me with her piercing, now-sad blue eyes and said, "And I'm tired of you."

I let her words hang in the air, willing them to evaporate into the evening sky. But they didn't.

The alarm clock jolted me back to the present. I enjoyed the soft bed and clean sheets for just a moment longer before I reluctantly began my reentry into the corporate world.

[...]

Throughout the morning, Allan, the CEO of Lurnix, and I made good progress on revenue forecasts, headcount, and total investment. As we finished our working lunch, Allan's secretary knocked on the conference room door. "Pardon me for the interruption," she said, handing me a telex. "This just arrived, Mr. Griffon. It's from your fiancée and appears to be urgent."

"Fiancée!" Allan exclaimed, smiling. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Sorry, it slipped my mind," I replied, surprised at how quickly a lie grows legs. I scanned the telex.

FM: VIVIAN, MAIN POST OFFICE, LILONGWE, MALAWI
TO: PARKER GRIFFON C/O ALLAN BAILEY, LURNIX LABS

HAVE MALARIA. 60USD LEFT. TRANSFER DIDN'T ARRIVE.
MAY NEED YOUR HELP. WILL TELEX NUMBER FOR CALL TOMORROW.
V

I paused for a moment as I reread the note, trying to make sense of it.

At best, malaria meant days of debilitating chills, fevers, and vomiting. At worst, you came home in a box. This was a woman who, before I knew her, had moved across the world to assert her independence from a man. Given how much pride she had to swallow to send that telex, writing that she might need help almost certainly meant she did.

Now the thin scrap of paper I held was the only thread connecting us. With phones capable of international calls scarce in Malawi, all I could do was wait until she found one and sent the number with a time to call.

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, and she knows it without needing to say so.

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

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



Siemens, Munich
Alvaro Franco, WikiCommons

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.

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

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A note on approach: *Swimming in Ai*r is a memoir, not a novel. The people and events in it are real. Please hold that thought and let it enrich the conversation.

- You moved to Munich in 1986 at age 31 to set up a software company. You had barely been out of the country and didn't speak the language. How did that happen?
- Tell me about the expatriate experience in Germany during the Cold War. How were you received as an American? As a person?
- You met Vivian who became not only your German teacher but your business mentor, and then something more. Tell me about that.
- A year and a half after you arrived, private equity bought out your company and the US backers, and you lost your residence permit. Most people in that spot would've just gone back home. What happened instead?
- So a year in Africa wasn't really the plan. What was the motivation? Tell me about Mac and how his experience played in this decision.
- What were the hardest moments on the journey across Africa? How do you fund a year like that? And how was it traveling back in the pre-internet days?
- How did your and Vivian's relationship evolve on that trip?
- Your title ties the concept of grace to David Foster Wallace's *This is Water* 2005 Kenyon College commencement address. That's an odd conjunction. Can you explain how they are linked?
- Trips like this change people. How did it change you?
- Describe your business reentry to the US. How did prospective employers view you? How did you view the them and the US?
- What would you tell someone standing at a similar kind of crossroads, who is thinking about stepping off the track for a while but scared to?
- Tell me about the book. What led to now being the time to write it, and how did that process go?

FOR BOOK CLUBS

Swimming in Air is a true story about commitment, independence, and the grace the world offers when we listen to our lives. In 1987, a physicist and a linguist who have agreed to "no commitments" cross Africa from Cairo to Cape Town on $20 a day. It suits groups that enjoy memoir, travel, and conversations that go past the plot.

Invite the author. I'd be glad to join your club by video for 20 to 30 minutes, free. Write to **info@parkergriffon.com** with your club's name and a few possible dates.

Discussion guide. The full guide has nine themes with follow-up prompts, plus background on the places and eras in the book, but it contains spoilers. Email info@parkergriffon.com to request it. Note: The book deals with difficult subjects, including abuse and death. The guide suggests how to prepare your group.

1. Parker and Vivian agree on one rule: careers first, no commitment. What does the arrangement protect each of them from? What does it make possible?
2. What does the story suggest about the relationship between commitment and independence? Does love mean giving up independence?
3. The journey takes place in 1987, before GPS, smartphones, and the internet. How does the era shape your reading? Could this trip happen today in the same way?
4. Two Western travelers on a tight budget pass through many countries and communities. Vivian tells Parker, "Let's not fool ourselves. Rich Whites passing through is who we always were." Is she right? What did they see, and what might they have missed?
5. Vivian speaks five languages and says she thinks and feels differently in each. What does that suggest about identity? Is there a "true" self beneath the languages?
6. The title echoes David Foster Wallace's *This Is Water*, a meditation on attention. What is the "air" in your own life, things around you so constantly that you've stopped noticing it?
7. The book pairs Wallace's idea with Frederick Buechner's belief that grace, what's given when nothing is owed, is available if we listen to our lives. Have you ever found grace by just being in the moment?

Where to find it. Paperback, hardcover, and Kindle through Amazon.


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