

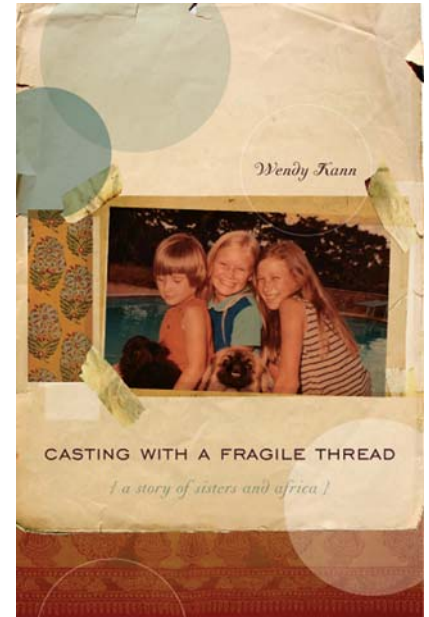
READING GROUP GUIDE

Casting with a Fragile Thread *A Story of Sisters and Africa*

by Wendy Kann

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Casting with a Fragile Thread* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Casting with a Fragile Thread*.

About the Book

One Sunday morning in her suburban home in Connecticut, Wendy Kann received a phone call from Africa: her youngest sister, Lauren, had been killed on a lonely road in Zambia. With that news, Kann is summoned back to the territory of her youth in what is now Zimbabwe. The girls' privileged colonial childhood, a rural life of mansions and servants, is devastated by their father's premature death, their mother's insanity, and the onset of civil war. Kann soon leaves Africa, marries an American, and has finally settled in to the dry sophistication of life in the states when her sister's death calls her back.

With honesty and compassion, Kann pieces together her sister's life, explores the heartbreak of loss and the anguish of belonging, and finally discovers a new, more complicated meaning of home.

“One of the most beautifully written, harrowing, compassionate nonfiction books I've read in years. Written with fierce love and a kind of sun-forged courage, it's heartbreaking, almost unbearably real, and incredibly hopeful.”

—Alexandra Fuller, author of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*

“[Wendy Kann] writes from the perspective of a daughter and a mother, with a twinge of regret but not the gnawing homesickness of other writers cursed and fortunate enough to have been raised on that remarkable continent. The book's refreshingly crisp, uncloying, practical tone makes you feel empathy for a woman who lost her sister in a faraway land.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Kann's debut is brave, brutally honest, and highly readable. Her prose is poignant and elegant; it especially comes alive when she is describing the land and the people of Africa.”

—*Library Journal*

“This is more than a touching story of personal tragedy. Wendy Kann paints an unapologetic and thoughtful view of a different kind of minority. She is first a settler: a white Zimbabwean, brought up in a privileged but dysfunctional cocoon of expats, alcoholics, and hardbitten farmers. She is later an improbable African immigrant: a Western-looking woman bewildered and alone on the streets of New York. Her candid treatment of race is refreshingly free of political correctness, her tales of bridging cultures are insightful and thought-provoking, and her family's searing history is penned with honesty.”

—Sarah Erdman, author of *Nine Hills To Nambonkaha: Two Years in the Heart of an African Village*

“I was very affected by this accomplished memoir. Wendy Kann, with often heart-breaking and evocative detail, has brought back a small gem from her colonial experience of Africa.”

—Carolyn Slaughter, author of *A Black Englishman* and *Before The Knife: Memories of an African Childhood*

“Wendy Kann's courageous memoir is marked by loss—of a mother and a father, of a country, of a sister. Her work is remarkably free of sentimentality. Instead she writes eloquently about her and her sisters increasingly desperate struggle for love and sense of belonging in a family disintegrating at the same time that a brutal civil war breaks out in Rhodesia. She vividly captures the fear and denial and disbelief of her fellow white countrymen in the years preceding independence.... her journey back to Zimbabwe and her reclaiming of her childhood years in Africa is a gripping read.”

—Lisa Fugard, author of *Skinner's Drift*

“Kann writes brilliantly about sisters....even when time has moved them continents apart. Her memoir takes us on an emotional helter-skelter, from the entitlement and raw racism of her African childhood, through troughs of poverty and abandonment, to an ascendant understanding of what means to live and love. Reads like a sequel to *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* and Doris Lessing's memoirs.”

—Rob Nixon, author of *Dreambirds*

About the Author

Wendy Kann lives in Connecticut with her husband and children. This is her first book.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the title of the book and how it speaks to the author's sense of identity. How does that sense of identity change over the course of the book?
2. "I was trying to figure out what 'American' was so I could be just that," the author says. Who or what prevents her from feeling as though she belongs in America? Does she feel as though she belongs in Rhodesia? In Zimbabwe? If not, what prevents her from belonging there? Is the issue of belonging always about a geographical place?
3. The author is frustrated by her relationship with her mother and then later by that with her stepmother. She tries to be a substitute mother for Lauren, and later Luke. What are the roles and responsibilities of a mother? Are the expectations we have of our own mothers too high? What is the impact on a child in being forced to mother a parent or sibling? Can a stepmother ever really fulfill a child's emotional needs? Discuss the significance of the term "motherland."
4. What accounts for the different choices the sisters make? Why, specifically, do you think that Lauren decided to marry Richard and move to Zambia?
5. The author seems to fall in love with Mickey, her future husband, on the basis of him asking her about South African politics. What does his question represent? What does the author gain by leaving Africa and marrying him? What does she lose? Why does she spend most of her time in America longing to return to the place where she experienced so much heartache?
6. What do we learn about cultural and social differences between Africa and America? What, specifically, do we learn about the role of women? Is the American feminist ethos always liberating?
7. The author writes: "America was a place where life played out gently, only in the middle octaves." Is her tone one of disappointment? What does it mean to survive a traumatic childhood? Why do some people survive it better than others?
8. Surprised to be given tea in a paper cup and to be served lobster on a paper tablecloth, the author ironically finds America to be a shabby substitute for Africa. Why do you think she comes to this conclusion?
9. How effectively does the author evoke Africa? Discuss the differences between her urban colonial childhood and the Africa of Luke's childhood. Do we, as readers, have particular

expectations from a book set in Africa? If so, why, and what does that say about our preconceived notions about the continent?

10. In general, do male characters play a significant role in *Casting with a Fragile Thread*? To what degree do men in Africa appear capable of sensitive or appropriate emotion? How is the author's American husband similar to or different from African men? Discuss the relationship between culturally imposed gender roles and individual identity. Does the author's experience of men contribute to her concerns about Luke's upbringing?
11. As a child, the author literally does not see black people. By the end of the book, her tone is one of revelation rather than horror or guilt. As far as race is concerned, does she develop enough? As a white African, how much responsibility should she bear for racial injustice in her country's history? Does her obliviousness to the implications of race suggest the possibility of equivalent blind spots in American culture today?
12. By the end of the book, does the author seem happy? Discuss memoir as a genre and how an ongoing life fits the conventional narrative structure of beginning, middle and end.

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