

Whistling for Hippos is Scott Corey's charming and humorous account of life in West Africa. It will appeal to readers of all ages who enjoy adventure, love of travel, and stories that show the depth and resilience of human nature.

WHISTLING FOR HIPPOS:
A memoir of life in West Africa
By Scott Corey

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Whistling for Hippos



SCOTT COREY

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Chapter One:

From Pindjali to the Moon

Africa has a way of luring you in. It begins with a flash of dark eyes in the firelight and ends with life-long fascination. Or it may be the hollow sound of balaphones drifting in the night wind, a mud-brick village awash in moonlight, the delicious taste of peanut sauce and rice, the grunt of a hippo from midstream, or the dry savannah with its sense of timelessness.

This is especially true at night when the sky seems to come down and mingle with the tall trees and high grasses; the eyes of the green monkey and stars are as one, and those who walk through the villages on clear nights – when the stars are out – feel as if there is no end to the dark horizon and the luminous path overhead.

All these sensations were true for me. Yet the strongest tug on my heart came the first time one of my students raised a slender dark hand and asked a question. This was the true Africa, the living, breathing Africa I came to love.

My wife and I lived in Pindjali, a small town in the north of Ivory Coast. The name Pindjali means '*place where the tom-toms are set out to dry*'. It's a small town compared to those on the coast, but Pindjali takes on an importance greater than its size because it serves as an

axis for the bush roads leading from north to south, and east to west.

I taught at the Pindjali *College Ensignment General* (CEG) - a grandiose name for a school consisting of four low buildings with tin corrugated roofs, no doors or windows, and rough wooden benches. Beyond the school grounds, the bush grew wild to the Mali frontier.

Most mornings in Pindjali began with the noisy squawking of guinea fowl outside our window. They weren't even our birds, but they flew over our wall every morning at sunrise and woke me with their irritating screeches. It was as if they were doing it on purpose. I swore that one I day would catch them.

When the BBC World News signed off, I grabbed my books and pushed my motorbike out to the road. My wife stood on the terrace in her colorful blue Fulani dress and waved.

"See you at lunchtime," I called.

"At Fatima's," she replied.

Speeding along, I passed the *boulangerie* where loaves of French bread were baked each morning and we bought them still warm enough to melt butter, then the compound where Ibrahima Touré lived with his four wives and eighteen children, and finally the blood-stained grove where cattle were butchered.

That was a sobering scene so early in the morning - to pass death under the mango trees. Two or three cows were usually tied in the shade, waiting to be slaughtered.

They were scrawny animals with protruding ribs, and we joked that they had been herded down from the Sahara. The meat was as tough as a boot when we bought it at the market, and my wife had to boil it for hours. Also, the butcher's table was out in the sun, away from the shade, and we swished away flies when making our choice. The butcher didn't know about sirloin, or prime rib, or flank steak. He simply hacked the carcass into pieces with his machete. As a result, we often found bone chips in the meat, ready to crack a tooth if you bit down on a sharp splinter.

Once I stopped at the grove and watched a cow being slaughtered. The butcher twisted the horns of a scrawny brown animal until it went down on its side. Then he tied the cow's legs together with rope. The cow lay wild-eyed and breathing heavily in the dust. The butcher was in no hurry. He did this every day, sometimes four or five times a day. Casually picking up an old machete, he glanced over to where I was sitting on my motorbike, and grinned. Then he slit the cow's throat with a sawing motion of the long knife.

By the time I passed the grove later in the day, the bloody cowhide had been tied on a drying rack and the meat hauled to the market in carts.

When I reached the school, I parked my motorbike in the shade of a mimosa tree and crossed the compound to my class. At the same time, the assistant director stepped from his office and banged a hammer against an old

wheel-rim hanging from a tree branch. The wheel-rim served as our school bell.

Clang-clang-clang!

The school day had begun.

"Good morning, Seydou," I called cheerfully.

Smiling, he waved his hammer at me. "Good morning," he said. "What class do you have this morning?"

"Fifth-form."

"Ah," he said. "A good group."

As a former French colony, the Ivory Coast had adopted the French system of education. In this system, the middle grade or younger students began with sixth-form and progressed to fifth, fourth, third and so on until the oldest students were in the first-form or premier class.

This was my fifth-form class, so the students were in their second year of English and had some facility with the language. They already spoke their tribal language, the market language, and French. In general, I was teaching them their fourth language. As a result, they picked up the vocabulary quickly. In some circumstances, I had to be careful what I said.

Once a hornet flew through the open classroom window and stung me viciously on the back of the neck. The sting felt like I'd been jabbed with an ice pick.

"Ow! Shit!" I cried, slapping at the hornet.

"Ow shit!" the students all repeated. "Shit! Shit!"

Finally, a boy pulled the stinger from my neck and we all laughed.

At least they all laughed. My neck throbbed.

The morning sunlight was softly filtered as I crossed the schoolyard. A dew-fresh scent of mango trees and elephant grass filled the air. This was my favorite time of the morning.

As I entered the classroom now, thirty students sat at rough wooden desks. They all stood quickly.

"Good morning, sir!" they said in unison.

"Good morning!" I said, smiling. "Please sit down."

They sat and gazed at me. Something was up. They laughed, covered their faces shyly, and shot expectant glances at each other.

Okay, I thought. Here we go again.

I'd planned on beginning with a vocabulary review but knew from experience they wouldn't be focused until I found out what was happening. There weren't many books in Pindjali and only a few students owned radios, so I had become a resource for them about life beyond the bush. They had questions about so many things. It was hard to know what they were going to ask me today.

A small boy with an impish grin raised his hand.

"Yes, Akah," I said.

He stood up.

"Sir," he asked. "Why is your skin white and ours dark?"

He looked incredibly pleased with himself and sat down.

Gazing around the classroom, I noticed a sudden interest on the faces of the other pupils. They were all eager to know why my skin was white and theirs dark. They leaned forward on their benches expectantly.

Well, I thought with some despair. What did I know about human skin? Then I recalled an article I'd read on melanin and how it altered skin pigmentation to prevent damage from the sun's ultraviolet rays.

"Your skin is darker than mine because it has adapted to the intense heat of the sun in Africa," I replied.

The students frowned and looked confused.

"Does that mean," another pupil asked, "if my mother has a baby in your country, the baby will be white?"

"That's good thinking," I said. "But it takes many generations for the pigmentation to change."

With this reply, the students slumped against their benches and I could see I was losing them. What could I say? How could I explain in a way these children would understand?

Teaching is a matter of timing. Fifteen seconds can mean the difference between keeping a class moving and on task or being completely lost. With a dreadful feeling that the moments were ticking away, I thought about what I'd learned since arriving in Pindjali. From the northern bush country down to the coast were more than a dozen tribes, each with a slightly different physical

appearance. These physical differences were taken for granted. No one had to explain to these Senoufo and Dioula children why they didn't look the same as children from the Baoulé or Man tribes.

At last I said, "We're from different tribes."

"Ah," the students smiled and nodded in comprehension. "Different tribes."

"So," I said. "Let's get on with our lesson."

But it wasn't going to happen yet.

Another boy raised his hand.

The class was full of questions this morning. I wondered how long they had debated about who would volunteer to ask.

"Yes, Drissa?" I said.

Drissa stood up and grinned at the other students.

"Is it true, sir," he began, "that men have been on the moon?"

The students gazed at me, chins resting on hands, nearly holding their breaths with anticipation.

"Yes, it's true," I said. "Astronauts have landed on the moon several times."

They burst into laughter.

"It is not possible," they cried uproariously. "The moon is too small!"

I watched in amazement as they held up their hands to form dark circles.

"A man could not possibly stand with both feet on the moon," a boy remarked. "He would fall off!"

"The moon is very large," I said. "It only appears small to you because of the distance."

"Is it farther than Korhogo?" a student asked from the back of the room.

Korhogo was a market town about sixty kilometers east of Pindjali.

"Much farther," I said.

"Ah," he said shrewdly. "I can see the moon, but I cannot see Korhogo."

The students nodded their heads vigorously in agreement.

"If I traveled to the moon," another student boasted, "I would write my name KOFFI in large letters so everyone on Earth could see."

"I would tie a rope around the moon and bring it back with me," a tall boy announced.

"The moon is too large," I explained. "You wouldn't find enough rope."

"Then," he said. "I would cut off a piece of the moon like a gourd."

A student on the front bench looked troubled.

"Do you believe astronauts have been on the moon, Mamadou?" I asked.

"No, sir," he replied, shaking his head. "I do not believe."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it is not possible," he said and gazed nervously at his pencil.

Mamadou was a good student and I knew there must be a reason for his point of view, although I couldn't imagine what it might be. As we moved into the daily vocabulary lesson, he began to relax and participate again.

In the schoolyard after class I ran into Solomon, the science teacher from Ethiopia. He was a slender man with dark-caramel skin.

"What is the matter?" he asked, seeing the perplexed look on my face. "Is the heat bothering you?"

"The heat always bothers me, but that's not the problem." I squinted up at the morning sun. "I can't convince my students astronauts have been on the moon. They don't believe it."

Solomon laughed. "That is nothing," he said, grinning broadly and showing his bad teeth, which contrasted so dramatically to the local villagers' strong white teeth. "I cannot convince them the earth is round!"

"You're serious? They don't believe the earth is round?"

"Absolutely," he said. "And I am their science teacher!"

At lunchtime, I saw Mamadou in the courtyard.

"You can tell me now," I urged. "Why don't you think astronauts have been on the moon?"

Digging the toe of his plastic sandal into the dust, Mamadou bit his cheek. Village students never looked an adult in the eye. It was considered disrespectful.

"Because..." he said and hesitated.

"Because what?"

"Because... of heaven."

"Heaven?" I asked, not understanding.

"Yes, sir."

Mamadou explained that in his faith, heaven was between the earth and the moon, and of course no living human could pass through heaven. Therefore, no astronauts had ever set foot on the lunar surface.

"Do you think a living man can pass through heaven, sir?" he asked seriously.

"No," I said. "I guess not."

Mamadou grinned. "I do not think so either."

At lunchtime, I rode my motorbike across the road and up a dirt path to the lorry park. Claudia was waiting for me at Fatima's stand and we ordered rice and fish with peanut sauce. The food was served in scuffed aluminum bowls and we sat on a rickety wooden bench to eat.

"Fatima is going to teach me how to make peanut sauce," Claudia said. "We're going to the market tomorrow morning."

I laughed. "You're really getting to know the local women."

"It gives me something to do," she said. "How was school?"

I told her about the students' questions and about Mamadou's thoughts on heaven.

"Gosh," she said thoughtfully. "I never considered that."

"Me either," I said. "But to teach them, I have to understand them."

"That may take time," she said.

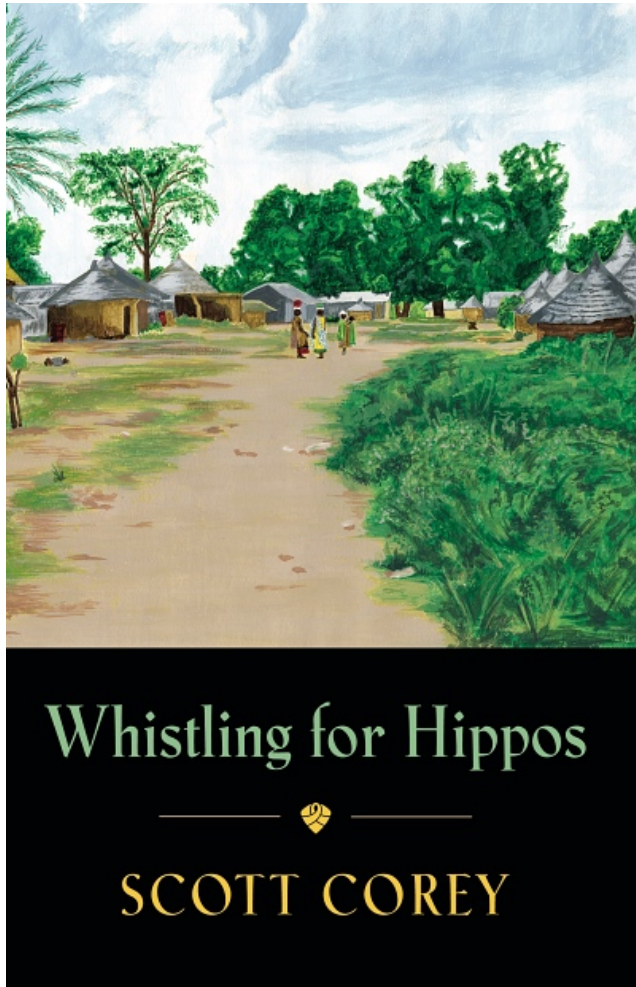
"I look forward to it."

Claudia pushed her bowl over to me. "I'm full. You want my rice and sauce?"

"You bet," I said.

Author Bio

Scott Corey's interest in international events and love of travel has inspired him to live in West Africa, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Sicily. He has worked as a teacher, reporter, editor, public relations specialist, and feature writer for the Kansas City Star. He has ridden a camel along the Red Sea; experienced the magic of four-wheeling through the Sinai desert at midnight; suffered the trauma of being tied to a table for an emergency appendectomy with no preop anesthesia; tasted such delicacies as armadillo, python, monkey, bush rat and crocodile; spent two years living in Paris and visiting Hemingway's favorite hangouts; hiked in Switzerland; skied in Austria; traveled up the Bosphorus from Istanbul; experienced the dread of malaria and dysentery. And along the way he got married and had three wonderful children.



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