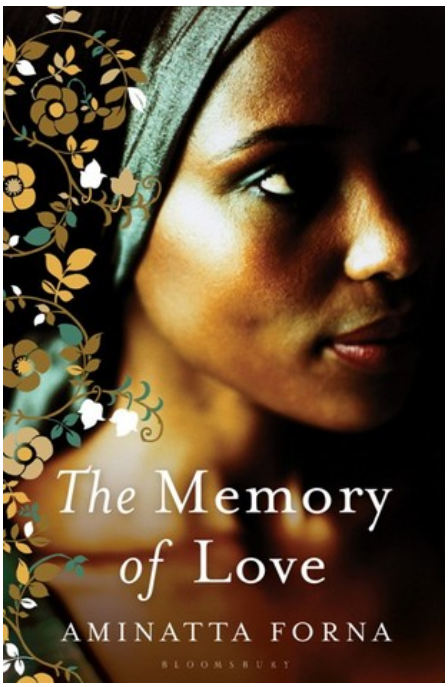

The Memory of Love

Aminatta Forna

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The Memory of Love Aminatta Forna
In contemporary Sierra Leone, a devastating civil war has left an entire populace with secrets to keep. In the capital hospital, a gifted young surgeon is plagued by demons that are beginning to threaten his livelihood. Elsewhere in the hospital lies a dying man who was young during the country's turbulent postcolonial years and has stories to tell that are far from heroic.

As past and present intersect in the buzzing city, these men are drawn unwittingly closer by a British psychologist with good intentions, and into the path of one woman at the center of their stories.

A work of breathtaking writing and rare wisdom, *The Memory of Love* seamlessly weaves together two generations of African life to create a story of loss, absolution, and the indelible effects of the past—and, in the end, the very nature of love.

The Memory of Love Details

Date	:	Published May 1st 2010 by Bloomsbury (first published 2010)
ISBN	:	9781408808139
Author	:	Aminatta Forna
Format	:	Hardcover 445 pages
Genre	:	Cultural, Africa, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Western Africa, Sierra Leone, Literature, African Literature

From Reader Review The Memory of Love for online ebook

Elaine says

This is an ambitious novel and Forna clearly can write, and I appreciate her wanting to make it more than a horror story of war-torn Africa, to have varied voices and to emphasize the life around the trauma, not just the vortex within it. But the threads were uneven -- both in terms of plotting and timing, and in terms of compelling-ness. We spend a lot of time with Elias Cole, especially at the beginning, with his flat banality of evil and his not very interesting love story. When his denouement comes, it is almost not enough for the time spent in his company. Meanwhile, Kai, easily the book's richest and warmest character, dances on the sidelines for far too long -- when his reveal comes there is nothing breathless about it, only a sense of finality. Adrian's career as a psychologist among a sea of PTSD turns out to be something of a red herring -- the "mystery" of one of his key patients drives most of the central section of the book (and is deeply harrowing and interesting) and then is entirely put aside for the latter third, when the story becomes much more conventional in its coincidences. Adrian too is flat -- almost colorless- we learn that he is loveable because the book's loveable characters love him, not because of what we can understand about him from himself. This essential coldness of both Elias and Adrian means that too much of this quite long book is not gripping, probably its most fatal flaw. Finally, the final twist lacks plausibility. That's all I'll say bc spoilers!

Joyce says

Amazing. Powerful. Though the first quarter of the book didn't do much for me. I had a hard time following the shifts from one character to the other and the present to the past.

Slowly, the book drew me in and slowly the dots were being connected. The characters were complex and their experiences both during the wars and after were unimaginable. Surviving was almost easier than coping afterwards. But hope and love also weaves its way through these hard times and broken hearts and minds. Those are the qualities that come shining through. Truly a significant accomplishment of writing about a broken country, broken people and about survival, goodness and love. Remarkable.

Julie Christine says

This novel opens quietly, as if the writer were a doctor, cautiously revealing a wound, warning the reader to look, but don’t touch; as if she were a psychiatrist, probing delicately at the mind, but who avoids coming too close to the main issues, for fear of doing her patient greater harm.

The wounds in Aminatta Forna’s devastating and beautiful novel *The Memory of Love* (why am I certain the author had another title in mind, but was convinced by her publisher to go with the banal to encourage mainstream readers? Sadly, this is the second novel entitled *The Memory of Love* I’ve read in the past four months and both deserve better titles. No offense to Elton John.) aren’t inflicted on just one person; they are the wounds of a nation brutalized by war.

The decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone was relegated to Page Five international sections in this country, overshadowed—if one paid attention to the many tangled messes abroad—by the War in the Gulf, then the Balkans, Rwanda and even Sierra Leone’s southern neighbor, Liberia. This beautiful West African nation was first a hub of the transatlantic slave trade, then became an important symbol of resistance. Its capital,

Freetown, was so named by repatriated slaves at the end of the 18th century. Its modern history is at least as complex: a land rich in natural resources, with an infrastructure and population that attained stability and productivity, reduced to horrific footnotes of “blood diamonds,” boy soldiers, hacked-off limbs and a generation of children born of rape.

But all politics is personal. And *The Memory of Love* wraps the war around multiple characters and two eras to show the progression from hope and happy times to defeat and resignation.

The central characters in this story are men: Elias Cole, a mid-grade professor of history and his charismatic alter ego Julius, married to the woman on whom Elias develops a obsessive crush; Adrian Lockheart, a British psychotherapist fleeing a loveless marriage in the UK to treat PTSD sufferers in a Freetown hospital; and Kai Mansaray, an orthopedic surgeon whose work schedule seems to be self-inflicted retribution for having survived the war when tens of thousands of his fellow citizens did not.

The story opens just before the 1969 Apollo moon landing, when Freetown bustled with progress. Elias Cole, a young professor at the time, relates his story in first person to Dr. Lockheart, who comes to Sierra Leone thirty years later, after the civil war ends in 2001, to a crumbled city beset by poverty, crime and disease.

Women are central to the narrative, though we never hear their voices directly: the enigmatic Saffia, Julius’s wife; Ileana, the chain-smoking Romanian doctor who navigates crazy, sad Freetown with wry dexterity; Kai’s former lover, Nenebeh and Adrian's new lover, Mamakay. And there is Agnes, a Sierra Leonean psychiatric patient suffering from a rare “fugue” state where she wanders off for days, lost in a world of memories. There are prostitutes and slutty foreign aid workers, cuckolded wives and neglected daughters. Women bear the greatest injustices and losses in this novel but their experiences are interpreted by their lovers, husbands and physicians.

Aminatta Forna explores betrayal on an epic, political scope and an intimate, every-day relationship level. *The Memory of Love* is many individual but linked strands of characters doing whatever they can to survive, even if it means survival of the body but decimation of the soul. Friendship is one of the central themes—how easily we find and create connections and how it takes just a moment, a misunderstanding, a cruel coincidence, to tear them apart.

This complicated and intelligent novel demands careful, slow reading to keep track of the multiplicity of characters, the frequent changes of points-of-view, time and place. Aminatta Forna’s writing is evocative, deliberate and authentic. She infects the narrative with tragedy and anger, then lances the wounds with sweetness, affection and hope. There are competing feelings of pent-up illness and catharsis that are partially, but not fully, resolved by the end. Not an easy read, but an important one.

Leslie Reese says

From the early pages of this exquisite, devastating book, I read the story like a jealous lover who doesn’t want to read or hear anyone else talk about the object of their affection. I coveted the choice and placement of each word; I desired to absorb my beloved’s odor, breath, and eyelash movements; the musicality of voice; to hang on the atmosphere of each sentence, unashamedly. Sometimes I sat with the book on my lap, admiring and caressing the cover with my fingertips, clasping the weight of its 445 pages to the flesh of my palm.

The Memory of Love is a novel in which a number of love stories run concurrently, feeding and watering each other over a period of 30-plus years, mostly taking place in Sierra Leone, beginning around 1968. A

man is in love with a beautiful woman; she is in love with her husband. A surgeon loves everything that takes place in the operating theatre. Visionaries love their dreams. The young love the feeling of their invincibility. Some children are allowed to be loved and protected, while others are not. People love things the way they were: when things made sense/ before there was trouble. People love their homelands, no matter the pictures painted by those from outside.

We love selfishly, deeply, altruistically and incidentally. We love feeling ourselves to be necessary. But we love with contradiction; we love dialectically.

a full appreciation is posted at http://folkloreandliteracy.com/2015/0...

Ellie says

DNF

The Memory of Love is not an awful book. Most of my book group enjoyed it though they did seem to agree with me that it took 150 pages to get into. I gave up on page 164 (or 36%).

To be honest, I felt uninspired by the book before I even picked it up. A book about love in Sierra Leone. Sounds promising but I didn't engage at all with the characters and I felt it was all a bit unemotional. The group countered that it was more like real life. 1. I get enough real life as it is and 2. I am quite an emotional person (in real life). I felt like I was going through the motions of reading the words but not feeling them. Some thought it was beautifully written but when I compare it to some of my recent reads, it just doesn't cut the mustard in that respect either. I wasn't even moved by scenes of a country ruined by civil war because I felt it was glossed over. The parts I read that did deal with the effects of war did interest me more. There were also too many "main" characters yet not a lot separating them personality wise.

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switterbug (Betsey) says

Incalculable grief cleaves to profound love in this elaborate, helical tapestry of a besieged people in postwar Freetown, Sierra Leone. Interlacing two primary periods of violent upheaval, author Aminatta Forna renders a scarred nation of people with astonishing grace and poise--an unforgettable portrait of open wounds and closed mouths, of broken hearts and fractured spirits, woven into a stunning evocation of recurrence and redemption, loss and tender reconciliation. Forna mines a filament of hope from resigned fatalism, from the devastation of a civil war that claimed 50,000 lives and displaced 2.5 million people. Those that survived felt hollowed out, living with an uneasy peace.

Over 99% of people suffered from unrelieved post-traumatic stress disorder, and those that survived often hid shameful secrets of forced betrayal. Here you have children, now adults, trying to cope after their brutal coercion with rebel soldiers. They are living with the aftermath of "nothing left to lose." If you can imagine an unspeakable atrocity, it was likely executed. Blood on the hands of the people who remain seep into the pores of the newly arrived.

Three principal characters form the locus of this story--a psychologist, a surgeon, and an academic. The story goes through seamless temporal shifts--from 1969, a period of unrest following a military coup--to 2001, following ten years of civil war begun in 1991.

Adrian Lockheart is a British psychologist on sabbatical from his failing marriage to accept a (second) post in Freetown. He is compassionate and dogged in his pursuit to treat the population of mentally disturbed and traumatized citizens, to help them find hope and resolve, yet he feels emotionally dislocated from his own family at home.

"The truth is that since arriving here his life has seemed more charged with meaning than it ever had in London. Here the boundaries are limitless, no horizon, no sky. He can feel his emotions, solid and weighty, like stones in the palm of his hands."

Adrian treats tortured men and women in the fallout of war, finding a particularly poignant interest in Agnes, a woman who is suffering from a fugue disorder. He contends that the endless miles she compulsively roams on foot (and subsequently forgets) indicate a search for something meaningful from the ruins of war. He believes she is going toward somewhere, a place he determines to find out.

Adrian's most prominent patient is the unreliable narrator, Elias Cole, an elderly, retired history professor dying of pulmonary disease. In this city of silence, Elias is compelled to tell his story, his confession, to Adrian. It begins in 1969, when Elias first laid eyes on Saffia Kamara, a charming and comely botanist married to the gregarious, fearless Julius, an academic at the university.

"People are wrong when they talk of love at first sight. It is neither love nor lust. No. As she walks away from you, what you feel is loss. A premonition of loss."

Julius, Elias, and Saffia embark on a friendship that inextricably points to the destiny of the next generation. The military coups of the late 60's followed Sierra Leon's hard-won independence from the British colonial rule. Political unrest led to widespread paranoia, which in turn led to wobbly allegiances. Elias's confession to Adrian is the rallying point, which heightens all the other narratives. Adrian's probing of Elias reaches to encounters outside of the hospital, and will alter the course of his life, and too of the story.

Lastly, there is Kai Manseray, a talented, young orthopedic surgeon, a tireless and tormented man plagued by chronic insomnia and a suppressed and devastating history. Kai chose to stay and help the damaged and impoverished, rather than abscond two years ago with his best friend, Tejani. He is torn between his loyalties in Sierra Leone and his desire for a more elite station in the States. The woman he loved has gone, the city ravaged, the people embattled, but his little cousin, Abass, and the patients who need him keep him anchored. He has secrets that he won't share with anyone, that threaten to undo him in the operating theater.

As the story highlights the contrast of their professions, Kai and Adrian form a tenuous bond of friendship. Kai's achievements are measurable--stitching, sewing, patching, cutting, and saving lives. Adrian, however, can't measure his patients' success with an X-ray or point to approximated edges of a wound. Psychotherapy is a process of encounters, wending your way through the dark channels of a person's interior and facilitating change through conversation. Kai and Adrian's bond is ultimately the most hypnotic, with consequences encroaching on the dark side of hope.

Forna constructs a mesmerizing collision of forces and people that slowly propel the reader toward a towering climax. This story is for the committed reader, the patient literature lover who will undertake many hours of dedication for the inevitable reward. Think of a blank canvas, and every sentence as a mindful brushstroke, a bloom on the page. It takes a while for the picture to materialize. The writing is carefully crafted, and yet imperceptibly so, not in the least self-conscious. She is steadily augmenting, fuller and deeper, contrasting the light and the darkness, capturing nature and sound. Even her secondary and tertiary characters are wrought with polish and care.The story's leisurely pace builds its emotional cathedral one stone at a time; at about the halfway point, it becomes riveting and impossible to turn away.

This is a personal and natal undertaking for Forna, whose father, Dr. Mohamed Forna, was a dissident in

Sierra Leona and was killed on trumped up charges when she was only eleven-years-old. Her non-fiction book, The Devil That Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Quest, is the story of her search for the truth of that harrowing time. She continues her exploration of healing and recovery in this deeply researched and ambitious book.

There are coincidences in this novel that nevertheless do not disturb the beauty or the impact of the story. In lesser hands, this may have come across as artifice. However, Forna's characters and themes are ultimately grounded, and the patterns that emerge from the disparate stories--the unguarded moments, the link of love that ties all the characters together--transcend her intention. The potency of storytelling and the refrain of love in the aftermath of tragedy is evident and sublime in her fluent prose.

"There exists, somewhere, a scale for love invented by one of his [Adrian's] profession...And there are others still who say love is but a beautiful form of madness."

The injured voices of her characters mesh into a voice of hope and holding on, to a startling story of redemption. At various intervals, the lyrics of Jimmy Cliff's "The Harder They Come" drift onto the page. It sang, I sang.

"Well, they tell me there's a pie up in the sky, waiting for you when you die...The harder they come, the harder they fall."

Love endures. One and all.

Julie says

8.0/10 for the writing
6.5/10 for the delivery

I can't remember the last time I enjoyed a writer's style so very much while at the same time being so completely bored by the book. It took me two weeks to read 185 pages. Each page was an achievement. I read enough to know this was going nowhere for me. It wasn't so very bad; in fact, the writing was good, technically; and she had a fine tale to tell -- but whether or not she would ever get there was lost in the minutiae of bla-de-bla-blah blah, and so I chose to end my misery about half way through the book.

Forna's characters did not simply make an omelette: they contemplated from which chickens the eggs should be harvested; they cracked the eggs and pondered the nature of the universe within the beauty of the egg yolks; they hesitated to stir the yolks lest it disturb the balance of the universe; having pondered this enough to realize that if one did not stir those eggs, one was in danger of starving because there was nothing else in the cupboard, the eggs were stirred, not without great angst about eventually setting them on the fire; but the eggs were cooked, they were eaten, and forgotten immediately. In fact, the eggs were never mentioned again -- almost as if they had never existed.

This, of course, is all a riff on the madness of her characters' hand-wringing, soul-searching, navel gazing, inner lives. There is such a monstrously important story to be told, but it is viewed through the eye of a needle; other parts are delivered through an eye dropper that never drops its drops! I was maddened into eventually cleaning out my attic -- which I'd been promising myself for two years -- and now it's spic and span. Thanks to Forna.

There was great joy in picking up this book and for the first 10 pages, I was in love. As I read on though, I picked up traces of Nadine Gordimer; and then saw Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie being channelled. I could not seem to pick up an authentic Forna voice, so much did she remind me of these two favourite writers. When she finally shed the ghosts of these other writers, I encountered a vague, detached intellectualism that left me rather bored and blasé -- even with some quite horrific scenes -- she had inured me against violence by her distracting/distracted mode of story telling! Lacking Gordimer's passion and Adichie's clarity of thought and purpose, Forna leaves me uninterested in her story and disinterested in her cause, which is rather sad, I am sorry to say.

Nothing here for me but the ghosts of other writers.

Didi says

After finishing The Memory of Love late last Friday night, I was truly sad to see page 445 arrive. It seemed to come so quickly for me. I started reading on Wednesday and read non-stop anytime I was free through to Friday. I could have just been pushed by time since I was discussing it with my book club on Saturday, but actually I just didn’t want to do anything else besides read this book. I really didn’t want that passionate story of memory to end. Click the link for more http://browngirlreading.com/2015/01/1...

Lily says

Several years ago, I read a book which had a couple of paragraphs that so moved me that I simply quoted them for its review. This past month (early 2016), I have read two books, each by a Neustadt winner or nominee, which sent me scrambling to find that quotation. The two books were this one, Aminatta Forna’s *The Memory of Love,* and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance.* TMoL deals with the terrible aftermath of years of rebel and civil war in Sierra Leone, whereas AFB is set in the years of Indira Gandhi’s attempts to reshape India with brutal political programs. When I finally asked what might be considered to link these two exceptional books, I found a theme in a paraphrase of that long set-aside quotation: to the humans enduring horrific situations, on the surface toughness and self-sufficiency seem to be what enable survival. However, in reality, only tiny bits of love, sometimes stolen, sometimes given here and there, occasionally lavish, are what sustain the human soul and will. Obviously, Forna’s title inspired my search to ascribe meaning to these devastating stories.

(For the entire excerpt, see my review of Reiland’s *Get Me Out of Here.*
https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...)

For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the Neustadt award for literature (or have not looked at its legacy recently), I suggest perusing this page and the accompanying ones about its winners and nominees: http://neustadtprize.org/about-the-ne... Also of possible interest: http://www.britannica.com/topic/Neust...

A very good summary of the story of TMOF appears here, if that is what interests you in a review. I won’t try to imitate Mengiste: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/09/boo...

Both Mistry’s and Forna’s books are likely to “stay with me always.” They were books full of characters, primary, secondary, tertiary, well drawn, sometimes by relating story after story, sometimes by a few carefully chosen images.

Forna only sketches Seligmann, the daring surgeon whose wife virtually kicked out this restless retired husband to a land where he could dare extend his prodigious skills into new medical accomplishments. Seligmann co-mingles his skills with those of the native Kai, well versed in the medical triage of selecting and treating the carnage from the killing fields that have ravaged the countryside. Together, they strive to restore function to the man Foday, far more genetically and physically handicapped than Somerset Maugham's famous club-footed Philip Carey from *Of Human Bondage* (currently reading it). Kai, on the other hand, is developed fully as a character into a key protagonist of the novel. We are dragged, as within a mystery, into the stories of Kai's loves, hopes, fears, friendships, patients, experiences of atrocities,….

Almost the only portrait we get of Elias Cole's attending doctor, but my mind's eye readily converts him into a "full person": To Adrian's question of how the patient (Cole) is, we read "The man, a Swede, possessed of the crisp, antiseptic aloofness Adrian associates with Northern Europeans, looks at Adrian, according him the automatic respect of a fellow white man. [and responds] 'Not so great. But OK.'" p. 265

For Kai and Adrian we get myriad situations and interactions with numerous other characters, many of whom, like Adrian's wife Lisa, we scarcely meet. Or the nurse Balia, of whom we know little more than her horrendous fate in rape and death at the hands of the rebels even as she and Kai had just applied their medical skills to save lives, leaving Kai forever scarred by the experience. Then there are the children, who I realize as I write this, are perhaps symbols of hope: Adrian with daughter Kate in the home of his mother in northern U.K.; Abass, son of Kai's cousin, and the little girl on the beach in Sierra Leone.

The writing is beautiful. How do I describe what is beautiful writing? Well, read it, savor it, taste it, think about it, feel it and you can know too, whether you agree or disagree. Sentences, paragraphs, chapters are well constructed. Ideas and images flow believably. It is not perfect. Some relationships may seem a bit too contrived, too conveniently plotted, too serendipitous. Those unaccustomed to post modern fiction may be jolted by abrupt changes in voice or time or place. But overall the story is almost too believable, both in the horrors of war and poverty and chaos, and in the ennui of first world living – both escaped from and escaped to.

I just re-read Chapter 50. Oh, to be able to write such as it. (In a chapter, the story of an adult man with the mother who parented him, with his father, into the man he became.) I realize now this is a book likely to enrich into at least its third reading. Not but what it isn't enough on its first. But the comprehension of life, of the milieu that raises men like Adrian and Kai, of the challenges placed upon the modern world by conditions in places like Sierra Leone, of the potential reaches and limitations of modern psychology, of the challenges of economic and cultural limitations, of the devastation and promise of being human. At least right now, I place this book alongside Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in the regard and esteem I accord it. I give no higher accolade to a work of literature.

P.S. Here is another example of a particular kind of love and respect, for country, for profession, for people. Adrian was recently told the taciturn administrator of the mental hospital that his aim for his patients is: "To hold down a job. To enjoy a relationship. To marry and have children." p318. Attila, the administrator takes Adrian with him on a trip that overlooks the city and its slums. He says: "Anyway,...you carry on with your work. Just remember what it is you are returning them to."

"It is as close as he has ever come to praise." p319-20

But Adrian knows he has been given permission to carry on.

Rashida says

Forna is a gifted writer, and I want to make clear at the outset that my stars are not based on my estimation of her talent. If it was just about the way she can turn a phrase, well there would be no reason to give her anything less than 5 stars. She can write, and she does it well in this book. The language is lovely. However, I did not like this book. I just didn't. I liked the broad outline of the story. I did not like the way the details were filled in. It was as though the story is a watercolor on a large canvass, too large to be contained by this book. So Forna had to choose a section to focus on. She chose the corner (character) I least cared to have so closely dissected. Had she but moved her lens to the left a bit... then we would have been in business. But, Forna is free to write the story she wants to write, and I'm sure there are many who will enjoy seeing this country and this time through this particular lens. For them, this book will be highly rewarding. For me, it became a bit of slog, that I felt obligated to finish, because I was constantly reminded of that larger picture that I was so interested in learning more about.

Shannon says

This book has been described as intricate and that might be an understatement. But even with so many moving parts, the author is able to bring them all together beautifully. This story illustrates how it can become impossible to distinguish between love, obsession, and infatuation.

Intertwined between the romantic love story are illustrations of love's many other facets. An uncle and a nephew, a physically deformed man and the pain he endures in hopes of finding a wife, the widow, the mistress, best friends..... and the ability of Forna to capture it all in this book - brilliant.

As the anticipation builds page after page, finally events start to unfold, a twist always waiting somewhere in the pages that follow, chapter after chapter, it was almost too much. It was comparable to getting to the top of a roller coaster ride, that brief pause before going down, and then hoping you can catch your breath before the next turn.

Bruce says

The author of this infelicitously named novel lives in London and was born in Scotland, the daughter of a Scottish mother and Sierra Leonean father who was involved in politics in his native country, ultimately losing his life as a political dissident. *The Memory of Love* has received a number of literary prizes. The story takes place in Sierra Leone. There are a number of ways that a reader can approach a novel that is set in a country and culture about which he knows little. He might focus on commonalities with his own culture, or he might note the differences. He might concentrate on learning the history of the region, the politics, or the environment. Most often, I suppose, we try to do all of these, and the author, if he or she is successful, creates a particular story that draws us in without either boring or alienating us.

This narrative has a number of interesting and contrasting characters, and Forna’s sense of pace and contrast seem sensitive and skillful. Enough ambiguities are introduced early to create a sense of curiosity on the part of the reader, and Forna’s psychological intuitiveness is intriguing. She has early created a framework that demonstrates large lacunae that can be filled in later. Sometimes within a chapter a new paragraph skips to an entirely different time, place, and context without warning or explanation, but this does not seem

objectionable. The story is told by a third person omniscient narrator, and the larger context – political and cultural – is at first unclear. The dialogue is skillfully done, and characters begin to flesh themselves out. Forna uses changes in tense to draw the reader in or distance him from the narrative, and this is done with skill even as it is unobtrusive. She frequently uses sentence fragments, most of her sentences using simple syntax, and the repetitiveness of her style can become bothersome, although this happens only occasionally. One soon, however, has the sense that Forna may be biting off more than she can chew, as do so many young contemporary novelists. Is she trying to stuff her narrative with love, passion, threat, civil war and its brutality, mental illness, betrayal, the poverty and venality of a so-called third world nation? Is any single novel sturdy enough to bear all this weight? Most cannot.

Forna's writing evokes surprisingly little sense of actual place until late in the story. Except for occasional details and until we near the end, this story could be taking place in Africa, South America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, or elsewhere. Even a specific historical context seems almost peripheral to the narrative for much of the book, the politics and civil conflict seeming almost generic. Characters seem lost and curiously isolated, each having his own memories of the past, memories of loves lost and lives dislocated. Forna's protagonists often seem insubstantial, incomplete, enigmatic, and one-dimensional. They are shadowy figures despite their centrality to the narrative. One character states that this is nation in which everyone suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and this may explain some of the atmosphere of numbing and the fragmented and disintegrated nature of the personalities one encounters.

Very late in the book, as details of civil war and atrocities emerge, some issues begin to fall into place and be explicable, but coincidences do stretch one's credulity. Forna does, however, convincingly explain the psychological tenor of the country and the individuals who have lived through unspeakable horrors. Part of the way in which people cope with what has occurred is to create their own memories, each crafting his own history in such a way that it justifies and exonerates, enabling each to live with others and with himself. History becomes malleable, memories become fluid, all in the service of surviving psychologically. Truth becomes elusive, something to be written by each person.

The book ends ambiguously with suggestions of life reemerging for some characters, others seeming lost and adrift. A few too many coincidences and conveniences occur for this reader's satisfaction, and Forna looks a bit too much like a juggler who had too many balls in the air, surreptitiously jettisoning some at the last minute and hoping no one would notice. A satisfying book in some ways, it is also flawed, leaving one uneasy about its ultimate value. Maybe reading some of Forna's other works would clarify her ultimate stature as a novelist.

Thing Two says

I can tell I've finished a moving book when I sit at dinner and explain detail after detail of the book to my non-reading husband, and then HE starts asking about it. This happened to us last night, sharing a sushi boat, sipping our wine, and discussing the civil war in Sierra Leone which lasted from 1991-2002 this time.

To say *The Memory of Love* is about the civil war in Sierra Leone is to dismiss this as a war novel, but it is much, much more. It's about how war ravishes the minds of its participants. It's about how war destroys the future and the past. It's about love. It's about loss. It's about post-traumatic stress disorder, and why people lie. It's about the best book I've read this year.

This is the reason I read many books ... to find the jewels. This one shines!!!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHq8Rc... (BBC interview)

http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/201...

* I re-read this book October 2013. I'd done the audio version on my first read, and wanted to see if I enjoyed it as much in hard copy. I did!

Emer says

Beautiful. Sprawling. Emotional.
Set in Sierra Leone this is a book that explores all the facets of love and of war through the intertwining stories of three men, Elias Cole, Adrian Lockheart and Kai Mansaray, and their loves, Saffia, Mamakay and Nenebah. It explores survivor's guilt, PTSD and the fugue state, marriage, friendship and betrayal.

I loved the way this book wove the three stories of the men together. I enjoyed reading about Elias' story the best as he was an utterly fascinating character and not always the most reliable of storytellers! Adrian and Kai's relationship was a beautiful study of a friendship between men. It was so multi-layered and there was always something else to discover about these two as the pages passed by and their story really did surprise me. Both men were troubled... Adrian was working in Sierra Leone away from his family and Kai was a doctor trying to come to terms with the effects of the civil war. I know very little about the civil war in Sierra Leone but this book really made it come alive through the survivors and how they dealt with that survival. Survivors guilt and PTSD featured very heavily in this book as Adrian worked as a clinical psychologist.

The female characters in this book were also incredibly appealing to read about because they were always kept at arm's length because the book was told from the points of view of the male characters. As a reader I kept wanting to know more and more about these independently minded women and it kept me shuttling through the pages. I adored Mamakay; she was probably my favourite character in the whole novel as she very much came alive with the author's descriptions of her and her life story.

The story kept surprising me until the end and I was incredibly moved by all of the characters affected by the war.
Recommended.

Favourite Quotes

“People are wrong when they talk of love at first sight. It is neither love nor lust. No. As she walks away from you, what you feel is loss. A premonition of loss.”

“The memories come at unguarded moments, when he cannot sleep. In the past, at the height of it, he had attended to people whose limbs had been severed. Working with a Scottish pain expert years later, he treated some of those same patients again. They complained of feeling pain in the lost limbs, the aching ghost of a hewn hand or foot. It was a trick of the mind, the Scotsman explained to Kai: the nerves continued to transmit signals between the brain and the ghost limb. The pain is real, yes, but it is a memory of pain.
And when he wakes from dreaming of her, is it not the same for him? The hollowness in his chest, the tense yearning, the loneliness he braces against every morning until he can immerse himself in work and forget. Not love. Something else, something with a power that endures. Not love, but a memory of love.”

‘Do you know what it took to survive in a place like this, where everyone was watched all the time, when you never had any idea who your friends were? Waiting to see who would be next.’
Adrian stands up and moves towards her; he wants to take her in his arms. ‘I imagine it took great courage,’ he says.
She moves away, as though his touch would burn her. From the other side of the verandah she looks at him and laughs humourlessly. ‘Oh of course, the new orthodoxy. Everyone’s a victim now. It’s official. But you see, that’s where you’re wrong, Adrian. Courage is not what it took to survive. Quite the opposite! You had to be a coward to survive. To make sure you never raised your head above the parapet, never questioned, never said anything that might get you into trouble.”

“How does a man like him believe in love? A man trained to analyse the component parts of emotion. Measures of neurochemicals, of serotonin, hormones, oxytocin and vasopressin. He who would name, classify and diagnose every nuance of the human soul into attachments, complexes, conditions and disorders. There exists, somewhere, a scale for love invented by one of his profession. Others have identified the neurological reward pathways of the brain, the tripwires that mark the way to love. And there are others still who say love is but a beautiful form of madness.
Adrian does not know.”

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three and a half stars

Jill says

Every now and then I read a book that is so powerfully crafted that I am in its spell for days afterwards: The Lizard Cage. In the Company of Angels. The Lotus Eaters. White Dog Fell from the Sky. And to this group, I now add Aminatta Forna’s masterwork, The Memory of Loss.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that each of these works, at its core, is about the survival of the human spirit and the triumphant resurgence of love during the worst times of war and torture. At our harshest times, we become the most human and reveal our best and our worst.

So it is with this story. Adrian Lockheart, a British psychologist, whose heart may indeed have become frozen and locked, comes to Sierra Leone with the best of intentions. He quickly becomes friends with Ka Mansaray, a gifted and tormented young orthopedic surgeon, whose current patient Foday may be a metaphor for the country: crippled and in need of reconstruction to embrace the future. Adrian also deals with a patient of his own: the elderly Elias Cole, an unreliable storyteller if ever there was one, whose captivating recitations center on post-colonial times and his obsession with the wife of a colleague.

All of these men (with the exception of Foday) will be swept into the vortex of one charismatic woman whose present and past history will define them within themselves and in relation to each other. While this plotting may rely a tad too heavily on coincidence, the characters are so fleshed out and the story is so stunningly told that this plot device can easily be given a pass.

In this “land of the mute”, the stories that are told are compelling and can also be self-serving. As one character states, “It’s happening all over the country. People are blotting out what happened, fiddling with

the truth, creating their own version of events to fill in the blanks. A version of the truth which puts them in a good light, that wipes out whatever they did or failed to do and makes certain none o them will be blamed."

It is up to the characters to recognize the silence of the lie, even when the lie becomes internalized. Ms. Forna delineates the two types of liars well: the less educated who express their conflicts physically through psychosomatic illnesses, muteness, paralysis, nightmares, fugues…and those who are "clever" enough to intellectualize their experiences and transform them into a different type of story.

At its heart, The Memory of Love is a love song to a country. When Ms. Forna writes, "People are wrong when they talk of love at first sight. It is neither love nor lust. No. As she walks away from you, when you

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Roger Brunyate says

I fall down, I stand up

Where to start, in praise of this amazing book? Perhaps from the fact that Aminatta Forna, a woman, writes a novel where all three major characters are men, inhabiting their minds so naturally that it was not until almost the end that I stopped to wonder at it. Not that her writing is devoid of the female presence; the title of the book is well-chosen. Whatever else it is, the novel is threaded through with love stories, or rather, in most cases, the memories of love. I thought more than once of Gabriel García Márquez and *Love in the Time of Cholera* ; Forna has a similar ability to tie a historical theme of great scope to the lives of a few individuals, shown in all their telling detail.

It would do no harm to look up the history of Sierra Leone, where most of the novel takes place, from the late 1960s into the present century, though eventually the main facts will emerge. The details are unimportant, but the pattern will be familiar enough: independence from Great Britain, a period of relative stability broken by recurrent coups, descent to one-party dictatorship, and eventually violent civil war fought by child soldiers high on drugs. The worst of these is over by the time the book opens, around 2000, but the scars and memories remain. The country seems gripped in a fatalism that one character describes in the phrase "I fall down, I get up"—fatalism tempered with a basic human resilience.

Kai Mansaray, a young surgeon, has had to deal with the physical wounds all through the war, limbs cleaved by machetes chief among them. His carefree student days seem a thing of the past, when he was making great plans with his best friend Tejani and Nenebah, the woman they both loved. But Tejani has emigrated to America and Nenebah has left him. Now Kai buries himself in his work, rejoicing in his small successes and trying to forget the memories of a particular incident when the war touched him directly with a personal and shaming violence.

Early in the book, Kai crashes in a room at the hospital occupied by Adrian Lockheart, a psychologist seconded for a year from Britain. Adrian is married, with a young daughter, but we sense that his year abroad is also an attempt to escape from mounting problems at home. He has become something of a specialist in PTSD, and gets closely involved, even obsessed, with several of the cases in his care. There is both a horror and a beauty in Adrian's work that reminds me strongly of how the theme of PTSD is explored by Thomas Kennedy in *In the Company of Angels*, a comparison I intend as highest praise. He quickly becomes close friends with Kai, and eventually becomes attracted to an African woman himself, so he provides a different pair of eyes on present-day Sierra Leone. But his researches, interviews, and discoveries also make him a link with the past.

That past is represented chiefly by Elias Cole, an elderly academic slowly dying in a private room of the

hospital. For some reason, Elias needs to talk about his past, and Adrian becomes in effect his stenographer. His memories go back to 1969, the year of the Moon landing, when he was a young lecturer obsessed with desire for Saffia, the wife of a charismatic young colleague. This was not a period of civil war so much as the steadily closing tentacles of a police state, and Elias' part in it, though also leading to violence and death, was a quieter one. There are moral issues at play here that, though in an entirely different context, remind me of Graham Greene, most especially *The Quiet American.* Yet Elias seems the simplest of the three protagonists and his yearning for Saffia is the earliest embodiment of the novel's title. His segments of the story seem illuminated in a clear light that we welcome at first, and only gradually begin to question as we discover how the three major strands in the book are in fact connected.

Reading this book made me realize how many novels have been published recently that deal with survivors from war or human rights abuses in their own countries, whether in Africa, Southeast Asia, or South America. It feels that a full third of what I have read recently have been of this type, and there are several more on my pile. But *The Memory of Love* stands above most of these for the sheer quality of its writing, the closeness of its concentration on individual people and the details of their lives, and its refusal to take the easy route of making the mere fact of such atrocities an automatic handle on the reader's sympathies. It is a dense book, a long one, and undeniably sad. But hopeful too, hopeful because human. It will be hard now to pick up any others in the genre again.

Fiona says

I was given this book several years ago by a gentleman I know with an incredibly exciting job that involves lots of travel, eye-watering anecdotes over dinner and, er, a legitimate favourite Somalian pirate that he knows on first name terms. His daughter is one of my best friends, and he knows my specialism in international and humanitarian law, so he'll occasionally send me interesting articles, white papers - and, once, this book. It sat on my shelf for a long time because I am rubbish, and reading about war zones is more difficult for me these days than it used to be. But after several weeks of needing comfort reading and not being comforted by it, I wanted something difficult, to give me a bit of perspective.

I loved it and I love it. Stories of Sierra Leone ebb and flow around a few focal points: a British psychiatrist, in Sierra Leone to help people - along with a dissection of how it feels to live in a place where you have British psychiatrists come and make it their mission to try and fix you, to see your head and the town you grew up in as something that can inherently be fixed. A Sierra Leonean surgeon, who dreams of joining his childhood friend in America, whose only way of keeping going with his work is to get tunnel vision and embrace that. A dying academic whose tunnel vision is, presumably, the only way he can still manage to look himself in the eye. What it means to take responsibility in a place where 99% of people have PTSD, to take responsibility for having done things that can only be called *atrocities*, for failing to stop them happening to other people, for facilitating them and for trying to patch things back together afterwards. What counts as a way out.

Forna is, of course, extremely well placed to discuss all of this. Her mother was British, her father Sierra Leonean, and she writes locals and ex-pats very well. She writes kindly, and broadly. Her writing is marinated in experience and observation, and much the better for it. None of her characters are unsympathetic, but then, they are the ones telling their stories and still alive and well enough to do that, so of course that is their prerogative to make you be sympathetic towards them whether they deserve it or not. In a sense, that's what having a voice means. It is how Forna explores her themes, rather than necessarily the themes she explores, that is her strength. Deftly. Very deftly.

I thought it was beautiful and intelligent, and I feel like I have more empathy and a little more understanding

of people after reading than before. This is a thing I ought to have read, and now I have, and I'm glad I did. I see what my friend was getting at when he gave it to me. I don't have very many things like it in my field of literary attention, and now I want more of them.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

On the one hand, this is a well-written book with good character development and a solid sense of place. On the other, it has some structural issues that make me hesitate to recommend it.

The Memory of Love is set in present-day Sierra Leone, and follows three men: a dying academic, Elias, relates his life story (or a version of it) to a British psychologist, Adrian, who meanwhile befriends a local surgeon, Kai. It is a character-driven book, gradually moving deeper into the characters' lives as it goes; Adrian learns more about the country while Elias and Kai must deal with their own baggage from the country's recent civil war.

On the one hand, this book deserves better than three stars; Forna is a clearly talented writer. The book has believable characters and is full of acute observations, and the writing style is solid. It also has an unmistakable thematic depth, and while it can't offer an easy solution for a place like Sierra Leone, it makes sharp observations about what the country needs and what it doesn't. Dealing with the aftermath of the war rather than the war itself is an unusual but mature choice: the book never wallows in easy drama, but instead focuses on how violence changes people and the society they live in. The point is not to show us atrocities, but to show us people, and it does that well. I can understand how it's won some prizes.

But.... the plot, the structure, the point-of-view. First, if you do read this, be aware that the first 150 pages or so are a tough slog: not only because they focus heavily on the odious Elias (who fortunately recedes as the novel goes on) and his stalking of a happily married woman, but because the story is told through a slow and sometimes monotonous accretion of detail, building very gradually through mundane events and description. Second, the structure seems oddly lopsided in places: Elias dominates the early part of the book despite having little importance later; a key character, Mamakay, doesn't appear until about halfway through; the subplot revolving around Agnes, one of Adrian's patients, is abruptly dropped at the 2/3 mark.

As for point-of-view, while Forna writes the male characters very believably (well, if you want to take *my* word for it), the book suffers from not including any of the women's POVs. The most important female characters, while they seem to be interesting people, are seen entirely through the eyes of men who are attracted to them and with whom they are fairly reticent, which leaves them less than completely three-dimensional. The ending initially seemed too equivocal to me as well, but I've since learned through another reader's sleuthing that the resolution is there.... but blink and you'll miss it.

So in the end, I'm not sure whether I'd recommend this or not.... give it a go if it sounds like your thing, but read the sample before you buy.

Heledd Davies says

As a book set in a period of war and turmoil and based around the concept of love, I felt that 'The Memory Of Love' was oddly lacking in emotion. Reading the reviews on a lot of other books I've read about romance under horrific circumstances, the main criticism seems to be that they are over sensationalised and use cheap tricks to pull at our heartstrings. Well this book doesn't do that. The traumatising events that occur to the

characters are told in a largely matter-of-fact way, and although the author goes to painstaking detail on the day to day observances of the characters (which is extremely frustrating at points), the actual events of the story seem to be glossed over, until I found myself feeling totally unaffected by the slightly predictable ending. Maybe the problem lies in the fact that I couldn't make myself care about the characters who on the whole I found pretty unlikable. The possible exception is Kai, and he is the only character whose 'love story' seems at all genuine, but unfortunately he's the character we hear the least from.
Overall I can't say I enjoyed the book, although it would be unfair to say that it was a chore to read. It has its fair share of touching moments and the actual events of the story are as shocking as those of a war-based novel should be, but the perspective just didn't allow me to connect with it in the way I wanted to. I realise the author was commenting on a country that refuses to talk about its past, and the tone reflects this, but its reluctance to delve into the feelings of the characters just made it seem a bit empty to me. Others have clearly been affected by this book in the way it was intended, so maybe I just missed the sensationalism!

Aubrey says

> *This is the way Europeans talk, as though everybody shared their experiences. Adrian's tone suggested that the desire for something was all it took. They all live with endless possibilities, leave their homes for the sake of something new. But the dream is woven from the fragment of freedom.*

I had hopes for this work that were not circumscribed by the formulaic route it ultimately took. Rest assured, there is a great deal of quality to be found within the realms of writing style and political commentary, enough of each in quotable form to make for a very nice miniseries if the producers took their task seriously enough. However, at the end of the reading day and at the beginning of the writing, 'serviceable' is not the word I want to be left with. Considering that I've engaged with many a composition which in the space of 120 pages took on what this blatantly refused to do in 445, it's not as if my standards are unreasonable. It's simply a matter of paying attention to, on a systematic level, who is the subject and who is, frequently if not always, considered the object.

> *No sooner than we think we can get away with it, we do as we please. It doesn't require the breakdown of a social order. It takes a six-hour plane flight.'*

In the words of the inimitable Elizabeth Warren: if you don't have a seat at the table, you're probably on the menu. The more you diverge from the het cis able middle class to upper some type of Christian white boy, the bigger the chance that the most popular narratives of today will sacrifice you on the pedestal of pathos. Perhaps the horrendous trope of a cover should have warned me off, but publishers are not authors, and what once mandated three volume tomes for the sake of multitask profit now prefers certain bodies in certain times be put on display. When I set out, as my recorded statuses show, I was thrilled by initial findings of a story that did not cut costs for the sake of the usual centricity of clarity. First one male character point of view, than another, and then one other, but two of them not white in a postwar setting, and On Beauty had taught me how a first person was not required for a woman of color when an author knew what they were doing. And so I read, and I read, and I read.

> *The truth is none of you wanted to know then, so why do you care now?*

The problem, ultimately, is the potential. So many divine moments of concise comprehension and so many human beings to engage with, but what underlay the course was not enough to prevent the narrative structure from buckling under its own weight. There was trauma, and tragedy, and the breed multigenerational pain only imperialism can sustain, but every content of spotlit character was built on the backs of one or more

women of color whose stories were made to fit into the flesh of others, rather than fleshed out in their own accord. I held off on judgment when my manic pixie dream girl senses started tingling, but when the last mystery resolved itself as a girlfriend in a refrigerator, I couldn't have said that I hadn't seen it coming. Coming as I currently am from classes on 19th, 17th, and 3rd-12th century narratological study, I know the arguments of the times and the places and all that jazz. If you try to extend this to 2010, I'm going to laugh.

> *Here enemies are a luxury only the poor can afford.*

In short, my woman of color author trope backfired. Not because of lack of quality, but because the type of character I can usually expect only a certain demographic of author to attempt was avoided to a seemingly conscientious extent. True, the few white women were here, there, sidekick echo chambers, but none of them were annihilated. This writer's got a great prose style and I have much hope for her future endeavors, but in the class of suitable comparisons, she's no Adichie.

> *The darkness seems to hurtle at them, breaking apart on the windscreen and closing up again in their wake. Abass says, 'Do we have to keep quiet?'*
> *'No,' says Kai. 'No, we don't.'*
> *'What if we lived in that town? Would we have to be quiet then?'*
> *In the silence all Kai can hear is the rush of air. 'I don't know,' he says.*