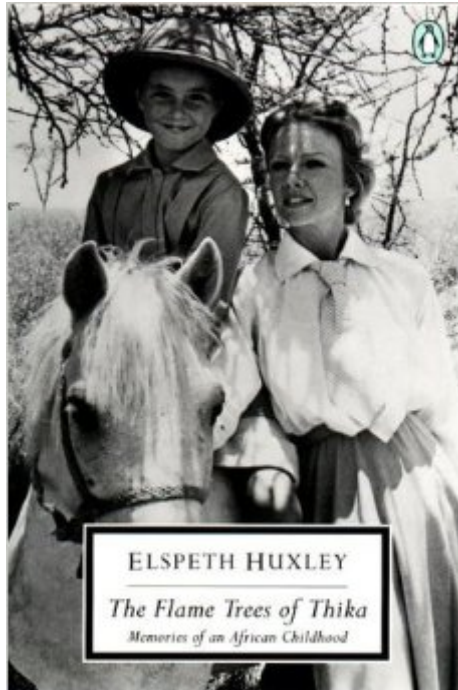


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# The Flame Trees Of Thika: Memories Of An African Childhood (Classic, 20th-Century, Penguin)



## Synopsis

In an open cart Elspeth Huxley set off with her parents to travel to Thika in Kenya. As pioneering settlers, they built a house of grass, ate off a damask cloth spread over packing cases, and discovered "the hard way" the world of the African. With an extraordinary gift for detail and a keen sense of humor, Huxley recalls her childhood on the small farm at a time when Europeans waged their fortunes on a land that was as harsh as it was beautiful. For a young girl, it was a time of adventure and freedom, and Huxley paints an unforgettable portrait of growing up among the Masai and Kikuyu people, discovering both the beauty and the terrors of the jungle, and enduring the rugged realities of the pioneer life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The African landscape and the people in "The Flame Trees of Thika" became so real to me that I grieved when the book ended. Six-year-old Elspeth Huxley's parents and friends became my parents and friends. Elspeth said of Tilly, her perfectionist mother, "it was the details others might not notice that destroyed her, the pleasure of achievement." However Robin, Elspeth's idealistic father, "as a rule, had his mind on distant greater matters always much more promising and congenial than those closer at hand." Other notable characters included Elspeth's neighbors the beautiful, Lattice and her formal husband, Hereward, the kindly Ian, their house guest, who was in love with Lattice; Juma, their Swahili cook, Sammy their Masai/Kikuyu headman and Njombo, the

Kikuyu laborer's spokesman. Huxley has the rare ability to understand and convey the culture and viewpoint of both the European colonial settlers and the Kikuyu and Masai people. The materialistic Europeans were critical of the nomadic Kikuyus who do not aspire to change, tame, possess or improve the countryside. The Kikuya, in turn, were mystified at the white man's sense of property ownership and the concept of theft. For the Kikuyu helping yourself to the possessions of the white man "was no more robbing than to take the honey from wild bees." At the heart of the story is the beauty and the challenge of life in Africa in the early 20th Century.

This book is a real literary treasure. I read it first as a teenager. It astonished me then, with its unique portrayal of Africa. Who could fail to love the African wilderness and its diverse people after reading *The Flame Trees of Thika*?! Africa seen through Huxley's youthful eyes is given a magical quality I have never again encountered (though BBC came close to portraying it in their rendition of this book). And it continues to astonish me now, twenty years later (oh dear, I have dated myself). The spectacular visual imagery from that book are a treasured keepsake, and the book itself is nothing less than a 20th Century masterpiece. It is a priceless gem and well worth the cost.

This book is on the same sort of rank and the same genre as *Out of Africa*. A literary autobiography set in Kenya during an uncertain and enterprising colonial era before the First World War. Its strongest elements include a deep sensitivity to the travails of animal life up against white hunters and farmers, very full accounts of the Kikuyu people and their rivalries with other Africans and it also paints a vivid portrait of pioneering planters and their servants in the shadow of the Great War. The vantage of the book is greater than that of *Out of Africa* by Blixen being a less personal tale. It is a faithful, sometimes harrowing tale culled from an excellent store of memories representing times and scenes gone by. Huxley is not short on romance and tragedy. This book is an ideal companion to those interested in the British Empire and African anthropology. For naturalists it provides breathtaking accounts of white hunters and their quarry as a retrospective commentary on man's abuse of Africa's wild heritage. Huxley writes quietly, sensitively and impartially providing philosophic insights in a heuristic and magical narrative. Always compelling, this is an important primary text.

Elsbeth Huxley is in my opinion much underrated. She is a magnificent writer, and should be ranked right up there with Isac Dinesen. Her childhood recollections, both this novel and '*The Mottled Lizard*', are not only an insight into a curious cast of East African pioneers, but an unpretentious and

innocent view of Africans, colonialists and their common humanity through the eyes of a young girl. Highly recommended reading.

In 1913, a little English girl named Elspeth relocated with her family from their native country to begin a coffee plantation in the wilds of Kenya. Similar in a way to Laura Ingall Wilder's adventurous and sentimental "take" on what was surely a very difficult experience for her family, Elspeth remembers Kenya as a wonderful place and tells us with lingering excitement of her experiences there in the short time before the First World War changed nearly everything. A delightful memoir that is a pleasure every time it's read.

If you are interested in other cultures and ways of life, this book is a treasure. Yes, there has to be a bit of willing suspension of disbelief that this would be the way a child would see and describe things, but if you can live with the fact that this is an adult looking back on her childhood, it's a small thing to get over. The descriptions I found perfect--very vivid, yet not so extensive that they became boring and slowed down the story. And just in what happens and isn't even excused (her parents leave her with neighbors, she accompanies the neighbor's worker to the city, where he leaves her with some more strangers--we'd be calling the police, and her parents are just slightly inconvenienced! And everyone else there has just left their small children at boarding school, not seeing them for years!), the book gives a lot of food for thought about the realities of life in that time and place.

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