

UPCOMING EVENTS

Thursday, October 22, 7:30 PM. Monthly Meeting. Caltech Y is located off San Pasqual between Hill and Holliston, south side. You will see two curving walls forming a gate to a path--our building is just beyond. Help us plan future actions on Sudan, the 'War on Terror', death penalty and more.

Tuesday, November 10, 7:30 PM. Note we're back at Caltech! Letter writing meeting at Caltech Athenaeum, corner of Hill and California in Pasadena. This informal gathering is a great way for newcomers to get acquainted with Amnesty.

Sunday, November 15, 6:30 PM. Rights Readers Human Rights Book Discussion Group. Vroman's Book Bookstore, 695 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena. This month we read "The House at Sugar Beach" by Helene Cooper.

COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Hi everyone,

Summer's back! I for one am glad. This is my favorite time of year, what they used to call Indian Summer. Hope you are enjoying the relaxing breezes and sunshine.

This year the Western Regional Conference is from Nov 6 to 8 in San Francisco. This year's theme is "Free and Equal in Dignity and Rights". It's not too late to sign up but hurry as the deadline is October 23. See

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/page.do?n=788> for more info or contact the Regional Office at 415-288-1800. Hope to see you there!

Another event that members may be interested in is Sunday October 25 from 3-5 pm at St. John's Cathedral, 514 W. Adams in LA. "The Intersection of Islamophobia and Torture" is sponsored by several ecumenical organizations, including the Episcopal Diocese of LA.

The new Demand Dignity Campaign: "While we in the U.S. are focusing much of our energy around maternal health and the national healthcare debate, Amnesty International as a whole will soon be campaigning on a variety of issues related to poverty and human rights including human rights abuses associated with slums and corporate accountability especially around the extractive industries." (from the AIUSA website)

Con cariño,
Kathy

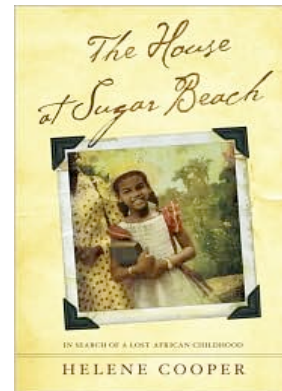
RIGHTS READERS

Human Rights Book Discussion Group

Keep up with Rights Readers at <http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>

Next Rights Readers meeting:
Sunday, November 15, 6:30 PM

Vroman's Bookstore
695 E. Colorado Boulevard
in Pasadena



The House at Sugar Beach

By Helene Cooper

New York Times Book Review

By CAROLINE ELKINS

Published: September 5, 2008

The skeletal remains of Africa's numerous civil wars litter the continent, from the easternmost reaches of Somalia to the western shores of Liberia. It is there, overlooking the picturesque beaches of the Atlantic Ocean, that unknown numbers of human remains — victims of Samuel Doe's reign of terror — haunt the earth. One building that serves as their communal headstone, itself a virtual skeleton is physical testimony to the civil war that racked Liberia for nearly 25 years. This macabre marker is the house at Sugar Beach.

In her masterly memoir, Helene Cooper brings us back to the halcyon years when Sugar Beach, her family's home, embodied the elite privilege and disco-age chic to which Liberia's upper class aspired. The Coopers' mansion, 22 rooms in all, rose in solitude out of the plum trees and vines that thicketed Liberia's undeveloped coastline. Inside was a living homage to the 1970s, complete with velvet couches in a sunken living room, marble floors and a special nook for storing the plastic Christmas tree. Outside, where a carpet of grass stretched to the thunderous

Atlantic, multiple servants made their home, and the latest-model American cars — from a Lincoln Continental to a two-tone green Pontiac Grand Prix — awaited their next 11-mile journey into downtown Monrovia.

Fate, so it seemed, handed Helene Cooper a “one-in-a-million lottery ticket” when she was born into “what passed for the landed gentry upper class of Africa’s first independent country.” Both sides of Cooper’s family traced their roots to Li-beria’s founding fathers — freed slaves from the United States who fought disease and the recalcitrant local population to forge a new nation. Their bravery and ingenuity were legendary, and their descendants soon formed Liberia’s upper caste.

At its heart, “The House at Sugar Beach” is a coming-of-age story told with unremitting honesty. With her pedigree and her freedom from internalized racism, Cooper is liberated to enjoy a social universe that is a fluid mix of all things American and African. “None of that American post-Civil War/civil rights movement baggage to bog me down with any inferiority complex about whether I was as good as white people,” she declares triumphantly. “No European garbage to have me wondering whether some British colonial master was somehow better than me. Who needs to struggle for equality? Let everybody else try to be equal to me.”

The young Helene Cooper oozes the awkward confidence of a privileged adolescent, and it is through her bespectacled eyes that we see the carefree decadence of Liberia in the years just before it descended into chaos. They are also the lenses through which we are introduced to Cooper’s distinctly female world. Atop the matriarchy is her maternal grandmother, the unforgettable Mama Grand. Cooper’s side-splitting portrayal of this hard-nosed, self-made landowner is nothing short of brilliant. With her gold-capped tooth glistening, Mama Grand is equally capable of dressing down a Lebanese merchant who “thought he was going to cheat me out of my rent” and berating the entire American government on camera for “60 Minutes.” The women are the backbone of Liberia in its heyday, but they show their true strength when the country collapses.

A subtle, nostalgic ache for a childhood foreshortened is the watermark imprinted on every page of Cooper’s story. The idyll at Sugar Beach, with its Michael Jackson LPs and Nancy Drew mysteries, was shattered when a ragtag group of soldiers — part of the rebel force that

brought down the Tolbert government in 1980, and with it over 150 years of old-guard, one-party rule — arrived on the scene. The stench of their inebriation, of their lust for violence, overpowered the tranquility that still lingered in the bucolic air of Cooper’s sheltered world. Her mother would try in vain to exorcise the odor — and the memories — the rebel intruders inscribed on her body and mind after they gang-raped her. Mommee sacrificed herself to protect the innocence of Helene and her other daughters, Marlene and Eunice, locking them in an upstairs room before the soldiers forced her down into the basement.

Cooper soon went into exile, joining thousands of other members of the Liberian elite who managed to escape the rebels’ murderous pillaging. Mommee and Marlene were also among them. Eunice was not. The daughter of a poor upcountry mother, she had been taken into the household at Sugar Beach when Helene was a lonely 8-year-old in need of companionship. She quickly became “Mrs. Cooper’s daughter” and was treated as one of Mommee’s own. Yet over the years there were subtle reminders of Eunice’s different status. And when it was time to flee, painful choices were made. Eunice was not a blood relation, and so she was left behind.

While Cooper’s memoir is mesmerizing in its portrayal of a Liberia rarely witnessed, its description of the psychological devastation — and coping mechanisms — brought on by profound loss is equally captivating. The second half of the book tells the story of Helene’s reinvention. Her aristocratic Liberian pedigree meant nothing in the hallways of her new school. She became the suspicious immigrant, spending lunchtime hiding in bathroom stalls and the recesses of the library rather than face the scrutiny and ridicule of her American classmates.

Cooper’s perseverance and immense talent with language eventually catapulted her into a career as a journalist. Her success at *The Wall Street Journal* and later *The New York Times* is nearly as noteworthy as her ability to compartmentalize — or, some might say, dissociate. This mental sleight of hand is what affords her the psychological space to create a new life and cultivate her writer’s craft. It would be a mistake to see her ruminations over race and class in America as the hypocritical ranting of a once-privileged African. They are, instead, a reflection of her internalized journey, part of the process of becoming whole.

The walls holding back the guilt of her early entitlement, the destruction of her childhood, the murder of family and friends, and the abandonment of her foster sister would finally come crushing down under the literal weight of an American tank in Iraq. When the tank destroyed the Humvee in which she was riding, Cooper narrowly escaped death. But once she was extricated from the wreck, her mind traveled to a different war. "At that moment," she writes, "as I lay in the sand in the desert, my chemsuit soaked with what turned out to be oil, not blood, I thought of Liberia."

For the first time in over 20 years, she soon returned to her former homeland. There, in the ravaged streets, in the overgrown jungles of yesteryear's plantations, she confronted the ghosts of the dead — and encountered the living survivors. With much suffering and loss, Eunice had miraculously endured the hell of the Doe era, as well as the civil wars and deep poverty that accompanied the ascent of Charles Taylor to Liberia's presidency. Eventually, the two sisters were reunited and returned to the house at Sugar Beach. In the defiled shadow of onetime grandeur, Cooper embraced the enormity of her past, and finally came of age.

Caroline Elkins is an associate professor of history at Harvard and the author of "Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya," which won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 2006.



Helene Cooper

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Helene Cooper is the diplomatic correspondent for the New York Times. Prior to that assignment, she was the assistant editorial page editor of the New York Times, after twelve years as a reporter and foreign correspondent at the Wall Street Journal. She was born in Monrovia, Liberia, and lives in the Washington, D.C., area.

ACTION ON HEALTH CARE BILL

PLEASE SEND TO SENATOR MAX BAUCUS, CHRISTOPHER DODD, OR HARRY REID

Senator Max Baucus
511 Hart Senate Office Bldg.,
Washington, DC 20510
202 224-2651
baucus.senate.gov/contact/index.cfm

Senator Christopher Dodd
448 Russell Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-2823
dodd.senate.gov/webmail/

Senator Harry Reid
528 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington DC 20510
(202) 224-3542
reid.senate.gov/contact/

Dear Senator _____

I am writing to urge you to ensure that the final Senate health reform bill provides a Medicare-like public health care plan that everyone can use.

Health care is a human right, not a commodity. A key step toward fulfilling this right and recognizing it as a public good would be for the Senate to provide a Medicare-like public plan that guarantees access for all, offers comprehensive benefits, and is publicly funded, without using private companies as middlemen.

I thank you for your efforts in leading the Senate's work on health care reform, which offers a historic opportunity to take important strides toward making the U.S. health care system more universal, equitable and accountable.

The American people need a Medicare-like public plan for all as a critical step toward fulfilling our human right to health care. I urge you to seize this opportunity.

Thank you in advance for your action on this matter.

Sincerely,
your name and address

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON PUBLIC HEALTH CARE PLAN

A human rights assessment demonstrates that when private companies stand between us and our rights, too many people are unable to get the care they need. Publicly financed and administered health care is the strongest vehicle for creating a system that is truly universal, equitable and accountable.

If we recognize health care as a right and a public good, shared fairly by all, we can create a health care system that works for everyone. To do so, the Senate must show leadership now and provide a Medicare-like public health care plan that guarantees access for all and has comprehensive benefits, without using private companies as middlemen.

The Senate's legislation is crucial in determining the fate of publicly funded health care for all. The Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT), is currently finalizing its bill, which must then be marked up and voted on. That committee – and the Senate as a whole – faces huge pressure from the insurance industry and other forces committed to keeping health care a commodity, not a public good.

Once the Finance Committee finalizes its legislation, that bill will be reconciled with that of the Senate health committee, led by Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT) in the absence of the committee chair, Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-MA), who is ill. **Note: Kennedy passed away after this was written.** The full Senate, led by Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV), will then revise and vote on final legislation.

Baucus, Dodd and Reid are key players who will decide whether the Senate's legislation creates a Medicare-like public plan for all. This would be a key step towards treating health care as a public good and one day ensuring that the human right to health care becomes a reality for everyone in the United States. Write them today!

DEMAND DIGNITY CAMPAIGN

"Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of

a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life." – Nelson Mandela

Everyone everywhere has the human right to essential health care and housing, as well as clean water, food, education and decent work. Everyone has the right to security, both physical and economic; to freedom from discrimination; and to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

The fact that violations of the right to health care or the right to clean water are common does not make those rights violations acceptable. Governments have the duty to respect, protect and fulfill the full range of human rights, at home and abroad. Private sector actors and international financial institutions also have an obligation to adhere to human rights standards.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees these rights and more – both freedom from oppression and the right to live a life with dignity. But more than sixty years after its adoption in the aftermath of the horrors of World War II and the Great Depression, the aspiration of a world free from want and fear is still unrealized for millions of people living in poverty.

At its core, poverty is not merely a question of lack of income. It is a question of one's right to housing, adequate food, clean water, and a decent standard of health care being at risk. Thousands die every day from preventable disease, contaminated water and hunger-related diseases, and those who live in poverty often lack the power to do much about that insecurity. These are human rights violations.

Amnesty International, as the world's largest grassroots human rights movement, is committed to addressing all human rights violations, including those of poverty. Given the size and breadth of our movement, we have a unique role to play in changing the terms of the debate around poverty and human rights. Our brand new Demand Dignity Campaign will be rolling out in 2009 and we will contribute to the work of defending everyone's right to live with dignity. We will do so by helping to empower communities and human rights defenders to win equal access to human rights and accountability for human rights abuses from their own governments and from international actors in the state, private and multilateral sectors. The first area of human rights violations we will be looking into are those related to the right to health, and specifically a woman's right to

maternal health, in the context of an ongoing human rights scandal: maternal mortality at home and abroad.

MATERNAL MORTALITY AND THE HUMAN RIGHT TO HEALTH CARE

Around the world, one woman dies every minute -- half a million women every year -- and many more face long-term debilitating health problems, due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth. Almost all of these deaths are preventable. That the world allows them to continue in 2009, when we know how to stop them, is a human rights crisis. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) -- an international framework to cut world poverty in half by 2015 -- includes cutting the rate of maternal deaths by three-quarters. But that goal has seen the least progress out of all the MDGs.

Amnesty International's work on maternal health continues our efforts to advance women's human rights, most recently in our Stop Violence Against Women Campaign. Complacency in the face of maternal mortality reflects discrimination against women, and it perpetuates that discrimination. As Mahmoud Fathalla, past president of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics, said:

"Women are not dying because of diseases we cannot treat. They are dying because societies have yet to make the decision that their lives are worth saving."

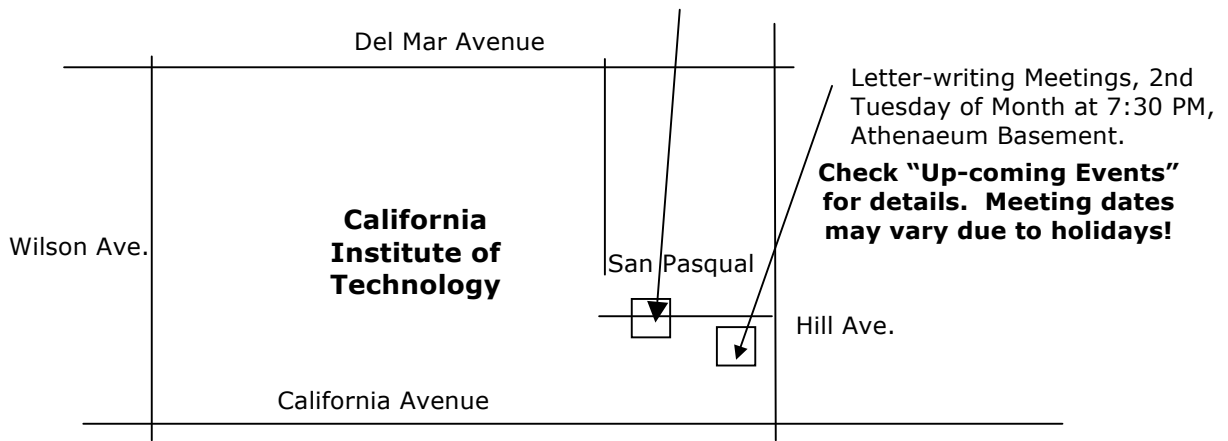
Maternal mortality is a crucial issue all over the world: Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and even here at home. This year will see the release of reports on Peru, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, and the United States. In every case, maternal mortality is an entry point for looking at the health care system as a whole.

In this country, we now have a once-in-a-generation chance to reform the health care system to truly fulfill the human right to health. As we see in the news every day, too often the debate assumes that health care is a commodity. It is not -- it is a human right, and a public good. It is up to us, as human rights advocates, to ensure that point of view is represented.

MONTHLY LETTER COUNT

DP	4
UAs	20
Total	24
To add your letters to the total contact lwkamp@gmail.com .	

Monthly Meetings, 4th Thursday of Month, 7:30 PM,
Caltech Y Lounge.



From the 210 exit on Lake Avenue, head south, turn left on Del Mar
From the 110 continue on Arroyo Parkway north, turn right on California
Street parking is generally available.

Amnesty International Group 22
The Caltech Y
Mail Code 5-62
Pasadena, CA 91125
www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>



Amnesty International's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights.