



A Spear of Summer Grass: A Story of Love and Friendship on the African Savannah

Deanna Raybourn

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Paris, 1923

The daughter of a scandalous mother, Delilah Drummond is already notorious, even among Paris society. But her latest scandal is big enough to make even her oft-married mother blanch. Delilah is exiled to Kenya and her favorite stepfather's savanna manor house until gossip subsides.

Fairlight is the crumbling, sun-bleached skeleton of a faded African dream, a world where dissolute expats are bolstered by gin and jazz records, cigarettes and safaris. As mistress of this wasted estate, Delilah falls into the decadent pleasures of society.

Against the frivolity of her peers, Ryder White stands in sharp contrast. As foreign to Delilah as Africa, Ryder becomes her guide to the complex beauty of this unknown world. Giraffes, buffalo, lions and elephants roam the shores of Lake Wanyama amid swirls of red dust. Here, life is lush and teeming—yet fleeting and often cheap.

Amidst the wonders—and dangers—of Africa, Delilah awakes to a land out of all proportion: extremes of heat, darkness, beauty and joy that cut to her very heart. Only when this sacred place is profaned by bloodshed does Delilah discover what is truly worth fighting for—and what she can no longer live without.

A Spear of Summer Grass: A Story of Love and Friendship on the African Savannah Details

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From Reader Review *A Spear of Summer Grass: A Story of Love and Friendship on the African Savannah* for online ebook

Delilah Dawson says

An utterly stunning stand-alone title from one of my favorite authors. The worldbuilding was so poetic and beautiful and the characters so deep and raw that I didn't want a plot, but the plot arrived unbidden and jerked my heart around dreadfully. If this book were a pair of shoes, I would dance in them until I fell over dead. Oh, how I wish it were a series!

Suzanna says

Apparently, Deanna Raybourn outside of the Lady Julia Grey series just isn't for me. I really did not enjoy her last standalone book *The Dead Travel Fast*, but this one sounded so interesting I was excited to give it a go. I was very disappointed.

Quite frankly, this book was a bit of a mess from start to finish. The main characters are developed in sudden bits and pieces, and don't really make sense. The other white settlers are pretty awful, and pretty flat in most cases, and while I really liked Gideon and Moses and the other African natives, I think there was a lot of problematic "white savior" elements which isn't very surprising from such a setting, but were not addressed like they could have been and left a not-so-nice taste in my mouth. The other thing which really bugged me was Ryder basically threatening to rape Delilah, while outdoors alone with her, made even worse as from the beginning he is established as her protector in the wilds of Africa - yet this instance isn't a big deal at all.

Delilah and Ryder are not well-developed characters, as much as all the random information about them that's thrown at us tries to do so - they come out with things in conversation that just don't make sense. I'm still not sure exactly how old Delilah is, but despite her apparent age, multiple marriages, and continent-crossing travels, she seems stupidly immature, which makes the wise things she sometimes says all the more jarring. Their romance was so hot and cold and contradictory that I lost interest, and it was just rather boring in the end. The plot was all over the place, and despite the numerous and varied Big Events of the book, it all kind of felt like filler, for Delilah to fall in love with Africa...well, the small specific part of Africa near Nairobi, but it's all just "Africa".

I really enjoyed the setting, and for that alone I was determined to finish it, but I kept hoping it would get better and it never did.

Christy B says

A delightful story set in 1920s Africa starring a scandalous flapper.

Even from reading the summary beforehand, I still didn't know what to expect when I started reading this. It was a fast read, although I'm not sure if the reason for that was the writing style or the fact that the story just moved quickly. Regardless, I never really felt a lull in the story. While it took a little while for the story to get going, once it did, there was no stopping it.

I admit to not reading a whole lot of historical fiction set in Africa, but that was because the books always looked so stuffy. **A Spear of Summer Grass** managed to evoke the beauty of a country without gagging me with it.

The characters were fantastic, although I admit to not being able to keep some of them straight. The main character Delilah started out as a frivolous, flighty flapper, but her character growth made for great reading.

A fantastic read set in a rarely visited time and location.

Caz says

4.5 stars

I've read and enjoyed Ms Raybourn's *Lady Julia Grey* books, so when I saw she'd written a story set in the 1920s, I was intrigued and at the same time a little apprehensive. Not only was the author treading new ground, but so was I – my taste in historicals tends to run to the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries. Maybe because I was born and grew up in the second half of the 20th Century, it's still a little too close for me to really regard it as "historical"!

Fortunately, however, my apprehension was quickly proved groundless, because *A Spear of Summer Grass* grabbed me from the start.

Delilah Drummond is presented as the epitome of the 20s good-time girl. She's rich, spoiled, does exactly as she likes and doesn't care who she shocks or upsets along the way. She's been married three times (widowed twice, divorced once) regularly takes lovers (including her ex-husband on occasion) without a second thought and has a taste for all the good things in life.

At the beginning of the book however, she has caused one scandal too many for the liking of her family, and she is sent to rusticate in Africa until such time as the gossip has died down and she can return to Europe.

Even in Africa though, she continues to ruffle feathers, mostly because of the fact that she treats the natives as people and takes upon herself the traditional duties of the 'lady of the manor' in treating their illnesses and making sure her workers are adequately fed and well-treated. She is immediately adopted by the local ex-patriots, who are real bunch of misfits, having nothing in common other than their presence in Africa and a thinly veiled dislike of each other.

One of the first of these ex-pats encountered by Delilah is Ryder White, who makes his living principally from safari-guiding. He's sort of a cross between Indiana Jones and Allan Quartermain (I can't help wondering if *J. Ryder White* is an homage to *H. Rider Haggard*) although rather more promiscuous than either of them. But he's a compelling character; ruggedly masculine, with a good sense of humour and an air of vulnerability and fatalism about him that sometimes belies the steely exterior. Ryder escorts Delilah to **Fairlight**, the estate owned by her stepfather. To her dismay, it's a mess – but being Delilah she doesn't let it deter her and with the help of her cousin and companion Dora, and local workmen, she sets about putting things to rights.

I've seen a number of comments from other readers pointing out the similarities between this story and Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*. I confess I've not read her book, and it's been quite a long time since I've seen

the film, so I don't want to comment on that. All I'll say is that if that *is* the case, it didn't stop me enjoying Delilah's story.

In Delilah Drummond, Ms Raybourn has created a character that, to quote Jane Austen (on Emma) "no one but myself will much like". Perhaps we're not supposed to like her all that much in the beginning, but like her or not, she's ballsy, courageous and outspoken, and isn't afraid to admit to her own shortcomings – well, some of them. Of course, behind the highly polished exterior lies a wealth of pain and doubt, a woman who has experienced more than her fair share of loss and heartbreak. As she says to her lover, Kit – "Like every bad thing that's ever happened to me, I lock it up and don't think about it."

In terms of the love story in the novel, I think there are actually two. The relationship between Delilah and Ryder develops slowly to start with. There's a strong current of mutual attraction and antagonism between them, and the sexual tension fairly crackles as they play a game of one-upmanship as to who will seduce whom. But alongside the human romance is the story of how Delilah is seduced by Africa; the sights, the sounds, the smells, the customs and kindness of the people, and how she is changed by it.

My one complaint is that the romance between Delilah and Ryder could have been better developed. It was clear that they wanted each other physically and that they bonded through an understanding of the life and customs of the country. But these were two emotionally prickly people, and I felt there needed to be more said between them. I'm not really a fan of the plotline in which one of the protagonists has to be alerted as to how the other feels about them by a third party; and Ryder's actions at the end of the book when he ploughs everything he owns into Fairlight for Delilah's sake but without any certainty of her reciprocation seemed rather out of character for the man we've encountered throughout the rest of the novel.

Those reservations aside however, *A Spear of Summer Grass* has much to recommend it, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It's superbly written and well-paced, the characterisation is excellent throughout and Ms Raybourn's descriptions of the scenery and landscape are simply ravishing.

With thanks to Harlequin/MIRA and NetGalley for the review copy.

(Incidentally, more of Ryder's backstory is revealed in the prequel novella *Far in the Wilds*, and I don't think it has to be read before *Spear*. I read it afterwards and enjoyed getting the full story of some of the events alluded to in the novel in retrospect.)

Julie says

Wow! What a great story!

We start out in Paris in 1923. Delilah Drummond is informed by her family that she has been involved in one too many scandals. Her grandfather has threatened to cut her off financially if she doesn't agree to lay low for a while. Her step father owns property in Africa and it is decided that would be the perfect place for Delilah to spend on a little vacation.

Delilah has been married three times and has had numerous lovers. Her first marriage though, broke her heart and she has never again let herself be open to that sort of love and pain again.

So, when she and her prim and dowdy cousin arrive in Africa, Delilah's introduction to a man named Ryder,

has her putting up all kinds of defenses and she is in deep denial of her feelings for him.

As Delilah begins to meet people in her area, she realizes there is a great deal of political unease. The threat of wild animals, the ways of the natives and the separation between white and black, the dirt blowing into her food, and terrible insects at every turn is too harsh of an environment for Delilah. She makes the best of her exile by keeping company with others of her class, and promptly begins a casual affair with Kit, an old friend. She also befriends an African boy and his brother. However, Delilah still yearns for her old life and longs to return to Paris.

But, tensions reach an all time high when a murder is committed within their little community and an innocent person is about to be held responsible. For the first time in her life Delilah makes an adult, self sacrificing choice.

Will Delilah finally let go of the monster hurt that keeps her from really falling in love? Will she find out who the real murderer is? Will Delilah finally grow up and will she admit that Africa has gotten under skin?

I have read Deanna Raybourn's historical romances in the past. They are great mysteries and the author has a real talent. I had no idea what to expect when I started this book. This is unlike anything I have read from this author previously.

The descriptions of Africa are startling clear and vivid. All the beauty and harshness combined gave up a true life vision of the setting. The characters were also sharply drawn, the dialogue real and deep. This story was so absorbing I couldn't put it down.

This is part romance, part drama, part mystery. It is the most unique novel I have read in a long time. I absolutely loved it. I can not recommend highly enough. An A+ all the way.

Thanks to edelwiess for the advance copy!

Amy S says

I still think that Deanna Raybourn is a great author with a lot of skill, great character development, and a master at witty repartee. She just lost me here. Didn't love it.

Delilah Drummond is not a likeable character, along with 90% of the characters in the book. This is not a dealbreaker by any means, but there just wasn't the growth that I'd hoped for with this character, who began with a lot of potential. Ryder (a pun, I am guessing?), the romantic interest is a cardboard cut-out who likes to tell Delilah how he could rape her and then throw her in the bushes for the animals and no one would know. Man, I love it when a man threatens to rape me. Sexy time!

Raybourn suffered from tell me and not show me. She loves to point out that Delilah may be many things, but she is NOT a racist to the poor indigenous Africans, unlike everyone else. Then there is Africa. Instead of allowing the country to be it's own character, we are constantly told that Africa is dangerous, and huge, and changes people. And if I had a dollar for every time she told us "There are two kinds of people in Africa..." or "We are all broken in Africa," or "There are two kinds of people in Africa" or "We are all damaged in Africa, or "There are two kinds of people in Africa," or "Africa is a hard place," or "Africa will go on without you," or "There are two kinds of people in...." never mind.

Lovely ending though. Really.

For sensitive readers: Lots of rough sex, lots of damaged people doing damaged things ("Everyone is broken in Africa"), and lots of lion sex. Seriously. Everything you ever wanted to know about lion sex but were

afraid to ask. Remember, there are two kinds of lions in Africa...

Giedre says

3.5/5

Don't believe the stories you have heard about me. I have never killed anyone, and I have never stolen another woman's husband. Oh, if I find one lying around unattended, I might climb on, but I never took one that didn't want taking.

Ah, Delilah. A 1920s party girl determined to shag away, drink away and/or outrun heartbreak will not be a heroine to everyone's taste. Delilah is what people like to call an "unlikeable heroine". It is a term I don't particularly care for, because of the things it implies, but there you go. Obviously, I liked Delilah just fine. Her character arc is the best thing about the novel. Well, that and the beautiful prose.

I wasn't as impressed with Delilah's romance with Ryder, the hero, since I couldn't entirely make up my mind if I wanted her to kiss him or kick him. But that romance took a backseat to Delilah falling in love with Africa, so it wasn't that big of a flaw.

The last third is where the book stumbled more noticeably. The murder mystery subplot felt more superfluous than anything else. There was sufficient conflict between Delilah and her farm manager without adding the murder of another character and letting the former conveniently resolve itself without anybody's help.

Still, *A Spear of Summer Grass* is definitely my favourite of the Deanna Raybourn standalones I've read so far.

Janga says

I had a really difficult time deciding how to "grade" this book. Deanna Raybourn is an amazing writer, and her skills are evident from the opening line to the final one. Her vivid descriptions of Kenya frequently made me feel as if I were watching a movie on a theater screen rather than reading a book. That was the effect of this description:

A tiny herd of elephants looked infinitesimal from our lofty height, and when Ryder stilled the engine, I heard nothing but the long rush of wind up from the valley floor. It carried with it every promise of Africa, that wind. It smelled of green water and red earth and the animals that roamed it. And there was something more, something old as the rocks. It might have been the smell of the Almighty himself, and I knew there were no words for this place. It was sacred, as no place I had ever been before.

Her prose is always beautifully lucid and often lyrical as well. When Delilah arrives at Fairlight expecting to see the place she had imagined when she was a child and finds instead a house falling apart, she expresses her disillusionment:

Of all emotions, disappointment is the most difficult to hide. Rage, hatred, envy—those are easy to mask. But disappointment strikes to the heart of the child within us, resurrecting every unsatisfactory Christmas, every

failed wish made on a shooting star.

The poignancy of some passages is powerfully moving, as in this passage when Delilah responds to Dodo's question about whether Delilah ever loved any of the men in her life after her first husband:

You close your eyes and suddenly he's not there anymore. What you loved, or thought you loved, just isn't there, and there is a man-shaped hole in your memory of where he used to be. The sad part is when it happens when he's sitting at the same table or lying in the same bed. You can turn and look at him and not even remember his name because he was just a visitor. He was a man who was only passing through your heart, and you never really made a place for him, so he just keeps passing. My husbands since Johnny have been passing men. Not a stayer among them.

At the other end of the emotional spectrum are tiny details that left me with a delighted smile, details such as Delilah's car, a lipstick-red Hispano-Suiza with leopard upholstery that seems perfect for her and also evoked images of the Hispano-Suiza in P. G. Wodehouse's Blandings Castle short stories and novels and the book, Fordyce's Sermons, which Delilah had to balance on her head when learning to walk like a lady. (Fordyce's Sermons is the 1767 guidebook to female conduct from which Mr. Collins read to the Bennet sisters in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice.)

In the con column is a heroine I could not like. Delilah is at times entertaining, she is more rarely sympathetic, and she is always interesting, but she is also, for much of the book, selfish, shallow, and amoral. She treats her cousin with condescension some times and with careless cruelty at other times. When she spends her last night in Paris with former husband #2, a married man with two young children, she thinks she may even be rendering a service to his wife since he's jollier after sex with Delilah and the guilt over his infidelity leads him to purchase an expensive present for his wife. The list of her offenses that the lieutenant governor in Nairobi names include "stealing a car outside a Harlem nightclub and driving it into the Hudson" and being "caught in flagrante with a judge's eighteen-year-old son in Dallas." Granted Delilah changes, but by that time, I disliked so many things about her that I could not feel any real connection with her. I'm not a reader who needs to identify with the heroine, but I do, especially with the intimacy between character and reader that comes with a first person point of view, need to like her.

If the vivid evocation of time and place, an atypical heroine and hero, and wonderful prose are sufficient to make you love a book, you may be one of the readers giving A Spear of Summer Grass high marks. If likeable characters are a prime criterion for you, you may, as I did, have mixed reactions to this novel.

See full review at The Romance Dish:

<http://www.theromancedish.com/2013/04...>

TheBookSmugglers says

Ana's take:

A Spear of Summer Grass starts really well and I loved the main character to start with. Delilah is a scandalous woman, an unrepentant, egotistical, multiple-time divorced in the early 20s. After a recent scandal in Paris, she is exiled to Kenya until gossip dies out.

Of course, this set-up is potentially problematic for two main reasons:

One is that the story could turn into a redemption story because god forbid a female character be unlikable and not-nice. Two is that said redemption will happen because of the Exotic Journey to the Savage Yet Beautiful Africa.

Unfortunately, it all happened exactly as I feared.

My problems with the book started really soon as Delilah set herself up as the voice of modernity opposing her white neighbours in Kenya. That's when the book just went all over the place. The novel is a messy mixture of anachronism and stereotyping. So we have Delilah, a white female character female who is modern and "different" – she is able to see her fellow white expats as privileged idiots, the treatment of local inhabitants as unfair. But by doing that she also sets herself up their White Saviour, completely idealizing colonialism: she treats the locals with her Expert White Nurse Training; she gives them food, she treats them fairly, she learns their language, etc. These are not necessarily bad things if it wasn't for the way that the novel portrays all the POC characters as simple people, most of them in Communion With Nature; there is a Wise Man who actually communicates with spirits; and everybody is loyal and grateful to the Good White People.

It is really important when reading historical novels like this to be able to differentiate between what can be construed as accurate portrayals of privilege, colonialism and racism within the novel itself and what is built on stereotypical portrayals that go unchallenged and therefore are perpetuated instead of questioned.

It also doesn't help that you have these two characters – Delilah and Ryder – talking about this ONE location, its peoples and its beauty as "Africa" as though Africa is not an entire freaking continent.

And then we have the "romance". This is twofold: the romance that happens between Delilah and Africa; and the one that "develops" between Delilah and the local hunter-stud-rich white man called Ryder White (no, seriously). Both serve to redeem the heroine and her "terrible ways". She becomes less egotistical when she learns to care for others. Which: fair enough. BUT then it is revealed that she is not in fact the scandalous person she is supposed to be: no, everything is just how people have interpreted her actions wrongly. This could have served as great social commentary about how people view women socially accept it only reinforces those same traditional views by making Delilah "innocent". The romance between Delilah and Ryder is also a no-go from me: it starts with him actually threatening to rape her and ends with her learning everything about him through third parties who help her decide to marry him because He Deserves Her Love. Or something equally disingenuous like that.

I also felt really, REALLY uncomfortable about the way domestic abuse is portrayed in the novel. There is one character that is constantly abused and beaten up by her husband and the characters including Delilah, our heroine, and the wife herself are all into victim blaming:

"I was only a little surprised Jude was still living with her husband after he had beaten her. I had known my share of women mistreated by their men. But they were all tormented creatures, with eyes like caged animals and a tightly wound intensity that burned them inside. Jude was different, cool as a mountain lake, and I suspected she stayed with Wickenden because his beatings couldn't really touch her. Perhaps that was WHY he beat her. Some men can only stand to be ignored for so long before they have to do something about it."

The narrative itself does nothing at all do dispel this idea.

Despite its promising beginning this turned out to be terrible – to be honest, I only kept reading because I couldn't look away from the train wreck.

Thea's Take:

It pains me to say this because I loved Deanna Raybourn's Lady Julia Grey books, but I sadly, wholeheartedly agree with Ana. I was intrigued by the premise of this book, although that intrigue was tempered with fear – because, as Ana says, this is a book about a rich white woman going to Africa and becoming a Better Person and... well, that often spells disaster.

First, let me start with the good: I loved the flawed prickly character of Delilah. I love that she is in control, that she doesn't give a damn about what other people think (in fact, she thrives on scandal and loves herself a good time). Most of all, I loved how sexually comfortable Delilah is in her own skin – she knows her effect on men, and she uses her charms to get in her kicks. Similarly strong is Deanna Raybourn's writing, which is as lovely as ever in this book, and she manages to create a group of interesting characters and we watch their lives unfold in a comfortable, natural way.

That said, even these high points could not save A Spear of Summer Grass from its deeply problematic issues.

My problems with this book are threefold:

The Treatment of Women – which could have been AWESOME but turned into rape-y, wife-beating apologist crap

The Treatment of "Africa" – exoticism and glorification of colonialism of the White Man

The Treatment of the Indigenous Populations of Nairobi (and of ANY people of color for that matter) – the book imposes interesting/frightening situations of colonialism and white superiority, does not CHALLENGE these ideas at all

So let's start with women. In this book, there is one particular character who is beaten by her husband. This character doesn't really CARE that she is beaten because, and I quote:

"The hitting?" She rolled onto her back and stretched. "I feel sorry for him sometimes. He just doesn't know any way to reach me. "

"He hits you and you feel sorry for him?"

"He loves me more than he's ever loved anything in his entire life," she said, relating the words in her cool passionless voice. "All he wants is to touch me, to move something inside of me so that I will love him back [...] Haven't you ever seen a small boy trying to get his mother's attention? He'll tug at her skirts and call her name, and if she ignores him, he'll just get louder and louder, poking and pinching until she sees him."

NO. At a different part of the book, Delilah is teasing Ryder (SERIOUSLY HIS NAME IS RYDER. With the "y."), thinking about getting hot and heavy. When she refuses him, he tells her:

"You understand that we're alone out here, don't you, Delilah? There's not a soul within screaming distance, nobody to hear you, nobody to help you. I could violate you sixty different ways and throw you out for the hyenas to have their way with before anybody ever noticed you were gone."

This turns Delilah on. Then, later in the book, Delilah is getting it on with Ryder and when he refuses to go the distance, this happens:

“That’s it? That’s all I get? you’ll let me get you good and ready, but then you won’t use it to repay the favour? Naughty, naughty, Ryder. Didn’t anyone ever teach you it’s not nice to be selfish?”

His hands were clenching and unclenching on his thighs. “I don’t hit women,” he said, half to himself.

“But you’d like to,” I went on, softly. “You’d like to put something into me, and if it isn’t going to be what we both want, why not your fist?”

I ground out my cigarette on my boot and stood close to him. I picked up his hand, that closed, fisted hand, and I opened it, coaxing the fingers to spread wide. His palm was open and flat, vulnerable, and I pressed my mouth into it, nipping lightly with my teeth.

AGAIN, NO. Rape-threatening and woman-beating is NOT hot. This is NOT an attractive trait in a hero (or heroine). Just, NO.

Next, there’s the exoticism of “Africa” – in quotes because COME ON, it’s a CONTINENT not a SINGLE TOWN or country! A *Spear of Summer Grass* is the most crude, textbook example of exoticism of a place and its people. Africa – ALL of Africa! – is portrayed as a savage but beautiful land, lorded over and being saved by its white aristocratic colonists. These colonists must feed, cure, and educate the indigenous people (heck, even Delilah is a skilled nurse, in addition to being a party gal with deadeye sharpshooter skills). The different tribes are portrayed as ignorant, simple people of the land, ever so grateful for the white man’s help (because otherwise they’d surely perish). Even the non-African characters of color get this treatment – the Indian characters are similarly meek and simple-natured. The fact that Delilah and Ryder (and Jude to some extent) are the only characters that see this is BAD and fight for the rights of the poor, hapless people of color only reinforces this awful white savior stereotype.

The only difference I have here compared to Ana? I could not bring myself to finish this book. It’s a big fat DNF for me.

Angie says

Originally reviewed here @ Angieville

Have you ever seen *Out of Africa*? It’s this old Sydney Pollack film starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, and it is sort of loosely based on Isak Dinesen’s (pseudonym of Danish author Karen Blixen) autobiographical book of the same name. I ask because it (and its soundtrack) was a staple in my house growing up, and when I first read the brief synopsis for Deanna Raybourn’s latest standalone novel, *A SPEAR OF SUMMER GRASS*, it was literally the first thing that popped into my mind. They just sounded fairly similar what with the same setting, though the time period is a good decade later in Raybourn’s novel than in Pollack’s film. Since I have fond memories of the movie as a girl, this only upped my eagerness to read the book. I get all excited when an author I love changes things up on her readers. I am a devoted fan of Raybourn’s Lady Julia Grey Victorian mystery series and I thoroughly enjoyed her standalone Gothic novel, *The Dead Travel Fast*. As far as I was concerned 1920s Africa complete with a British/American flapper fish out of water could only spell bliss.

Delilah Drummond is a household name among the London and Paris socialite sets. Daughter of an infamous society wife in her own right, Delilah has worked her way through a few marriages of her own. Unfortunately, the latest crashed and burned so luridly that her mother and current stepfather have called Delilah home for a little Come to Jesus. In fact, they're packing her off to Kenya so she can cool her heels a bit while the scandal back home runs its course. It so happens her stepfather (the best in a long line of her mother's spurious husbands) has an estate called Fairlight on the Kenyan savanna. Accompanied only by her cousin and sometime maid Dodo, Delilah arrives at Fairlight to find the place crumbling around her feet. Determined not to let the man (or men) in her life get her down, she immediately starts issuing orders, procuring help from the local Africans in setting the manor to rights. It doesn't take long for the European expat social life to find Delilah and she is more than happy to dive into the swirling politics and pandering that involves. She even runs across a few old friends in the process, as well as encountering some new ones. Most notably a Canadian transplant by the name of Ryder White--a man as wild as the African wilderness he inhabits and one who just might be larger than life enough to measure up to Delilah herself.

I do love this setting and time period. And what a master Deanna Raybourn is at capturing the sights, tastes, and sounds of the worlds her characters inhabit. The descriptions of everything from the scrumptious clothes to the sweeping landscape positively drip with vibrancy. And the writing, as always, is exquisite. Where I ran into trouble was, oddly, with the characters. Delilah is hard as nails. She's as bright and devil-may-care as they come, and she has zero interest in anything that does not involve pleasure. Interestingly, that was not always the case. We are given a few meager hints that indicate a more sedate and driven past, one in which she married for love (for once) and worked as a nurse during the war. All that was smashed to smithereens, of course, and she is who she has become--a woman who barely resembles the girl she once was. Now doesn't that back story sound intriguing? Add to that the truly crushing details of her last marriage and the fallout it must have left somewhere inside her, and we have got ourselves a recipe for some serious character depth and development! The thing is . . . it never happens. I mean it rather *dismayingly* never happens. The bits of depth we get are distributed seemingly at random, in too small quantities, and in entirely the wrong places to maintain the thread and drive of Delilah's story. The result being that she is by and large wholly unsympathetic. Sort of monumentally callous and insipid, as a matter of fact. She dashes about her story taking pleasure where she will, heedless of the consequences, lifting her hand for a dubious good deed here or there, but more often intentionally risking her neck and courting destruction by toying with the caged lion that is Ryder. Who, by the way, I found little better than Delilah as far as his ability to secure any scrap of my affection goes. The potential was there on the grand scale. But somehow the decadence of Delilah's life and that of almost every other person around her completely overwhelmed the more subtle possibilities of her story. Her relationship with Dodo remained distressingly unexplored. The unfolding of the plot continued flat and unsurprising. And the crisis, when it came, failed to incite my sympathy given how little I cared for anyone affected by it. I finished it feeling tired out and sad. It could have easily gone so very differently. It's worth pointing out that while I can't recommend this one, it is the only misstep I've had from Raybourn, and I wholeheartedly recommend her other books, all of which are on my Beloved Bookshelf.

Misfit says

"Don't believe the stories you have heard about me. I have never killed anyone, and I have never stolen another woman's husband. Oh, if I find one lying around unattended, I might climb on, but I never took one that didn't want taking."

Best opening lines ever?

"I might have been heading to the wilds of Africa, but there was no excuse to look untidy."

Delilah Drummond has finally dug herself into one scandal too many, and she needs to go someplace in the back-o-beyond and cool her heels until the publicity dies down - and her stepfather's aging estate in Kenya is where she's shipped off to. Not one to be down and out ever, Delilah jumps into the local society full throttle and the life of the party with a not-so-secret lover to boot. Ryder White is the local go-to guide for those wanting to hunt big game, but Delilah might be the one trophy he cannot catch. Or can he?

"So, you keep your libido in check and stop sniffing around my skirts. Because it's not going to happen."

Despite her outward behavior, Delilah is carrying a ton of grief over her first husband (lost in The Great War), and Ryder's carrying some emotional baggage as well. Delilah's story is told in the first person narrative, which I'm not usually fond of, but I loved her voice in this one. Plenty of sass and smart comments - she didn't take crap from anyone. Ryder's not too shabby either - my kind of man.

I enjoyed this a lot, a nice blend of historical setting and romance with a bit of a murder mystery tucked in at the end. The African setting and depiction of the wildlife was exceptionally well done, I felt like I was right there.

"They chanted of life, which is as short as a spear of summer grass or long as the heart of the Rift itself, and of the silent land that waits beyond. They chanted of Africa."

My copy obtained via library loan.

Ali Trotta says

“Because if we're on the road to hell, we're going to dance the whole damn way and give them something to talk about when we're gone.” *A Spear of Summer Grass*, 334

A Spear of Summer Grass, is Deanna Raybourn's latest masterpiece. Once again, she crafts a perfect opening line – opening paragraph, truly – “Don't believe the stories you have heard about me.” And with that single sentence, a reader wants to know what, exactly, those stories are. It is the ultimate invitation to witness a bit of chic wickedness, clothed in scarlet, circled in smoke. If Delilah Drummond offers you a drink (gin and tonic, most likely), you would gladly take it. If she levels a gun at you, you would do well to run.

Imagine a New Orleans-born Dorothy Parker, given to Paris society. Picture her in 1923, with a bob sleek enough to cut glass – and a tongue sharp enough to scar a heart. Delilah is a wild one, a woman with a backbone who does exactly what – and whom – she pleases, with no regard for society's demands. She is, after all, “nobody's best example” (177). However, she can handle a gun as deftly as any man, which comes in handy when, after one too many scandals, the it-girl is banished to Africa until the media circus moves on.

There she arrives, with her plain and sullen cousin Dora, to an expected world rife with expected and unexpected predators. Just as she's stepping off the train, Delilah meets a man as formidable as Rochester and Lord Byron (mad, bad, and dangerous to know), but as wild as lions he so expertly hunts. Ryder is not one to suffer fools, and his temper is only guided by a strong sense of justice – an oddly founded morality that serves him well. Thrown together by circumstance, the two form a tenuous relationship, one predicated not strictly on a game of cat-and-mouse – but of two equal people who worship their own walls. Broken and

troubled, but fierce, both possess scars – seen and unseen. Their relationship is shaded by their own difficult, tumultuous pasts – and yet, there is a mutual respect that falls between them, breathtaking as any African sunset.

Delilah takes up residence at a house belonging to her ex-stepfather, Nigel. Fairlight is full of potential, but has fallen into disrepair. Delilah and her cousin begin to set things to right, but the resistance they are met with, at turns, is palpable. Situated amid a gaggle of displaced acquaintances, including an artist and dalliance of Delilah's (Kit), Delilah comes into her own and starts letting people in, whether or not she realizes it. Troubling as any lion, Kenya is rampant with change and a shifting political landscape, as the colony's British rule is uncertain. Delilah quickly learns that nothing is exactly as it seems, and she must navigate its numbered dangers. True to her tenacious persona, she takes no quarter from anyone, man or beast, while waiting out her sentence.

But a landscape is often a living thing, as much a character as any person. Delilah finds herself in a love affair with Kenya and its people – but is it enough to keep her there? And, for that matter, is Ryder? A charming and dangerous man, when he murmurs, "Sin with me," it is seduction at its best. While Delilah may be his match, she is no stranger to art of manipulation – a spider to any willing fly. Yet, as Ryder points out, some scars are visible – while others are easily hidden, like a woman who has "been holding hands with ghosts for too long" (348). Delilah might be the dazzling party girl, with a bright red mouth, but she is "dancing on broken glass" (231). What makes Delilah's forgivable – and even likeable – is that she's layered. She's what is easily seen by prying eyes and flashbulbs. And yet, she is also a whole world of history that's never truly been witnessed. Her walls are built with care and reason, perhaps with less of an eye toward keeping people out – and more as a means of self-protection.

Deanna Raybourn's deft hand crafted a novel that is full of sharp wit, vibrant characters, and exceptional plot twists. (No, I'm not giving them away. But I will say this: Rosebud is a sled. And Han shot first.) Nestled within a dangerously beautiful country, she tackles the idea of identity, belonging, and owning who you are – and facing who you could be. This is very much a novel about finding yourself in the last place you expect. It is about burning everything to the ground and starting again, because sometimes, ashes make the most fertile soil. It may look like a wreck and a ruin at first, but every disaster is an opportunity – as Delilah certainly discovers. At one point, she muses, "You had to love someone completely to be willing to destroy them" (230). The reverse is also true: you must love someone completely to let them destroy you. But that is, truly, the only way we let anyone in, by tearing the walls down. What better place to tear those walls down than on an adventure?

It should be noted that I was lucky enough to be given an ARC of *A Spear of Summer Grass* by Deanna. I was not otherwise compensated or bribed in any manner, and this review was entirely my own idea. I do believe that's enough disclaimer, before I simply tell you: you want to read this book. It is beautiful and wicked, with enough verbal calisthenics and divinely smeared red lipstick to demand that you read quicker than you thought possible. This is a book that will keep you up until the wee hours of the night, reading beneath the sheets with a flashlight. And truly, who wouldn't want to take Ryder to bed? Or Delilah for that matter?

A Spear of Summer Grass is available April 30. You will adore it.

Khanh, first of her name, mother of bunnies says

The men stood back, chanting a song of one who would not be forgotten, of loved ones lost and returned to the earth, and of the land itself which does not die but is always born anew with each fall of the long rains. They chanted of life, which is short as a spear of summer grass or long as the heart of the Rift itself, and of the silent land that waits beyond. They chanted of Africa.

My apologies in advance for the liberal use of quotations within this review. *The writing is beautiful, exemplary, and I couldn't help myself.*

Deanna Raybourn has a skill for writing spectacular settings and believably flawed characters. I have always enjoyed the beautifully vibrant atmosphere she creates, along with the rich and varied characters within her novels, be it her Lady Julia Gray series, or one of her standalones. Her typical repertoire usually takes place in 19th century Europe, and we do have a change of pace here. Nevertheless, the quality of writing still remains, and despite the slow pace of the novel, Deanna Raybourn has once again established her talents as a writer.

I have always loved her heroines; they are independent, strong, and not surprisingly in historical novels, ahead of their times. I had mixed reactions to Delilah at first; she is initially not a likeable character. The story is narrated from her first person point of view, and **what we know of Delilah in the first hundred or so pages did not endear me to her in the least.** Compared to the other heroines in Deanna Raybourn's books, Delilah initially comes off as a typical free-spirited woman of the 20s, **spoiled from her wealthy upbringing, loose of morals, with a string of discarded husbands and broken hearts in her wake.**

We do get initial flashes of vulnerability, but it is more or less upstaged by her antics and her larger than life (and not in a good way) presence. She eats men for breakfast, lunch, and dinner...maybe even brunches and elevensies, too. **It would take an entire day's worth of Hobbit meals to fit in all the men she has devoured, left behind, battered and their spirit broken, in her wake..** Delilah spends money like it's water, and is seemingly more interested in clothes, fashion, and being the penultimate trendsetter among her clique of social elites than about the consequences of her actions.

Her scandal (and it's not a huge one) is nevertheless enough for her socialite mother, her fair-weather friends, and still-besotted former husbands to want to banish her in order to avoid further disgrace. Delilah is notorious among her set, and that comes with a price of its own.

"Notoriety was indeed contagious. If you were a carrier, decent people didn't care to spend time with you lest they come down with it. Infamy was an infection most folks could do without, even if the price for it was living a very small and colourless life."

Faced between exile and being financially cut off by her wealthy, controlling grandfather, Delilah chooses the former.

Africa is her sequestered destination. At this time, British colonization is still firmly in place, and there are quite a few British expatriates living abroad. Africa is a wild place, full of promise and danger, beauty and brutality. The setting is the star here, and in none of her books (not even the one set in Transsylvania!) has Deanna Raybourn built up the atmosphere and the feeling of the place as vividly and distinctly as she has here.

I heard nothing but the long rush of wind up from the valley floor. It carried with it every promise of Africa, that wind. It smelled of green water and red earth and the animals that roamed it. And there was something more, something old as the rocks. It might have been the

smell of the Almighty himself, and I knew there were no words for this place. It was sacred, as no place I had ever been before.

Africa may be beautiful, but her new home, Fairlight, is a wreck.

It was like being shown a photograph of a winsome orphan one meant to adopt, only to arrive and find the child had rickets and a snotty nose and was dressed in rags. I felt my shoulders sag as I stood, rooted to the spot.

Once faced with the harsh truth of living on a crumbling estate, surrounded by nature and all the danger it entails, Delilah asserts herself, and we see what kind of a woman she is underneath her glamorous and carefree façade once it starts to crumble.

“You have always been dazzling—the life of every party, the glamour girl who dances until dawn.”

“Well, I am. But I’m dancing on broken glass. **I’m Miss Havisham’s wedding cake, Kit. A frothy, expensive, mice-eaten confection. I’m the Sphinx’s nose, the fallen Colossus. I’m a beautiful ruin, and it’s time that has done the deed.**”

Delilah proves to be no shrinking violet, she plays hands-on nurse relying on her experience during World War I, caring for the sick and injured villagers; she weathers the harsh new lifestyle better than I expected, with unexpected fortitude and her usual carefree attitude. Eventually the story of her past unfolds, and we learn why she hides herself the way she has, why she breezes through life so carelessly so she doesn't have to think about the past. The land and the new situation helps to heal her, but **some things can never be entirely fixed.**

*"Do you know what a cicatrix is, Ryder? **It's a scar, a place where you have been cut so deeply that what's left behind is something quite different.** It doesn't heal, not really, because it isn't the same ever again. It's impenetrable and it's there forever, to protect you from hurting the same place again."*

The attitudes of the white colonists range from downright disdain to a paternalistic one. The overwhelming attitude among the white expatriates is one of condescension. They view the natives as one would a child: they do not think the natives capable of taking adequate care of themselves and their land, and this results in rampant poverty, disease, illiteracy, and a decay of morals. **The white men are less men than gods, saviors, as they view themselves.**

Imperial attitudes prevail, and there is an underlying tension between the natives and the white expatriates. Even more evident are the lurking strain between the expatriates themselves; they are small group of people who have been reluctantly thrown together due to their proximity more than their similarity of minds.

"Something seemed slightly off with the company. There were undercurrents of tension I didn't quite understand. In any close group of people there are bound to be secret resentments, and this group was closer than most...But little things could fester in the African heat, and I wondered if any small thorn prick had been left to turn septic.

The romance develops slowly, and is **believable and painstakingly, subtly portrayed.** Both Ryder and Delilah have scarred past, both are scared to become involved. The gradual progress in their relationship is not the backbone of the story, but a result of it. Like Delilah, Ryder is not the most likeable character when we first meet him as he is thrashing the bloody life out of a man. That man turned out to be a wife-beater. **Ryder turns out to be the perfect foil for Delilah, he is rough, bluff, and nothing like the sycophantic**

suitors that she is used to. There is no blind worship in their relationship; they are on equal footing, and he proves to be a match for our heroine.

I loved this book, it is like a lullaby. The subplot seems almost forgettable and slow in its pacing; but it is the characters, their growth, and ultimately the landscape itself that makes this book as beautiful as it was. Highly recommended for a lovely, lyrical read.

Fred Shaw says

Scandalous Delilah Drummond is being exiled by her family from Paris to her step-father's estate near Nairobi, Kenya, until the the press frenzy over her latest soiree has subsided. Delilah has embarrassed her wealthy family and this is a final warning. The time is sometime shortly after WWI.

When arriving in Nairobi, she is a duck out of water, a very beautiful duck, arriving in expensive silk frocks and high heel shoes. On her way to the estate, her driver, guide and neighbor, Ryder White, stopped by a water hole to cool off the vehicle's motor and add water to the radiator. "The second rule in Africa is to make sure your vehicle has water. You do not want to get stranded in the bush. You may not be found for weeks." "What is the first rule?" "Never wander alone anywhere in Africa without a weapon. You WILL become the next meal of some beast." At that same instance a 4000 lb cape buffalo emerges from the tall grass a few yards away looking very surly!

There are some places I would love to visit, so I travel to them in books. One is Africa. I read all I can about it, both fiction and nonfiction. I stumbled across this gem of a novel and have enjoyed every minute.

Deanna Raybourn has written many novels, but this is her first with an African backdrop. She did her homework well, and delivered a highly entertaining work, combining superbly crafted characters, in a beautiful but dangerous place with all the nuances of the British and native cultures. Oh. There is also some romance to tickle your and even my fancies!

If you enjoy adventure to exotic places, loaded with life's challenges you can only find there, this is one for you.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

DNF at about 30%. I have issues with this one on several levels:

- I should have known this one wouldn't be for me when, in the first few pages, our main character Delilah (<----oooh symbolism) explains how it's okay that she occasionally sleeps with her ex-husband, **who is now married to another woman and has a child with her**, because she "had him first" and she doesn't intend to ever take him away from his second wife. So it's all good. Um, no. It's not.
- Delilah is a wealthy, privileged white woman who goes to Africa in the 1920's, and finds herself and True Meaning in Life. Unlike almost all other white people, *she* understands the natives and has sympathy for them. Cliché and stereotype overload.

- More adultery: Delilah falls for a guy named--wait for it--Ryder, who's rough and crude and kind of rapey but (of course) very handsome, and who also understands and loves Africa. He's also (I peeked at the end) separated from a wife who's living in Egypt. But it's okay that he cheats on her regularly because, apparently, she's a slut. No, it isn't.

Delilah has good qualities but I just didn't want to live with her any longer, or in her world where cheating abounds and no one seems to blink twice about it. I can see how others might really like this book, but it's just not my cuppa.
