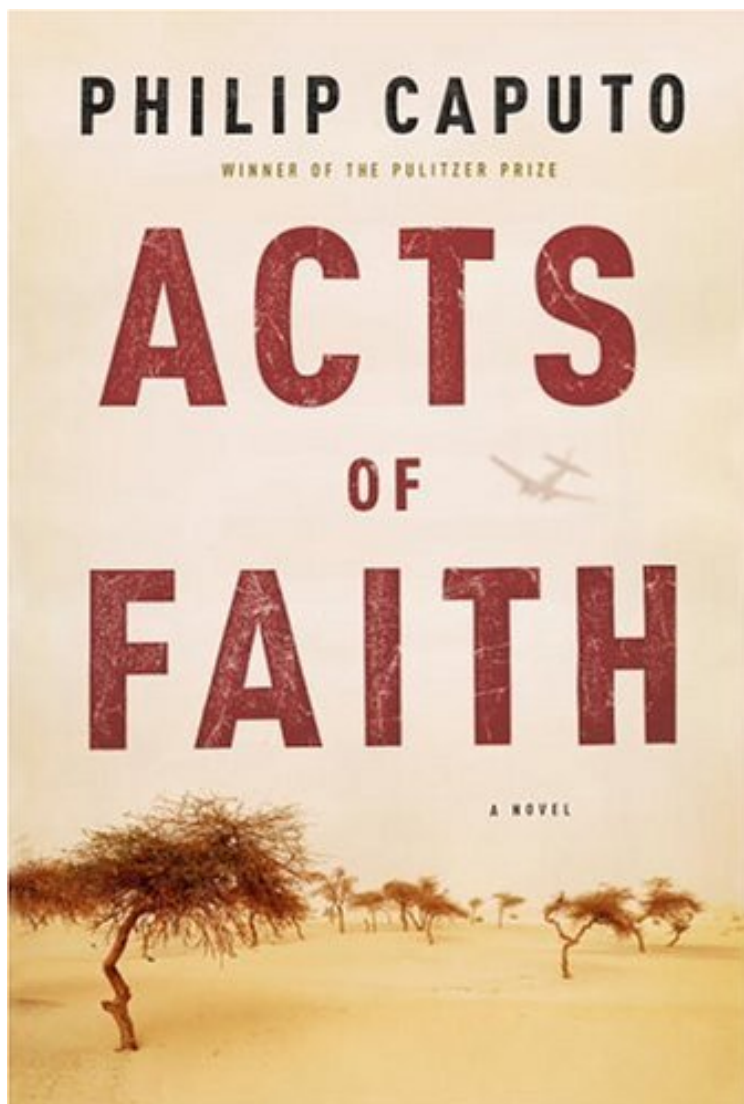


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Acts of Faith



Par Philip Caputo
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurPhilip Caputos tragic and epically ambitious new novel is set in Sudan, where war is a permanent condition. Into this desolate theater come aid workers, missionaries, and mercenaries of conscience whose courage and idealism sometimes coexist with treacherous moral blindness. Theres the entrepreneurial American pilot who goes from flying food and medicine to smuggling arms, the Kenyan aid worker who cant help seeing the tawdry underside of his enterprise, and the evangelical Christian who comes to Sudan to redeem slaves and falls in love with a charismatic rebel commander. As their fates intersect and our understanding of their characters deepens, it becomes apparent that Acts of Faith is one of those rare novels that combine high moral seriousness with irresistible narrative wizardry. From the Trade Paperback edition.ExtraitMan of All RacesIn his early twenties, after two undistinguished and troubled years

at university, Fitzhugh Martin had achieved a modest celebrity as center forward for the Harambe Stars, which are to Kenyan soccer as the New York Yankees are to baseball. A sportswriter had nicknamed him The Ambler, because he never seemed to run very fast, his leisurely movements caused not by slow feet but by a quick tactical eye that allowed him to read the field in a glance and be where he needed to be with economy of motion. He traveled with the club throughout Africa, to Europe, and once to the United States.

He saw something of the world, and what he saw namely the shocking contrast between the West and his continent convinced him to do something more with himself than chase a checkered ball up and down a field. He had heard a kind of missionary call, quit soccer, and became a United Nations relief worker, first in Somalia and then in Sudan. That was the story he told, but it wasn't entirely true: a serious knee injury that required two operations was as responsible for his leaving the sport as a Pauline epiphany. Or maybe the injury was the mother of the epiphany; sitting on the bench with his taped knee, he knew his career was as good as over and wondered what to do with the rest of his life. Of course, if he hadn't had a social conscience to begin with, he would not have made the choice he did, and that conscience was formed by his ancestry. He had come to Kenya from the Seychelles Islands when he was eight years old, the eldest of three children born to a French, Irish, and Indian father and a mother who was black, Arab, and Chinese. The emigration took Fitzhugh from a place where tribalism was unknown and race counted for little to a land where tribe and race counted for everything. His family wasn't poor; his father managed a coastal resort near Mombasa but he came to identify with the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, because he grew up on the margins of Kenyan society, a boy without a tribal allegiance or a claim to any one race, for all the races of the earth were in him. He was the eternal outsider who was never allowed to forget that he was an alien, even at the height of his athletic fame. His skin was brown, yet the white Kenyans, children and grandchildren of colonial settlers, were more accepted than he, a tribe unto themselves. After he worked for a year in Somalia, the UN promoted him to field monitor and assigned him to its operations in Sudan. Now a corporal in the army of international beneficence, he wandered in southern Sudan for weeks at a time, stalking the beast of hunger and devising strategies to hold the numbers of its victims to some acceptable minimum. That vast unhappy region captured him body and soul; it became the stage where Fitzhugh Martin played the role he believed destiny had assigned him. The goddamned, bleeding, fucked-up Sudan, he would say. I don't know what it is about that place. It sucks you in. You see some eighteen-year-olds who've been fighting since he was fourteen and can tell you war stories that will give you nightmares, but drop a piece of ice in his hands and he's amazed. Never seen or felt ice before, never seen water turned to stone, and you get sucked in. He meant to do all in his power to save the southern Sudanese from the curses of the apocalypse and a few the author of Revelation hadn't thought of, like the tribalism that caused the southerners to inflict miseries on themselves. That was where his cosmopolitan blood became an advantage. He moved with ease among Dinka, Nuer, Didinga, Tuposa, Boya; the tribes trusted the tribeless man who had no ethnic axes to grind. He loved being in the bush and hated returning to the UN base at Loki. It had the look of a military installation, ringed by coils of barbed wire. The field managers and flight coordinators and logistics officers to his eyes a mob of ambitious bureaucrats or risk-lovers seeking respectable adventure drove around like conquerors in white Land Rovers sprouting tall radio antennae; they lived and worked in tidy blue and white bungalows, drank their gins and cold beers at bars that looked like beach resort tiki bars, and ate imported meats washed down with imported wines. When Loki's heat, dust, and isolation got to be too much, they went to Europe on RR, or to rented villas in the cool highland suburbs of Nairobi, where they were waited on, driven, and guarded by servants whose grandparents probably had waited on, driven, and guarded the British sahibs and memsahibs of bygone days. They were the new colonials, and Fitzhugh grew to loathe them as much as he loathed the old-time imperialists who had pillaged Africa in the name of the white man's burden and the mission civilisatrice. When he wasn't in Sudan, he who had grown up on the edge of things dwelled on the edge of the compound, in a mud-walled hut with a makuti roof and two windows lacking glass and screens; it wasn't much better than the squalid twig-and-branch tukuls of the Turkana settlement that sprawled outside the wire, along the old Nairobi-Juba road. Inside were a hard bed under a mosquito net, a chair, and a desk knocked together out of scrap lumber. Fitzhugh's only concession to modern comfort was electricity, supplied by a generator; his only bow to interior decoration, the posters of his heroes, Bob Marley, Malcolm X, and Nelson Mandela. Asceticism did not come naturally to him. Self-denial is easy for people with attenuated desires and appetites; Fitzhugh's were in proportion to his size. He could down a sixteen-ounce Tusker in two or three swallows and inhaled meals the way he did cigarettes. He loved women, and when he came out of the bush, he would sweep through the compound, scooping up Irish girls and American girls and

Canadian girls. (He stayed away from the local females, fearing AIDS or the swifter retribution of a Turkana fathers rifle or spear.) Inevitably, he would feel guilty about indulging himself and go on a binge of monkish abstinence. He met Douglas Braithwaite exactly two months and eighteen days after the UN fired him, an encounter whose date he would come to recall with as much bitterness as precision. Years later he tried to persuade himself that he and the American had come together for reasons he couldnt fathom but hoped to discover, hidden somewhere in the machinery of destiny or in the designs of an inscrutable providence. Who among us, when an apparently chance meeting or some other random occurrence changes us profoundly, can swallow the idea that it was purely accidental? Over and over Fitzhugh would trace the succession of seeming coincidences that caused the path of his life to converge with Douglass. He never would have laid eyes on the man if he hadnt lost his job; he would not have lost it if . . . well, you get the idea. If he could map how it happened, he would find out why. Eventually Fitzhughs mental wanderings led him back to the day he was born, but he was no closer to uncovering the secret design. So he was forced to abandon his quest for the why and settle for the how, a narrative whose beginning he fixed on the day a bonfire burned in the desert. The High Commissioners of World Largesse, as he called his employers, occasionally overestimated the amount of food they would need to avert mass starvation in Sudan. Blind screw-ups were sometimes to blame; sometimes field monitors deliberately exaggerated the severity of conditions, figuring it was better to err on that side than on the other; and sometimes nature did not cooperate, failing to produce an expected catastrophe. Surpluses would then pile up in the great brown tents pitched alongside the Loki airstrip, tins of cooking oil and concentrated milk, sacks of flour, sorghum, and high-protein cereal stacked on pallets. Once in a while the stuff sat around beyond the expiration dates stamped on the containers. It then was burned. That was standard procedure, and it was followed rigorously, even if the oil had not gone rancid or the flour mealy or the grain rotten. Mindful that cremating tons of food would make for bad press, the High Commissioners had the dirty work done under cover of darkness at a remote dump site, far out in the sere, scrub-covered plateaus beyond Loki. Truck convoys would leave the UN base before dawn with armed escorts, their loads covered by plastic tarps; for the Turkana, men as lean as the leaf-bladed spears they carried, knew scarcity in the best of times and were consequently skilled and enthusiastic bandits. And it was the Turkana who blew the whistle. One morning a band of them looking for stray livestock in the Songot mountains, near the Ugandan border, spotted a convoy moving across the plain below and smoke and flames rising from a pit in the distance. The herdsmen went to have a look. That year had been a particularly hard one for the Turkana sparse rains, the bones of goats and cows chalking the stricken land, shamans crying out to Akuj Apei to let the heavens open. The bush telegraph flashed the news of what the herdsmen had seen from settlement to settlement: The wazungu were burning food! More than all the Turkana put together had ever seen, much less eaten. The word soon reached Malachy Delaney, a friend of Fitzhughs who had been a missionary among the Turkana for so long that they considered him a brother whose skin happened to be white. Apoloreng, they called him, Father of the Red Ox, because his hair had been red when he first came to them. He spoke their dialects as well as they and was always welcome at their rituals and ceremonies. In fact, he was sometimes asked to preside, and anyone who saw him, clapping his hands to tribal songs, leading chants of call and response, had to wonder who had converted whom. Malachy had been reprimanded by the archbishop in Nairobi and once by the Vatican itself for his unorthodox methods.