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Blood Diamonds?

Was it really all about diamonds? In truth the chain reaction that launched Sierra Leone's 11 years of civil war was far messier than Hollywood would have it. Sierra Leoneans, who had high hopes for self-government on independence day in 1961, instead saw their fledgling democracy hijacked by a greedy political elite whose avarice gave rise to the brutal band of rebels known as the Revolutionary United Front.

Black Man's Grave: Letters From Sierra Leone tells the story of Sierra Leone's chaotic descent through the eyes of those who struggled to survive it. Based on years of correspondence between residents of the small northern village of Fadugu and the book's authors, both former Peace Corps Volunteers in Fadugu, Black Man's Grave provides a grassroots view of the forces that finally exploded in grim profusion.

The cast includes Sierra Leone's "big man," Siaka Stevens; RUF leader Foday Sankoh, whose grandfatherly demeanor belied the viciousness with which he sought to impose his "revolution"; and one who aspired to the big man role, Charles Taylor from next-door Liberia. Taylor's support for Sierra Leone's rebel war expanded from initial hostility toward Stevens's handpicked successor into a commercial venture that supplied arms in exchange for diamonds. In an offshoot of that unsavory trade, links between Sierra Leone's diamonds and al Qaeda have been traced. The revelations of *Black Man's Grave* help us understand the frustrations that simmer throughout much of the third world and threaten a peaceful future for all.

Gary Stewart is the author of *Breakout: Profiles in African Rhythm* (U. Chicago), *Rumba on the River* (Verso), and dozens of articles and reviews.

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Black Man's Grave: Letters From Sierra Leone is available for \$14.95 at bookstores and Amazon.com. Fifty percent of the profits from book sales will go to projects that benefit the people of Fadugu.

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