Susi Wyss knows Africa the way few Americans do. She lived in Ivory Coast for part of her childhood, when her father worked for the World Bank in Abidjan.

And as an adult, Wyss (SPH’90) lived in several African countries, working in public health. This wealth of knowledge and experience is reflected in her first book, *The Civilized World: A Novel in Stories*.

*The Civilized World* is a series of nine gentle, interlocking tales of ordinary Africans and white Westerners reaching across the cultural divide. Mostly well-meaning, the characters narrow that divide with varying success. But their encounters paint a picture of African life and values that is more sedate, and rings truer, than the grim images dispatched through the filter of Western media. In one of the novel’s threads, an enterprising Ghanaian woman tries to make amends for the crime her twin brother committed against a trusting American who had employed her years earlier in Cote d’Ivoire. In another, a white American clashes with her Ghanaian mother-in-law over the care of her baby, the intrusive grandmother, clinging tightly to the norms of her homeland, is named Comfort. Another story unites several of the characters in Ethiopia, where an American couple has traveled to adopt a son.

Wyss laces her novel with searing detail: a car stalled by a blizzard of butterflies, a plumber named Nobody.

**SUSI WYSS KNOWS**

**Stories from the Real Africa**

Susi Wyss’ portrait of African life rings true

**BY SUSAN SELIGSON**

**Wyss laces her novel with searing detail: a car stalled by a blizzard of butterflies, a plumber named Nobody.**

With her about *The Civilized World* (Holt, 2011), its long gestation, and her perspective as an American in Africa.

**Bostonia: Did you first conceive of the book as separate stories?**

**Wyss:** Yes. I basically wrote the first three stories over a period of five years, very slowly, and then when I had the three stories I looked at them and said, I want to know more about these characters and how their lives might intersect. And it took off from there.

**Having lived in several African countries, do you think most Americans have no sense of the real Africa?**

Oh, definitely. I think that there’s this thought that Africa is what you read about in the newspaper—AIDS and coups and southern Sudan. People associate Africa with crises. The notion that people have day-to-day lives and they’re not that different doesn’t hit home. That’s one of the motivations of my writing, to make Africa more accessible, so people don’t have this us-and-them mentality.

**The book gets to the heart of the racial and cultural divide. Living so long in Africa, did you ever bridge that divide?**

Yes, it’s always there, and yes, you can bridge it. I come from a multicultural background: my parents are Swiss and I grew up in the United States. I’ve always been an outsider, and I’ve always had to bridge the cultural divide, even between the United States and Europe.

**Working in public health for many years, were you mostly inspired or disillusioned? Did you burn out?**

I still believe in public health programs, but I also recognize their limitations. I think aid programs help people, but only to a certain level. Western programs deal with a Band-aid approach for more immediate
Nonfiction

Angel Walk: Nurses at War in Iraq and Afghanistan
Diane Vines (GRS’86) and Sharon Richie-Melvan
Arnica Publishing

THE AUTHORS of this frank, illuminating oral history, both psychiatric nurses, met in 1982 when they served with the first crop of nurse White House Fellows. Although the grit and sacrifices of combat nurses have been the subject of television shows (China Beach, M*A*S*H) and a handful of books, most notably Lynda Van Devanter’s moving Vietnam War memoir Home Before Morning, Angel Walk allows a spectrum of contemporary nurse veterans to tell their stories in their own words. And those words are often as poetic as they are honest.

“If the wards are quiet, time drags, boredom sets in, and tempers grow short,” writes Tamora of her service at a Vietnam Combat Support Hospital. “But then you are aware that during these quiet times, there is a respite from the fighting and people are not being brutally wounded or killed.”

In all three conflicts covered by the authors, the wards are rarely still. Nurses male and female talk not just of the sometimes tender bonds they form with the wounded, but of friendships, romance, tedium, gallows humor, near unbearable heat and other discomfarts, and the constant sense of foreboding. In Afghanistan, a nurse, a medic, and a translator are ambushed by the Taliban; in Iraq, a nurse who for weeks walked mere yards away from her quarters to lunch narrowly escapes death the day mortar fire claims a life in the spot.

What comes through most powerfully, though, is the nurses’ humanity and commitment to their profession. They are forever changed. Here is Lt. Colonel Vivian on the nurses she supervised in Iraq: “The camaraderie on the team is such that I just felt like I could entrust my life to these people. My nurses, God, I love them. I would go anywhere with them. Right now if they called me and said I need you, I would drop what I was doing with my family and figure out how I could help them. It just makes you that close.”

Angels engenders a deep respect for battle nurses and nurses in general. “For the rest of the civilian world out there, we want you to know that you could meet one of these ‘Angels of the Battlefield’ today in your church, at a school board meeting...” the authors write. “If you do, we want you to have a better understanding of who they are, what they have endured, how they have coped, and how they are thriving.” Anyone reading this book could conclude that when it comes to nurses at war, it can be said without irony: mission accomplished.

Angels

The Comfort Garden: Tales from the Trauma Unit
Laurie Barkin (SON’75,’82)
Fresh Pond Press

BARKIN’S BOOK reads like a horrific page-turner. But these are real stories that happened to real people. And as a psychiatric nurse consultant, Barkin was privy to her patients’ tragedies, fears, and angst over the five years she worked in San Francisco General Hospital’s surgical and trauma unit.

Barkin plunges immediately into the adrenaline rush of SFGH, a “hospital of last resort” catering to drug addicts, victims of sexual and physical abuse, the homeless, and the city’s worst trauma cases. Her first day on the job, she meets a young paraplegic left paralyzed after...