

## Discussion Questions for *The Lower River* by Paul Theroux

1. Do you think the book cover and title accurately portray the book inside?
2. Did you find the characters believable? Which of the characters did you like the most? Which did you dislike?
3. Did you find the dialog in the story realistic?
4. What did you think of the plot line development? How credible did the author make the plot? Did the plot take turns you did not expect, or did you find it predictable?
5. How does the location, Malawi, shape the story?
6. What does *The Lower River* say about longing and the desire to repeat the past? What is Ellis Hock trying to recapture?
7. Has anyone had any experiences that relate to places or experiences in the book? Does anyone now want to visit Malawi?
8. Any comments about the way the book ended?
9. Are there questions you would like to ask?

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From a May 12, 2012 interview with NPR:

THEROUX: It's a story that's been in my mind a lot because it's the picnic that goes wrong, the vacation that turns into a horror. You know, you go to a place - it happened to me in Africa long ago. I went. These people said come to our village and, you know, we'll have a drink. It was late at night. We went. Next morning, I said I think I'll leave. They said no, no, no, stick around another day. I did. On the third day, I said I'm definitely leaving. They said no, no, you can't leave. Give us money and you're staying. And it went on for three or four days. It was very, very scary. They wouldn't let me leave. And I've often thought about that experience. I suppose I transformed that into this story of the man who goes sentimentally back to his village, the happy village of his Peace Corps years. And it's not only different but they won't let him go.

THEROUX: I returned to my Peace Corps school and I got very sad because it wasn't the school that I remembered and it hadn't aged well. It's silly to think that because you have a dream for a person or a place or you have hopes that those hopes are going to be fulfilled. Probably they won't be fulfilled. And the reason is because they're your hopes. They're not the hopes of those people. So, you're deluding yourself into thinking that, and I suppose that's the idea behind the book. The Malawi that stays in my mind, well, there are two. There's the old place that I knew that had a population of maybe a million or a million and a half, and then there's the present-day with a million orphans and huge unsustainable population, of deforestation and tyranny. And they don't qualify for a lot of aid because their governance is so bad.