



A Hippo Banquet

Mary Henrietta Kingsley

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'While engaged on this hunt I felt the earth quiver under my feet, and heard a soft big southing sound, and looking round saw I had dropped in on a hippo banquet...'

Told with verve and self-mocking wit, the adventures of doughty female Victorian explorer Mary Kingsley describe stumbling upon five hippos by night, dodging elephants and fighting off a leopard with a stool. Introducing Little Black Classics: 80 books for Penguin's 80th birthday. Little Black Classics celebrate the huge range and diversity of Penguin Classics, with books from around the world and across many centuries. They take us from a balloon ride over Victorian London to a garden of blossom in Japan, from Tierra del Fuego to 16th-century California and the Russian steppe. Here are stories lyrical and savage; poems epic and intimate; essays satirical and inspirational; and ideas that have shaped the lives of millions.

Mary Henrietta Kingsley (1862-1900).

Kingsley's work is available in Penguin Classics in *Travels in West Africa*.

A Hippo Banquet Details

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Author : Mary Henrietta Kingsley

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Maud says

Actually more like a 3.5 star rating.

This book was a lot more funny and witty than I expected. It was a very enjoyable read though some parts felt a bit anticlimactic. One thing that I very much appreciate about this book is the fact that the author writes about Africa and its inhabitants in a very respectful way, which is not found often in these travel journals from that time for as far as I know.

I definitely want more so I hopefully will be able to pick up "Travels in West Africa" sometimes soon.

Darwin8u says

"Indeed the ways of Providence here are wonderful in their strange dual intention to preserve and to destroy;"

- Mary Kingsley, A Hippo Banquet

Vol N° 32 of my Penguin Little Black Classics Box Set. This volume contains excerpts from Kingsley's 1897 book 'Travels in West Africa'. The following are the four pieces in Vol 32:

1. A Hippo Banquet - ★★★★★
2. Five Gorillas - ★★★
3. Elephant Hunt - ★★★★★
4. Fight with a Leopard - ★★★★★

First, I really enjoyed this small piece. Mary Kingsley reminds me of those Victorian women you see in E.M Forster novels or in various Victorian BBC dramas: completely bold, confident, and immune to the full danger they are in. It is as if this scientific suffragette just carries the confidence of the British Empire with her wherever she goes. That said, probably my only negative on this work (and it isn't super negative given the time and place this was written) was her writing might have contributed in some form or fashion to British/European colonization of Africa AND stereotyping of African tribes. Maybe. For me, at least in these writings, she is fantastically droll, witty, self-effacing, and completely delivers the scene and the smell of her experiences with Hippos, Gorillas, Elephants, Leopards, and various tribes of West Africa.

Daren says

MHK is not only the quintessential Victorian female explorer, but she writes in a style I find hilarious. Its hard to describe accurately, but to read it in modern times it comes across as sort of pretentious or pompous, using a lot of words I only vaguely understand, but also in a self deprecating sort of way, which just makes her descriptions amusing.

Page 4 *"Geographical research in this region is fraught with difficulty, I find, owing to different tribes calling one in the same place by different names; and I am sure the Royal Geographical Society ought to*

insert amongst their "hints" that every traveller in this region should carefully learn every separate native word, or set of words, signifying "I don't know," - four villages and two rivers I have come across out here solemnly set down with various forms of this statement, for their native name."

Page 12, while discussing Hippopotamus *"At present I am undecided whether nature tried 'her 'prentice hand' on them in her earliest youth, or whether, having got thoroughly tired of making the delicately beautiful antelopes, corallines, butterflies, and orchids, she just said 'Goodness! I am quite worn out with this finicking work. Here, just put these other viscera into big bags - I can't bother any more.' "*

Michelle Curie says

Mary Kingsley is **certainly a woman to admire**. She was a British explorer of the 19th century, who studied cultures and peoples in West Africa. Back in the day, it certainly wasn't a job often done by women and her development sounds like straight out of a blockbuster.

From an early age on she was more interested in science and stories of explorers than those of romantic novelists such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. When her parents became ill and died soon after, she was freed from the responsibility of looking after them and decided to finish a book about African culture which her father had started and decided to go and *explore West Africa*.

A Hippo Banquet is a collection of excerpts from her **travel journal, which are reflective, observant and occasionally amusing**. Being the emancipated woman she wanted to be, she travelled without any men to protect her, but with a translator and the help of a few natives. The gender-based thinking of the Victorian Era shines through, for she has to fight a leopard with a wooden stool as it wouldn't be "ladylike" to carry around a gun. (*And yet, she does it! And thereby saves the dog the leopard was attacking. What a woman.*) I would recommend this to everyone interested in natural history and explorers' journals.

In 2015 Penguin introduced the Little Black Classics series to celebrate Penguin's 80th birthday. Including little stories from "around the world and across many centuries" as the publisher describes, I have been intrigued to read those for a long time, before finally having started. I hope to sooner or later read and review all of them!

Liz Janet says

This book was read for the #readwomen month.

A lady whose works helped shift African perceptions by the British as well as what British imperialism was? Sign me the hell up for that! I do disagree with her views on the suffragette movement, but this book is not about that so I will not mention it.

This is her book of her describing rivets and lands in West Africa, and it was very beautiful as well as hilarious. Read her for a feel of the time and imperialism, and how some believed themselves superior to others, she will not disappoint on that aspect.

JK says

I had never heard of Mary Kingsley before picking up this book, and I'm both ashamed and amazed at this fact. A woman choosing to be an explorer in Victorian times was shocking; exploration and travel were men's hobbies (usually for the very rich) and for Kingsley to simply take off and pursue her dream, not bothering one ounce about what society's opinion of this was, shows complete strength and drive.

No doubt dispelling many social expectations of the time, she travels alone with only an interpreter and natives guiding her through the jungles. Not a single white man 'escorts' her on her mission; she learns as much of the language and dialect as she can, and survives an emancipated woman. And what a woman.

Her musings on her time in Africa are peppered with humour alongside hints at the danger she was in, between both the big game and the natives. Although she reminds us frequently of her feminine disadvantage (with female locals fleeing upon seeing what they believe to be a white woman devil), she also shows us determination; whether that be eating a snake her awestruck companions believe to be treacherous, or fighting off a leopard with a wooden stool matters not. Despite her dangers, a clear love of animals seeped through her words, and this was the most heartening aspect of all.

The writing itself is gorgeous; I loved reading her descriptions of her surroundings and the animals she encountered. My favourites were the birds; their colours, their bodies, their behaviours. She captured all of these beautifully, and I could picture everything so vividly, I thought I could smell the gunpowder.

For me, this volume is what the *Little Black Classics* range is all about; opening readers up to writing they otherwise wouldn't be exposed to, and prompting them to look at these types of historical figures in more depth. This was absolutely captivating, and an excellent legacy for an excellent woman.

Bookdragon Sean says

I've got a great deal of respect for Mary Kingsley. Being an explorer was typically a man's role; it's something he would do if he had spare time and money in the Victorian age. It was almost a symbol of status and reputation to go and explore other continents and come back with animalistic trophies to hang on one's wall. It was a man's game in a cruel man's world. So, for Mary Kingsley to go ahead and be an explorer anyway was quite a brave thing to do; it symbolises her willpower and determination to do what she wanted to do regardless of gender stereotypes. She just doesn't care what other people think about her.

These four entries do reveal a lot about Victorian society. They're not directly concerned with the era, but whilst Kingsley narrates her travel logs she reveals the massive difference in social stance in the sexes. It was considered inappropriate for a woman to travel alone, let alone go exploring to a faraway continent. Her observations are quite amusing, though I don't agree with her assessment of Hippopotamus. I think Hippos are really quite cute. Not everything has to be majestic to be so.

"At present I am undecided whether nature tried 'her 'prentice hand' on them in her earliest youth, or whether, having got thoroughly tired of making the delicately beautiful antelopes, corallines, butterflies, and orchids, she just said 'Goodness! I am quite worn out with this finicking work. Here, just put these other viscera into big bags - I can't bother any more.'"

She transgresses the boundaries between what was considered typical male and female behaviour. She's a

tough girl. And that's not to mention the entire scene where she gets attacked by a leopard; she is forced to defend herself with just a cheap wooden stall. She is, indeed, a strong woman, and her journal entries are entertaining, funny and full of personality. This is worth a read.

Penguin Little Black Classic- 33

The Little Black Classic Collection by penguin looks like it contains lots of hidden gems. I couldn't help it; they looked so good that I went and bought them all. I shall post a short review after reading each one. No doubt it will take me several months to get through all of them! Hopefully I will find some classic authors, from across the ages, that I may not have come across had I not bought this collection.

Peter says

This lady is an explorer in a time when you expect it to be male dominated like most things at this time. She seems to be a lone explorer and not in the company of white men. Like any good explorer she had a team of natives with her and dispels the myth of rape and assault of a lone woman by the native "savages".

Although the writing was plodding in places I give it a four star rating for her bravery. YOU ROCK, GIRL.

Aylan Wever says

The book is an interesting read mainly because it was written by a female explorer from the 19th century. Her description of life in Africa are worth the read. The writing style, being somewhat archaic, was not so much to my liking, neither was the story.

Joey Woolfardis says

Mary Kingsley was an 19th Century English scientific writer and explorer. She wrote two books about her journeys through Africa and helped to change Europe's view of the African cultures and British Imperialism.

I had never heard of Mary Kingsley before I picked this book up and I think that is the greatest tragedy. How many men have I heard of who travelled the world, how many men I have read who spoke of daring deeds and exotic places. And here we have a woman who travelled alone and of her own interest to a land that, at the time, appeared to be wild and definitely not a place for a Victorian lady.

She has a wonderful turn of phrase and although she often reminds us that she is, of course, a woman, everything she does is everything an explorer should do. She fought off two Leopards as they fought dogs and she stumbled upon almost every creature known to man by accident, but did not run in fear but instead

stood and watched. She did not take any crap from any man, whether or not they wore a British Military Uniform or a simple loincloth about his groin.

And, despite what we may think of the Victorian period, she was greatly received by her male contemporaries, but she did not enjoy the label of being a "new woman". She was not concerned with Feminism, instead she concerned herself with her own well-being, science and the preservation of African culture. She died of Typhoid whilst serving a nurse during the Second Boer War. She was not a woman, a new woman or a man, she was simply a scientist and writer; a Human Being.

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Russio says

The experiences of Mary Kingsley are interesting: she spends her time among West African wildlife and tribespeople. She seems a gregarious type, with much resourcefulness and bravery. The first two stories in this volume are fairly plodding affairs as she sets the scene, while the final two are much packer, detailing as they do, encounters with dangerous animals in the wild. This book is clearly of its time and must have been very interesting for contemporaries. I cannot say that the writing was tight enough for it to fulfil my own personal wishes for visceral thrills or deep insights, however.

Marjolein says

Full review to come!

Tamsien West (Babbling Books) says

An interesting insight into colonial Africa, from the perspective of a female adventurer.

My favourite of these short tales was the final one: Fight with a Leopard. It was the most amusing and Kingsley's attitude towards animals is most keenly shown.

Overall I think this collection lack cohesion. The subject matter and writer are certainly interesting, but the 4 stories don't tie together in any kind of chronology, and it feel like a significant amount of context has been lost in presenting them in this format.

Frida says

I get up without delay, and find myself quite well. The cat has thrown a basin of water neatly over into my bag during her nocturnal hunts; and when my tea comes in I am informed a man 'done die' in the night, which explains the firing of guns I heard. I inquire what he has died of, and am told 'He just truck luck, and then he die.' His widows are having their faces painted white by sympathetic lady friends, and are attired in their oldest, dirtiest clothes, and but very few of them; still, they seem to be taking things in a resigned spirit.

I really did not know what I was missing before I read this Victorian lady explorer.

Lindsay says

I've never heard of Mary Kingsley before (natural history really isn't my forte!) but I was intrigued by the description of a "fearless, pioneering Victorian female explorer". The writing is very lively and beautifully conjures up images of West African rivers and forests. I'm quite tempted to read the full version of Travels in West African, not least because I'd like to know more about the explorer herself!
