



Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour

Gustave Flaubert, Francis Steegmuller (Translator / Editor), Eugène Delacroix (cover artist)

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At once a classic of travel literature and a penetrating portrait of a “sensibility on tour,” *Flaubert in Egypt* wonderfully captures the young writer’s impressions during his 1849 voyages. Using diaries, letters, travel notes, and the evidence of Flaubert’s traveling companion, Maxime Du Camp, Francis Steegmuller reconstructs his journey through the bazaars and brothels of Cairo and down the Nile to the Red Sea.

Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour Details

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Jimilie says

Whitepower and colonization... Okay this is 1849, but seriously, add a warning to the book or something. This white european travels to Egypt like it's conquered land, fucks 15 yo teenagers with no remorse whatsoever, shoots at dogs, describes "niggers" and slavery as they are the most normal thing. No questioning. Describing the ass of a 12 year old, or the sex of a prostitute with the same neutral descriptive tone he uses for sand and trees. He has no interest in arabic culture, food or people. This was painful to listen to.

Lisa says

I found out about this book when it was mentioned in a story on NPR about how the trip generated the first photographs of Egypt. Flaubert in Egypt is fascinating, raw, and frequently raunchy account of the author's travels in Egypt and surrounding areas in 1849-50. From the outside this may sound like an old school salacious read a la 50 Shades, but if you can get past the naughty stuff there is a lot that one can take away from Flaubert's accounts. For the student of history, one will find a vivid and poetic description of what Egypt was like prior to British rule. Reading the author's travel notes feels like looking at sketches created by an artist before he commits a design to canvas. For the literature lover, the editor has provided some intriguing notes about how certain individuals and events mentioned inspired different aspects of Flaubert's famous novel, Madame Bovary (published about 5 years after his trip). Those who like a study in human character may enjoy this book for the insight it gives into who Flaubert is; different aspects of his personality emerge depending on whether he is writing in his journal, to his mother, or to his equally-debauched friends back home. For those fascinated by Egyptology, there are many beautiful accounts of ruins, pyramids, and legends. Last, but certainly not least, for the photography lover there is an intriguing side story about Flaubert's traveling companion, Maxime Du Camp, who on this trip became the first person to photograph Egypt. Upon his return to France, Du Camp's images of Egypt immediately transformed the country from a place that existed in the minds of Europeans mainly as an exotic feature of classical literature to a real destination ready for tourism. I recommend this book, but with a word of warning: it is not for the easily offended.

Sébastien Torres says

Le donneur de voie sur Audible à une diction parfaite, le texte que j'écoute avant de dormir fait voyager ! Après Flaubert à tirer sur des chiens errants et à se taper des gamines de 15 ans m'a l'air d'un type louche :p

Tocotin says

"Women of Algiers" is one of my favorite paintings, but there is no denying that it depicts harem as nothing more than a bordello. Same with Flaubert: for him, Egypt is nothing more than a bordello. The dude never married, and he loved visiting prostitutes. Here are his words:

"I love prostitution, and for itself, too, quite apart from its carnal aspects. My heart begins to pound every time I see one of those women in low-cut dresses walking under the lamplight in the rain [...]. The idea of prostitution is a meeting place of so many elements – lust, bitterness, complete absence of human contact [?"

color me confused], muscular frenzy, the clink of gold – that to peer into it deeply makes one reel. One learns so many things in a brothel, and feels such sadness, and dreams so longingly of love!...”

Fair enough. In Egypt, he screws people left and right, boys, girls, whoever is available. (Not sure about camels, but he mentions them so many times that I got suspicious.) He pays for it not only in gold, but in venereal diseases too, later on – which makes me wonder what happened to the people he slept with, before and after. It’s a quite frightful thought. You look at all those highly civilized folks from European countries – engineers, archaeologists, writers, photographers, reporters, intellectuals of all sorts, what have you – well-to-do white men, most of them – and see walking and talking biological hazard, whose levels of restraint, responsibility and compassion are nearing zero.

Such was the culture, such were the times, they were conditioned from the cradle to this sort of entitlement, yeah, I know, that’s right – they were. Still, in every era, every place, there were people of privilege, as well as common people, who thought differently and saw behind the importance of their own WANT. Sadly, Flaubert is not one of them.

“I buy the hair of two women, together with their hair-ornaments. The women being shorn weep, but their husbands, who do the shearing, make ten piastres per head. As we are about to leave, a man comes up and offers us another head of hair, which Max buys. This must have been distressing to the poor women, who seem to prize their hair greatly.”

You don’t say?...

He doesn’t give a crap about the ubiquitous slavery, either. Mentality of the times, white man’s burden, romanticism, or perhaps putting too big a strain on the conventional, not-too-brilliant intelligence?

“All these faces are calm, nothing irritated in their expression – brutes take these things [that’s slavery] as a matter of course.”

A very curious, quaint little book.

Jennifer says

I probably wouldn't have enjoyed this book very much if I hadn't been here in Egypt. It really is just a collection of travel notes and observations, but when read in it's proper setting, it provides an interesting perspective on Egyptian culture and history.

It's amazing how some things simply remain in this seemingly fast moving world. All the monuments and buildings described in this book are still here, and life in Egypt doesn't seem to have changed much since Flaubert made his journey.

Mark says

Flaubert, famous for *Madame Bovary*, took a trip to Egypt when in his late 20s. Penguin has published excerpts from his journal and letters to his parents in this volume. I thought that because it was about travel through the eyes of a very gifted writer, that maybe he would verbalize some of what I love about foreign countries, foreign sites and foreign experiences. He did offer some beautiful descriptions of places, and exciting moments, but for the most part he offered stories about being lewd and obnoxious. He expresses his

desire to sodomize on of the boys that are in the public bath houses (because everyone did it and he thought he should experience everything), he talks about the hookers he slept with, sometimes he talks about the natives like cute little pets,. The good is very good, but the bad outweighs it. His description of sunrise over the pyramids, the streets of Cairo are wonderful, but I for one could not enjoy reading about his sensual adventures and found the spaces in between the beautiful paragraphs just too long to get over.

Mostafa Shalash says

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R.K. Byers says

this guy was a pig! he was worse than Henry Miller! not only that, he kept referring to Egypt as "the Orient".

Geoff Balme says

It is sometimes difficult to imagine this fellow is responsible for some of the most impressive novels of western lit. Nothing much seems to point to his being either particularly observant or a devoted worker. Still travel literature of the era are fascinating for the perhaps unspoiled nature of the Egyptian antiquities being studied.

Daren says

Francis Steegmuller (translator and editor), probably doesn't take enough credit for this book - and Flaubert probably too much.

In 1949/50 Gustave Flaubert (at the time 27) and Maxime Du Camp (a little younger, I think) made their grand tour of Egypt, before heading on to Beirut, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Greece and Italy. Flaubert kept a diary, which he embellished a number of years later, filling on some detail. He also writes letters, mostly to his mother, but also to a friend, Louis Bouilhet. From these, and from Du Camp's book 'Le Nil, Egypte et Nubie' and his 'Notes de voyage', Steegmuller pulls together a narrative and a commentary for this trip.

Flaubert is a strange fellow. At times despondent, offering few words per day, other times expounding about a place or a person. In his diary, and in letters to his friend, he is (hilariously) crass and talks of his times with the many prostitutes he engages, even a baths attendant boy (when in Rome...). I found it a very entertaining read. It offers a number of factors of interest / amusement:

It has historical context. In 1849/50 many of the Egyptian sites were more readily accessible to tourists, but also more inaccessible as they had not be excavated properly - for example Abu Simbel, which during their visit, is under many metres of sand, buried up to the chin. Some of the descriptions were great for comparison to my travels there (about 1995).

Flaubert also offers a few pearls of wisdom - *When one does something, one must do it wholly and well.*

Those bastard existences where you sell suet all day and write poetry at night are made for mediocre minds – like those horses that are equally good for saddle and carriage, the worst kind, that can neither jump a ditch nor pull a plow.

A thirdly, his ridiculous and hilarious writing: *This is indeed a funny country. Yesterday, for example, we were in a cafe which is one of the best in Cairo, and there were, at the same time as ourselves, inside, a donkey shitting, and a gentleman who was pissing in a corner. No one finds that odd; no one says anything.*

and*A week ago I saw a monkey in the street jump on a donkey and try to jack him off - the donkey brayed and kicked, the monkey's owner shouted, the monkey itself squealed - apart from two or three children who laughed and me who found it very funny, no one paid any attention. When I described this to M. Belin, the secretary at the consulate, he told me of seeing an ostrich trying to violate a donkey. Max himself jacked off the other day in a deserted section among some ruins and said it was very good. Enough lubricities.*

Hilarious. Albeit still somewhat disjointed. Probably 3.5 stars, rounded up to 4.

Céline (lumierewhispers) says

1 ?

À mes yeux, la qualité de la prose de Flaubert ne compensera jamais l'horreur du contenu de ce livre. Je suis consciente du contexte historique et social de l'époque - mais le regard pervers et colonial de Flaubert sur les hommes et femmes d'Égypte était juste insupportable à lire (ou dans mon cas, à écouter).
