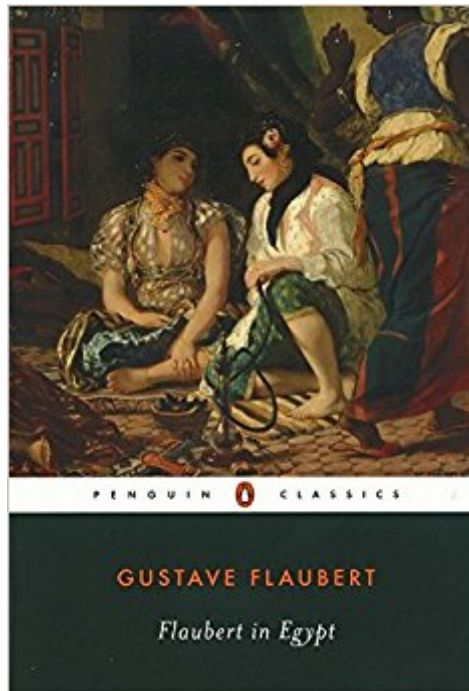




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Flaubert In Egypt: A Sensibility On Tour (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Flaubert's unforgettable memoirs of travels abroad. At once a classic of travel literature and a penetrating portrait of a "sensitivity 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. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

This 1972 volume was gleaned from Flaubert's diaries, letters, and travel notes. It reconstructs an 1849 trip to Egypt, Cairo, and the Red Sea area. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French

In 1849, at age 28, Gustave Flaubert (who had not yet distinguished himself in literature) embarked on a trip to the "Orient", as it was then called. His traveling companion was Maxime Du Camp. From

November 1849 to July 1850 they were in Egypt. From there they went on to Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Italy. This book is an account of the Egyptian portion of the trip. FLAUBERT IN EGYPT actually is a composite, assembled from several sources: Flaubert's own travel notes, in their original version and as later re-written by Flaubert (but never published); letters Flaubert sent from Egypt to his beloved mother and to his good friend Louis Bouilhet; and the papers and several publications of Du Camp. Francis Steegmuller has done a brilliant job of selecting, inter-weaving, and translating these various extracts, and then interpolating them with helpful and non-intrusive notes and commentary, so that the result is a very coherent and eminently readable travelogue. True to its title, the book reveals as much about Gustave Flaubert as it does about Egypt, and to me they are equally engrossing and fascinating. Egypt of 1850 was an extraordinary and exotic place, and Gustave Flaubert was an extraordinary sojourner, highly receptive to the exotica of Egypt. His writing, as translated and edited by Steegmuller, is more literary, readable, and entertaining than that of Sir Richard Francis Burton, who began his famous travels and accounts a few years later, in the 1850s. FLAUBERT IN EGYPT abounds with the odd, the colorful, the curious, and the grotesque. One example: Flaubert and Du Camp spent five hours perched on a wall watching the ceremony of the Doseh, whereby a sheik (priest) rides his horse over the bodies of more than 200 men, lying on the ground and arranged and pressed together in a row like sardines. According to legend, in so doing the sheik cannot hurt any of the men; if they die, "it is due to their sins." Another: Sailing up the Nile, they passed a Coptic monastery, from which dozens of monks, totally naked, spilled into the river and swam towards their boat shouting "Baksheesh, baksheesh", while the crew of the boat tried to beat them off. Elsewhere, Flaubert writes that baksheesh and the cudgel "are the essence of the Arab." The essence, or symbol, of Egypt turns out to be bird[poop]. Actually, Flaubert, as translated, uses a more vulgar term: "Bird[poop] is Nature's protest in Egypt; she decorates monuments with it instead of with lichen or moss." As the above suggests, the strait-laced and the politically-correct of today may find offense in some passages of FLAUBERT IN EGYPT. There is much that is vulgar, and a few of Flaubert's observations would quickly be condemned by some as racist. He also described, and participated in, rather exotic venery. Of one night with an "almeh" (dancer/whore), during which he counted "coup" five times, he wrote: "How flattering it would be to one's pride if at the moment of leaving you were sure that you left a memory behind, that she would think of you more than of the others who have been there, that you would remain in her heart!" Be that as it may, Flaubert himself left Egypt with a venereal problem for which he received mercury treatments for the rest of his life. Steegmuller gently pushes the notion that the expedition and the travel notes Flaubert maintained during it marked an important transition in his

writing and aesthetic perspective from romanticism to realism. Along those lines, one of the excerpts from Du Camp's writings tells about Flaubert, on the summit of Gebel Abusir overlooking the Second Cataract of the Nile, suddenly crying out, "I have found it! Eureka! Eureka! I will call her Emma Bovary!"

This book's value lies largely in the insight into the personality of Flaubert that it provides. The commentary on ancient Egypt is virtually nil. Flaubert's commentary on the Egypt of 1849 is rather interesting, but limited here as well. I was looking for more on ancient Egypt out of this book, but Flaubertistas may not be disappointed. There are a few photos and drawings of interest.

Having enjoyed "Salammbô," which is a technicolor sandals and swords Panavision epic a century before its time, I wondered about Flaubert's earlier travels in the fall of 1849 in the desert realm. He probably behaved no differently than any other twenty-seven-year-old aesthete from Europe among the natives, and this remains less an indictment of "orientalism" in our P.C.-sensitive era than a pair of journals by him and his companion Maxime du Camp, with commentary by the Flaubert expert Francis Steegmuller. Parts ramble on without a lot of interest, and other sections captivate you, but like any diary and the expanded journal entries made later by Flaubert, the work as a whole is more a miscellaneous notebook of impressions and observations, much as one might expect of this formidably articulate tourist. I think the relatively few sexual episodes get, if understandably for their candor, too much of the attention here compared to the bulk of this slender book, which is given over to the sights. There's amidst the itinerary and dutifully recorded letters to his mother many marvelous descriptions. Not all were addressed to his mother! You get the sense of the languid pace of a brothel, an early visitor's curious wanderings among the colossal statues of Luxor or Thebes, the sun rising over the graffitied Pyramids, his first sight of the Sphinx-- Steegmuller's notes remind us how magical this would have been before the ubiquitous photographs-- and the decaying splendors of Karnak. Here's a sample of the prose about this last attraction. "The first impression of Karnak is of a land of giants. The stone grilles still existing in the windows give the scale of these formidable beings. As you walk among the forest of tall columns you ask yourself whether men weren't served up whole on skewers, like larks. In the first courtyard, after the two great pylons as you come from the Nile, there is a fallen column all of whose segments are in order, despite the crash, exactly as would a fallen pile of checkers. We return via the avenue of sphinxes: not one has his head-- all decapitated. White vultures with yellow bills are flying around a mound, around a carcass; to the right three have alighted and calmly watch us pass. An Arab trots swiftly on his

dromedary." (169) Out of such awesome silence, Flaubert also gained inspiration for "Madame Bovary," unlikely as it may seem. He also learned early about the fickleness of women, no matter where they might live, in his closing comments to Louise Colet about an "almeh," a lady of the night who often entertained him, Kuchuk: "You and I are thinking of her, but she is certainly not thinking of us. We are weaving an aesthetic around her, whereas this particular very interesting tourist who was vouchsafed the honours of her couch has vanished from her memory completely, like many others. Ah! Traveling makes one modest-- you see what a tiny place you occupy in the world." (220) These remarks remind us that Flaubert cannot be seen as a mere pawn of mid 19-c imperial strategems. He took advantage of his position, but he also realizes his complicity and the whole game that he by his privilege is able to indulge himself in as long as he pays the price. Another will always be found to accept his payment and render services accordingly, Those who denigrate Flaubert's typically frank account for its coolly documented exchanges might well contemplate how we today are enmeshed in a far greater contest, that began in such initial encounters, a century and a half before the vogue of globalization.

This book has accounts from Flaubert's letters and travel notes during his adventure in Orient. He is a romantic poet and a weak traveler when it comes to difficulties in the voyage, but what calls the attention is his lack of amazement for the ancient monuments. Interestingly, in this book there are translations from Du Camp's accounts that tell how unconscious and lazy was Flaubert during this journey when admiring the ancient places. Du Camp is not a romantic writer and he is a scientific and very realistic man. He did photography and research during the entire journey along with Flaubert's rare oriental experiences. You have both perspectives in one book! But if you want to go deeper about the journey, you need to read their books separately. The only problem I encountered is that Du Camp's books were not translated to English! and now I have to read them in French. On the other hand, Flaubert's books are translated not only in English but in Spanish too. To me this makes no justice to Du Camp's works.

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