

BOOKSHELF

Five Best: Lynn Freed on Paradise Lost

From the author of the novel 'The Last Laugh.'



MAMAN Colette in a 1954 photograph by Madame d'Ora.

PHOTO: NACHLASS MADAME D'ORA, MUSEUM FÜR KUNST UND GEWERBE HAMBURG

By Lynn Freed

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West With the Night

By Beryl Markham (1942)

1. In this glorious memoir, the celebrated adventurer and pilot Beryl Markham (1902-86) describes a youth straight out of a dream: a farm in colonial Kenya, where a young girl can run off to hunt barefoot with the local Nandi tribesmen; where Kibii, her beloved Nandi friend, can teach her to jump higher than herself; where a leopard can creep in at night to snatch a dog and a half-tame lion can maul the girl almost to death. It is Kibii who is with Markham through all the stages of her marvelous African life, including the one in which she learns to fly planes. "When you fly," says the pilot who teaches her, "you get a feeling of possession that you couldn't have if you owned all of Africa." And off she flies,

delivering mail, passengers, supplies to safaris, and scouting elephants for hunters. “It is absurd for a man to kill an elephant,” Markham concludes in this preconservation era. “The elephant is a rational animal. He thinks.” And then one day Markham leaves Nairobi for good. Sitting at the Mayfair in London, surrounded by all the comforts of civilization, she and Baron von Blixen (husband of Karen) drink a toast to Africa, “because we knew that Africa was gone.” Soon after this she makes her record-setting solo flight across the Atlantic, landing nose-down in a bog on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.

The Snows of Yesteryear

By Gregor von Rezzori (1989)

2. Among the literary gems produced by the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian empire, this memoir by Gregor von Rezzori—writer, publisher, TV personality and bon vivant—shines bright as the sun. Born in the Bukovina, a designation that has since vanished off the map, von Rezzori (1914-98) was “the true son of an era of universal disintegration.” The people of his childhood emerge in rich portraits—his jealous and neurotic mother; his lusty, high-spirited, fiercely anti-Semitic father; his feral nanny; his charming governess. Of these, the nanny is the most vivid: ugly, “a barely tamed savage,” Cassandra was the joy of his childhood. “There is always present . . . the image of Cassandra, running wild and naked, and behind her the pack of dogs snapping at the black banner of her mane.” She’s also obsessed with defecation. Any romantic story she told would inevitably conclude with, “And then the two squatted down and together they crapped on the ground.” By contrast, Bunchy, the governess, is an entirely civilizing influence. Having served as governess to von Rezzori’s mother, she brings with her “all the rules of proper comportment, the knowledge of languages and art history” and, for young Gregor, the future publisher, his first miniature printing press.

My Mother’s House

By Colette (1922)

3. Sensual in every detail, Colette’s paean to her mother—the person who “dominated all the rest of my work”—was written in pieces over time, an undertaking that allowed the writer (1873-1954) to render the quality and texture of her own childhood: aubergines, pimientos, the smell of tomato leaves; her one-legged father, who walked with the “regular rhythm of two sticks and a single foot”; the village girls and their “meagre scandals”; her mother reading the plays of Pierre Corneille (the books disguised as missals) during Mass, and bristling “like a belligerent hen” when the curé suggests that Mass is not for dogs. Throughout, the song is rich. “Where are the children?” her mother

cries. “A slender hand strokes my hair and pinches my ear. How dearly I love its three little hard lumps caused by the rake, the secateur and the dibble.”

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis

By Giorgio Bassani (1962)

4. There’s a lovely sort of afternoon sadness to this novel, in which a group of friends, some of them Italian Jews, meets for tennis in the garden of the Finzi-Continis’ magnificent mansion. It is 1938, and Mussolini’s racial laws have banned Jews from the group’s tennis club. Despite his father’s disapproval of the Finzi-Continis and their “hereditary pride,” the narrator falls in love with the young Micòl Finzi-Contini. The two sit beside the tennis court, enjoying what will be the last season of their carefree youth, eating sandwiches: smoked salmon, little vol-au-vents filled with minced chicken in béchamel. There is also tea, milk, coffee and “beaded Bohemian crystal carafes [of] lemonade, fruit juice, *Skiwasser* . . . ‘in homage’ ”—Micòl says, laughing—“ ‘to the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire.’ ”

Out of Egypt

By André Aciman (1994)

5. Of the fabulous mélange of relatives in this splendid memoir of life in Alexandria, Uncle Vili, a “Turco-Italian-Anglophile-gentrified-Fascist Jew,” adorer of Il Duce and spy for the British, is, perhaps, top of the list. But there are also rival grandmothers, unfaithful husbands (“she wished him dead in small doses every day”), Arabs, Armenians and one-eyed servants. And there’s the Ladino they all speak—a language of “loosened neckties, unbuttoned shirts, and overused slippers, a language as intimate, as natural, and as necessary as the odor of one’s sheets, of one’s closets, of one’s cooking.” Eventually Nasser and his cronies confiscate the family’s assets and force them to flee. Wherever they end up they’re as nostalgic for Alexandria as they once were for Constantinople. Even living in relative splendor in England, Uncle Vili has little good to say of his British hosts. “They’re slower than Arabs and twice as stupid. How on earth did they ever manage to have an empire once?”