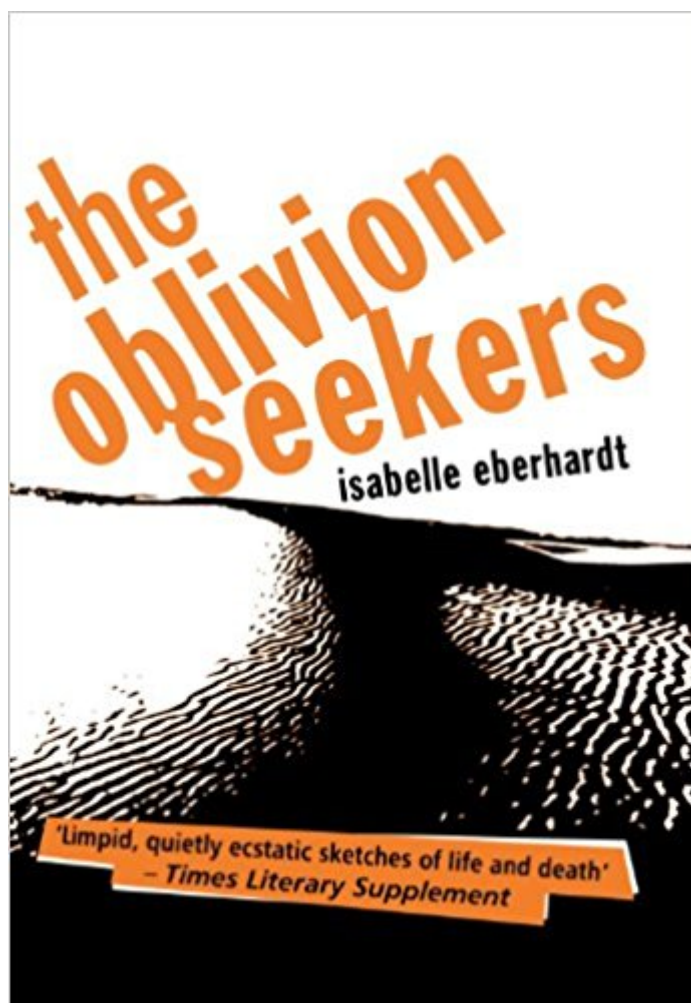


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The Oblivion Seekers (Peter Owen Modern Classics)



Synopsis

Isabelle Eberhardt's life was one of the most extraordinary of any writer's of the last 150 years. Daughter of a Russian Nihilist who forbade her any contact with society, dressed her as a man, and insisted that her education consist of hard physical labor, she, perhaps unsurprisingly, ran away to North Africa in 1897, aged 20. There she traveled through the Sahara and became one of the first white women ever to be initiated into Sufism. She also produced a small but exceptional body of writing. *The Oblivion Seekers* is a selection of her best stories and vignettes of African life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Highly literary, evocative, romantic." — Kathy Acker, author, *Pussy*, *King of the Pirates*

Isabelle Eberhardt was born in Geneva in 1877, the illegitimate daughter of a Russian Orthodox priest and a Russian-German woman. She spent much of her short adult life in North Africa, where she converted to Islam.

An interesting collection of short fiction with the perk of being translated by Paul Bowles. It's an important glimpse into the brief life of Eberhardt. It's also a great compliment to Eberhardt's diaries which help complete a portrait of the author.

Highly recommend this book. Interesting and captivating. Fascinating woman. Well written. It was recommended to me and I've since passed it on....everyone I know who has read it loved it.

Meh. Seems like she was an outstanding woman, but the book is less than stellar---or, perhaps I just don't get it.

She dressed as a man. Born Russian, she moved to North Africa, converted to Islam, joined a Sufi sect. She drank, smoked hashish, slept with any man she pleased. An assassin failed to kill her, but succeeded in nearly hacking her arm off. In 1904, when she was just 27, she died --- actually: drowned in a flash flood --- in the desert, leaving behind a handful of short stories, a thin novel and a legend so compelling she became the subject of a French film. If you've read "The Wilder Shores of Love," you know Isabelle Eberhardt as an unforgettable character, larger than life by several magnitudes. But a friend suggested she was too good a writer to be left in the suburbs of literary celebrity, so I settled in with eleven of her stories --- 50 pages of barely disguised non-fiction in a book called "The Oblivion Seekers." I had an unforgettable hour. Start with the title, which is both appropriate and disturbing. In contemporary fiction, characters are generally trying to Get Somewhere: marry up, make a fortune, triumph over circumstance. Eberhardt's characters --- and, for that matter, Eberhardt --- are going in the opposite direction. All they want is to be left alone. And that, more often than not, means they're nobodies. Vagrants. Vagabonds. This does not mean they are losers. Their quest is exalted --- they seek enlightenment. Which can only be obtained through self-purification. No possessions. No family. No career. Just endless wandering. Poverty. And, of course, the drugs that push attention inward: hashish and kif. "Even in the darkest purlieu of Morocco's underworld," Eberhardt writes, "such men can reach the magic horizon where they are free to build their dream-palaces of delight." Eberhardt envied these men. And had the astonishing courage to become one of them: "As a nomad who has no country besides Islam and neither family nor close friends, I shall wend my way through life until it is time for that everlasting sleep inside the grave." So what we get in these stories is a stripped-down world. Sunlight. Wind. Weather. Chanting. Prayer. Daily life, endlessly repeated. In the first story, a wayfarer walks and walks, and when his arms and legs grow heavy, there are "no prayers, no medicines, merely the ineffable happiness of dying." In another story, a man escapes a brutal father by joining the army. That life has advantages: food, shelter, the right to "get drunk, gamble and go after women." That comes to bore him. At the earliest opportunity, he returns home. But there he is regarded as a soldier --- a suspicious character. Though not to his brother's wife, who sees him as a hero and takes him as a lover. How

can this story end? Not the way you think. In the third story, a prostitute finds true love. For a while. In the end, she pays. In the fourth, a French man who has come to Algeria to make some money comes to see the simple beauty of life on the farm --- and he becomes a Moslem. My favorite story, "Criminal," is a seven-page chronicle of colonialism in action. The French have decided to buy a valley. The only question: how much will they pay the Algerians who have owned the land for generations? The answer is shocking. So is the reaction. The story ends with a stunning sentence: "Crime, particularly among the poor and downtrodden, is often a last gesture of liberty." There is magic in these stories, as there is in any fiction where life has been reduced to the basics and interior travel is just a puff away. To us, it may seem as if Isabelle Eberhardt goes too far. On every page. She exults in that: "By advancing into unknown territories, I entered into my life." And that takes her somewhere we may think is foreign to us. "I had a fantasy," she writes in one story, "of being lifted up and carried off in the enormous embrace of a winged monster, come to destroy us all." Not your fantasy? Really? Never?

Unfortunately, Isabelle Eberhardt died at 27, her major manuscript lost in the flood that took her life. Our loss. This volume contains 11 short stories, a diary excerpt and a letter to the editor defending her integrity. Paul Bowles has provided in the preface a reasonably detailed account of her life. The book would be valuable solely as a historical piece - a sympathetic view of the natives who are in the process of being subjugated by France. However, the writing is a pleasure to read, often becoming almost a prose poem. "The dry wind, completing its work of cracking open the earth, whipped against the muscles of his legs ..." from Blue Jacket. "It burns in the sunlight, a dusty stripe between the wheat's dull gold on one side, and the shimmering red hills and grey-green scrub on the other." from Outside. These are stories of wanderers, soldiers, young girls in love, old displaced farmers, and oblivion seekers. Eberhardt has the ability to make these characters both very specific and universal. Unfortunately, she did not live to produce more of this splendid writing. I have to be satisfied with this slim volume.

Isabelle Eberhardt captures the oppressed spirit of the Islamic men within her description of the kif smokers holed up in a ramshackle shelter for the night. In this short story "The Oblivion Seekers" she paints a descriptive picture of the backward desert towns of Morocco and aptly draws a subtle metaphor between a captive falcon and the plight of the Arab men. On a road to anywhere else is the town of Kenadsa in a desolate town with not even essential human comforts, here of all places, "where there is not even a *café*", Eberhardt discovers a kif den. The Islamic kif dens of the late

1800's were not unlike the crack houses of today; hidden away in unforgiving places, always in poor sanitary conditions. These places are the sanctuaries for the homeless, the lost, the spiritually bankrupt, the wanderers of our day. This one was similar at least with regards to décor. This particular kif den, despite its derelict location, was of higher quality than most. It was in a "partially ruined house behind the Mellah, a long hall lighted by a single eye in the ceiling of twisted and smoke blackened beams". Eberhardt's passage continues, "The walls are black, ribbed with light colored cracks that look like open wounds". Within this apparent squalor are collected together vagabonds, nomads, persons of dubious intent and questionable appearance for the purpose of smoking kif. Among them, on a "rude perch of palm branches" is a falcon. The captive falcon is tethered to the makeshift perch by a string around one leg. When unencumbered, falcons spend their time surveying the land from the tall branches of mighty trees or soaring in the clouds, high over the desert cliffs, keeping dominion over their land. Surprisingly, a simple string keeps the falcon terrestrial and prevents him from living out his true destiny. Just as the owner of the proud raptor goes untold in Eberhardt's story, the oppressor of the Islamic men is neither disclosed; only the oppressed condition in which they all find themselves is described. It could be the politics of the region, the occupation of the land by foreigners, or the poverty inflicted by the desert on all its inhabitants. Reason aside, even the "most highly educated" of Islam can succumb to the oppression of the spirit. Gathered this evening in the den, among others, is a Moroccan poet, a wanderer in search of native legends; to keep alive he composes and recites verse. There is a Filali musician, rootless without family nor specific trade. There too, a Sudanese doctor who follows the caravans from Senegal to Timbuktu. All, men in search of a medicine to help them forget. To help them forget the futility of their existence - wandering from place to place with no good purpose. These men should be part of a thriving free culture, able to spread their talents to the ends of the Islamic world. The art, music and science are essential pinnings of the Islamic spirit. With a free spirit they wander to the horizons with purpose as surely they, or their predecessors, once did; free to dream and make real those dreams. Eberhardt writes, "even in the darkest purlieu of Morocco's underworld such men can reach the magic horizon where they are free to build their dream-palaces of delight". The Islamic men are proud men, intelligent men, with dreams and aspirations of freedom and self-determination but their desires, just like the falcon, are restrained. They travel across the desert from country to country undeterred by political borders. They live off the land - on what meagerness the desert will yield. Yet, a metaphorical string around their ankle binds them tight. The men of Islam can roam freely about the desert but it is their Islamic spirit that is tethered. Consequently, they pursue their dreams in the "clouds of narcotic smoke".

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