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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

SangFroid

Claude Feninger
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Behind the scenes in the world's international luxury hotels is a hectic world of activity that must be orchestrated in such a way that its existence is only guessed at by guests.

A general manager, Feninger writes, must be "a good accountant, diplomat, gourmet chef, army general, and the kind of strategist who can run a crew of thousands. You have to have an eye for details and good delegation skills, but you have to be hands-on at the same time."

It's a world he was made for, and his love of the hospitality business comes across on every page.

Born in Cairo of an Egyptian father of Swiss descent and a Neapolitan mother, the author was fluent in Arabic, French and Italian before he started school. He promptly added English to his repertoire. His cosmopolitan family gave him useful connections as well. At the end of World War II, the young Feninger took the first boat out of Cairo bound for the Ecole des Hoteliers in Lausanne, Switzerland.

SangFroid describes a career that seems to have been crafted in equal measure of natural ability and luck. Repeatedly, Feninger managed to be in the right place at the right time, or at least the most dramatic time. After brief experience managing a small hotel in a Swiss resort town, he returned to Cairo at the age of 25 to be the youngest manager ever of the storied Shepheard's Hotel. He was also its last manager; a highly visible symbol of foreign privilege, it was torched and burned to the ground during anti-British riots in 1952.

Feninger's next assignment took him to Saudi Arabia, where he rehabilitated the Dhahran International Hotel, perhaps too successfully. When he was ready to leave, the local prince, who owned the hotel, refused to extend him an exit visa. He had to smuggle himself out of the country.

These adventures were a prelude to a career that spanned the globe. As a member of Hilton Hotels International, Feninger supervised construction of Hiltons in Addis Ababa, Amsterdam, Athens, Brussels, Hong Kong, London, Paris, Rabat, Rome, Rotterdam, Singapore, Tel Aviv, Tokyo and Tunis–and has tales to tell about all of them. He's an accomplished raconteur, choosing the right details to engage readers and avoiding the tedious.

With Hilton's blessing, Feninger strove to avoid the cookie-cutter construction common to many American hotel chains.

"We wanted our hotels to retain local flavor and color," he writes. "Whenever possible for our buildings, we used local materials such as marble, tropical woods, and sandstone for the exterior and indigenous crafts and materials for the interior." Many of his descriptions are accompanied by pictures from Feninger's collection.

A good editor could have improved this book grammatically, particularly by removing an overabundance of commas and exclamation points. Nevertheless, *SangFroid* is a fascinating read for anyone interested in the evolution of the modern luxury hotel.

MARILYN BOWDEN (September 27, 2010)

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