

Travels in Syria: A Love Story

Carol Miller

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Miller moves layer by layer through the history of Syria, bringing to life her rich observations of the setting and culture.

Freelance writer, author, and photographer Carol Miller confirms herself as a dedicated historian in *Travels in Syria*, a lengthy account peppered with exquisite present-day photographs. This book details the rise and fall of rulers, religions, commerce, and a “parade of societies” that made their marks on this prized land.

“Everyone wants a piece” of Syria, Miller writes, and history reveals the same: Syria is a “kaleidoscope, forever changing, always disputed, never submitting.” Miller proves this by taking the reader through cities, famous landmarks, and archaeological sites as the chapters progress, pausing to peer into the story of the famous Qalaat Saladin (Saladin’s Castle) or the castle-turned-trading-post Sheizar, among others. Her history is painstakingly thorough as she moves layer by layer through the millennia of tribes, religious movements, leaders, artists, philosophers, and traders that left their imprint on the land—“one story raised on another.”

The bibliography contains more than one hundred entries, research that has afforded Miller descriptions of recovered court records; ancient household items; trade, commerce, and palace life; and the documentation of “probably the world’s first female historian,” Anna Komnene, who wrote of her Byzantine father’s reign. Miller’s stunning black-and-white photographs of the architectural remains of these societies pair well with her descriptions and offer a visual aid for comprehending what many Westerners have never witnessed up close.

Behind the work of the historian is a less weighty, yet appealing, travel narrative where Miller and her traveling companion move among modern people juxtaposed with the remains of an earlier time. It’s a pleasure and a delight to envision Miller encountering young women with their babies and laundry in a structure that contains a deep stone stairway leading to “an ancient drainage system,” a remnant of Aleppo’s Old City walls. These short accounts are few and far between, however, and may leave the reader desiring more of the same.

Miller’s writing style is thorough and deliberate in the dominating historical sections, which are dry, at times, compared to her lyrical and fascinating descriptions as a present-day observer—a “lacy minaret,” a “grapevine, gone mad,” and in Aleppo, for instance:

“There are only the quiet streets and the busy mosques, their carpets and prayer rugs damp from feet just washed. Old men are enveloped in their scarves, made transparent by the light from the open windows, heads buried in the Koran, the faithful seated cross-legged on a stool or on the floor. Women in repose are mindless and apathetic as their unleashed children scamper under the light flickering from the crystal chandeliers. Groups of men are swaying, praying, weeping, wailing, as they recall the death of the Shi’ite Hussein or the loss of faith or their own sins.”

Travels in Syria is a title that may suggest itself as a travelogue, yet the descriptions and rare present-day observations are weighted with historical accounts meant for serious ponderers of the past as well as for those who

desire to trace the history of their ancestors or religion back to its origin in the ever-changing land of Syria.

HEATHER WEBER (January 6, 2014)

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