

Writings from the Sand, Volume 1: Collected Works of Isabelle Eberhardt

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University of Nebraska Press (May 1, 2012)

Softcover \$39.95 (600pp)

978-0-8032-1611-2

From the murky circumstances of her birth in Geneva in 1877 to her dramatic death in a flash flood in Ain Sefra, Algeria, Isabelle Eberhardt lived an unconventional life. At twenty, she unshackled herself from the “fettters” of modern life and boarded a boat in Marseilles bound for the Algerian coast. Savoring “the delectable taste of solitary liberty,” Eberhardt began a journey through North Africa, where, often dressed as a man, she penetrated the inner circles of Arab and Islamic culture, learning Arabic and eventually converting to Islam. Ever the astute observer, she wrote prolifically, amassing hundreds of journal entries, introspective reflections, and short stories.

Like many artists, the merit of Eberhardt’s work was not widely known, nor valued, until after her death. In *Writings from the Sand*, editors Delacour and Huleu assemble these writings into a vast collection that aims to “reestablish the work in its true form.” This focus on accurate reproduction shapes the collection and sets it apart. It is not simply a volume of writing canonizing a particular author; it is a collection that functions as an autobiographical paper trail, offering a study of a life in addition to the study of a process of composition.

Using original manuscripts archived in Aix-en-Provence as the basis for reproducing Eberhardt’s work, the collection places side by side slightly altered versions of the same essays, published at different times. This arrangement gives valuable insight into Eberhardt’s writing process, moving from the frank and rudimentary entries—itemized lists of her daily activities—to the dreamy, wispy prose that dwells on her obsessions with solitary freedom.

In her reflections, she takes readers from moonlit nights in Tunisia to the seedy, darkened corners of society where prostitutes roam for wandering soldiers. Her sheer glee at being alone and free is apparent but calmly restrained with measured, subdued prose. This variety and contrast provide a palatable sense of Eberhardt’s style. This writer has the gift of making the overworked new again. The muezzin’s call to prayer, for example, is a “dream voice,” but Eberhardt’s own voice dips into somber, matter-of-fact resignation when the call ends and “one by one, the four wooden shutters closed up again, with the same dry clack.”

Her writing exemplifies a creation of identity—she revels in anonymity, and her dreamlike, sumptuous prose depicts the foreign lands she travels through with bristling imagery and poetic languor while also actively creating an alternate persona. Her prose is an extension of her life, reflecting it, but also creating it: “In the hot air, familiar scents trailed behind Bedouin-country scents of summer evenings: thuja or juniper smoke, goatskin smells, tar, the odor of sweaty tanned skins. And I was tasting the deep voluptuousness of the wandering life, the joy of being alone—unknown beneath my Muslim burnoose and turban—and the joy of peacefully watching the day finish in red glimmers on the simplicity of things.”

This collection is an important addition to the literary canon and will be essential for literary theorists, biographers, and historians. It will also appeal to contemporary readers who will relate to the wanderlust spirit and find their values of freedom and independence reflected here.

SHOILEE KHAN (Summer 2012)

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