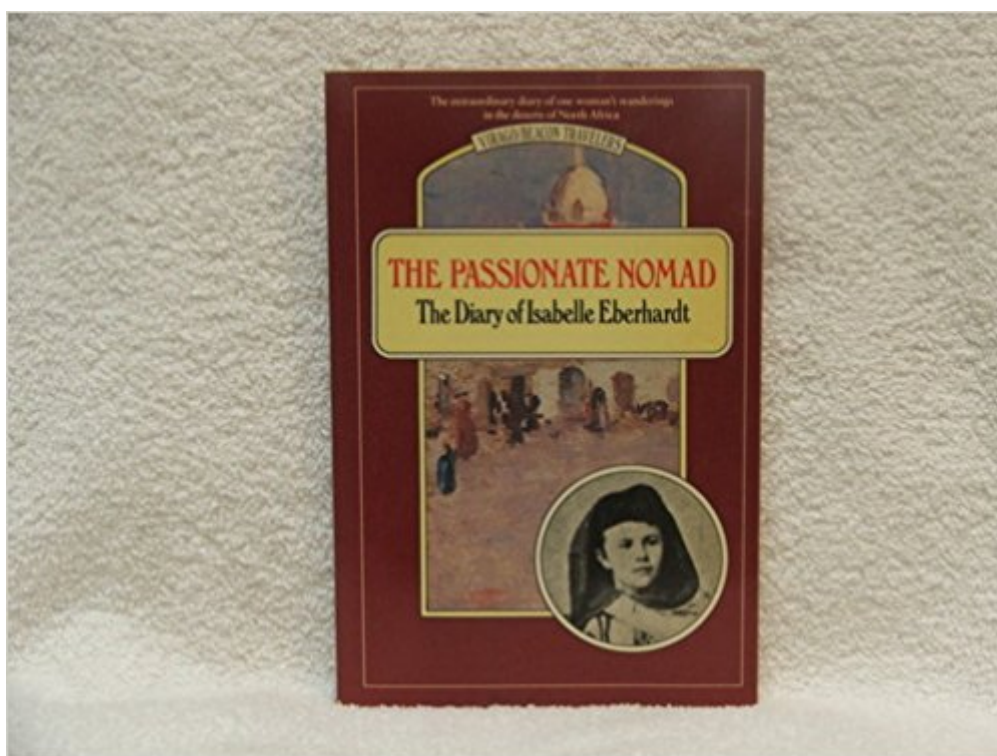


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The Passionate Nomad: The Diary Of Isabelle Eberhardt (Virago/Beacon Traveler Series)



Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Eberhardt, the 19th century traveler so vividly evoked in Lesley Blanch's *The Wilder Shores of Love*, here speaks through her own journals and diaries. Born into a middle-class Swiss family, she moved to Algeria in her early 20s and spent her remaining few years (she died in a flash flood at the age of 28) wandering through North Africa disguised as Si Mahmoud, a male itinerant Sufi. Though her commitment to Islam was profound, she was an active supporter of French rule and may have acted as an agent of the French intelligence services. Eberhardt's sexual adventures, experimentation with drugs and bedouin spirit have led many observers to see her as presaging the youth of the 1960s. This absorbing piece of exotica, ably edited and translated, opens with an introduction that is scholarly yet accessible. Notes have been added to the sparse text and particular attention is paid to accurately reproducing foreign words and faithfully translating alien cultural concepts. The jumbled order of the original diary has been retained, giving the work the texture of a modern novel. Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Text: English, French (translation)

This is the first book about Isabelle Eberhardt I ever read, but had read two books of tales she wrote. She was a poet, a true nomad, and a gifted storyteller who lived her short but colorful life her way. So when I found this slender book, recognizing her name, and read the introduction by its editor Rana Kabbani in 1984, I was shocked that anyone would introduce the *Diary* by slamming

someone who died in a flashflood at age 28, 113 years ago. Why did she bother to edit the Diary, anyway? Kabbani compared poor Isabelle to people (Kabbani) despised and in the case of T. E. Lawrence, mercilessly slandered. On page vi of the Introduction, Kabbani writes: "Like Flaubert, who [...] engaged Cairene prostitutes; like Andre Gide or T. E. Lawrence, who only managed to come out of their respective closets when they solicited the services of Arab boys; or like those endless droves of Western hippies who landed in India in the sixties and seventies, a paperback copy of The Karma Sutra in hand to [...] 'let it all hang out' (much to the embarrassment and hilarity of the local people)..." Kabbani introduces Eberhardt's North African voyage as "a sexual trip in the contemporary sense of the word." Kabbani (gender unknown to me) tears Eberhardt's character to pieces as an introduction to the girl's diary, which, while in some ways true, (she was rather a vagabond, did dress as a young male yet loved men, and did often accept, at first, the traditional hospitality of the region; did smoke kif, but so did most of the population, and, by the way, so did the renowned author-expatriate to Morocco, Paul Bowles, among others). But Eberhardt fell in love with, converted to Islam for, and married a young man named Slimene, and her utmost to adhere to Muslim law, often taking a a mystical step forward and two backward, as most of us do on our lives' journeys. Her entries about horses and the Sahara were heart-pulling and lyrical. She was young and impetuous and loved freedom. That Kabbani despised Eberhardt yet edited her Diary is, to say the least, puzzling. It causes a discerning reader who is familiar with Eberhardt's writings suspect the editor's editing! Kabbani who had utter contempt for Eberhardt may have possibly cut very important passages from the Diary of a defenseless dead girl to support the opinions in the Introduction. I believe this because Kabbani writes, on page xi of the Introduction: "In editing these diaries, I have found it best to delete such passages as seemed unjustifiably repetitious, as well as most of the poems or the bits of prose that Isabelle copied out from books." Kabbani assumes that although Isabelle's death was accidental (she was caught in a flashflood) that it "somehow takes on the poignancy of a suicide. One can just picture her lying there lying under the fatal timbers, [...] weighted down by full clothes like a travesty of Ophelia [...]" I do not believe that to be correct, and it is a malicious comment. She loved life and was no Ophelia, "the 'hoar leaves' of the tattered notebooks of her diary swollen by water as their entries had been swollen by tears." I can imagine Kabbani sneering as she wrote that passage. One who is editing something like a biography of Stalin might be excused for, even expected to, disparage such an infamous person, but not someone like Isabelle Eberhardt, who meant no harm to anyone. As I re-read this Diary, I found, as I did the first time reading it when this was published, that Isabelle Eberhardt gave far more than she got in life, and died tragically. She was an exquisitely sweet poet and a storyteller whom Isak

Dinesen might have found intriguing and would have admired. She loved life especially because she narrowly escaped death once. I believe she was courageous and she certainly merited a more worthy appraiser than a severely opinionated editor to introduce her Diary with such contempt for the author that she commits character assassination and as suggested above, was probably very careful to select freely from its contents, thereby depriving the reader of the complete diary that may have been relevant and important and showed even more of her passionate character. Kabban claims to have been inspired by Cecily Mackworth's biography of Eberhardt, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, and I suppose I will have to investigate that book.

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