

West with the Night by Beryl Markham

From 500 Great Books by Women; review by Erica Bauermeister

West with the Night is an exceptional autobiography filled with a strong spirit, fascinating events, and beautiful words. Beryl Markham was raised by her father on a large farm in British East Africa in the early twentieth century; as a child she preferred spear hunting with the native Muranis to her school lessons. At seventeen, when her father lost their farm and went to Peru, she chose to stay in Africa and began a highly successful career as a race horse trainer. In her twenties she gave up horses and started flying airplanes, becoming the first woman in East Africa to be granted a commercial pilot's license, then the first woman to fly the Atlantic from east to west. Lyrical and philosophically, West With the Night covers each of these parts of her life. Beryl Markham writes hunting stories filled with danger and tension, then turns and discusses the different qualities of silence or what it is like to fly alone over water for forty hours: "Being alone in an aeroplane for even so short a time as a night and a day, irrevocably alone, with nothing to observe but your instruments and your own hands in the semi-darkness, nothing to contemplate but your own small courage....such an experience can be as startling as the first awareness of a stranger walking by your side at night. You are the stranger." This is the story of an extraordinary woman - and that alone might be enough to recommend it. The fact that it is also extraordinarily well-written makes it a gift.

Ernest Hemingway, in a letter to Maxwell Perkins

"Did you read Beryl Markham's book, West with the Night? I knew her fairly well in Africa and never would have suspected that she could and would put pen to paper except to write in her flyer's log book. As it is, she has written so well, and marvelously well, that I was completely ashamed of myself as a writer. I felt that I was simply a carpenter with words, picking up whatever was furnished on the job and nailing them together and sometimes making an okay pig pen. But [she] can write rings around all of us who consider ourselves writers. The only parts of it that I know about personally, on account of having been there at the time and heard the other people's stories, are absolutely true I wish you would get it and read it because it is really a bloody wonderful book."

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