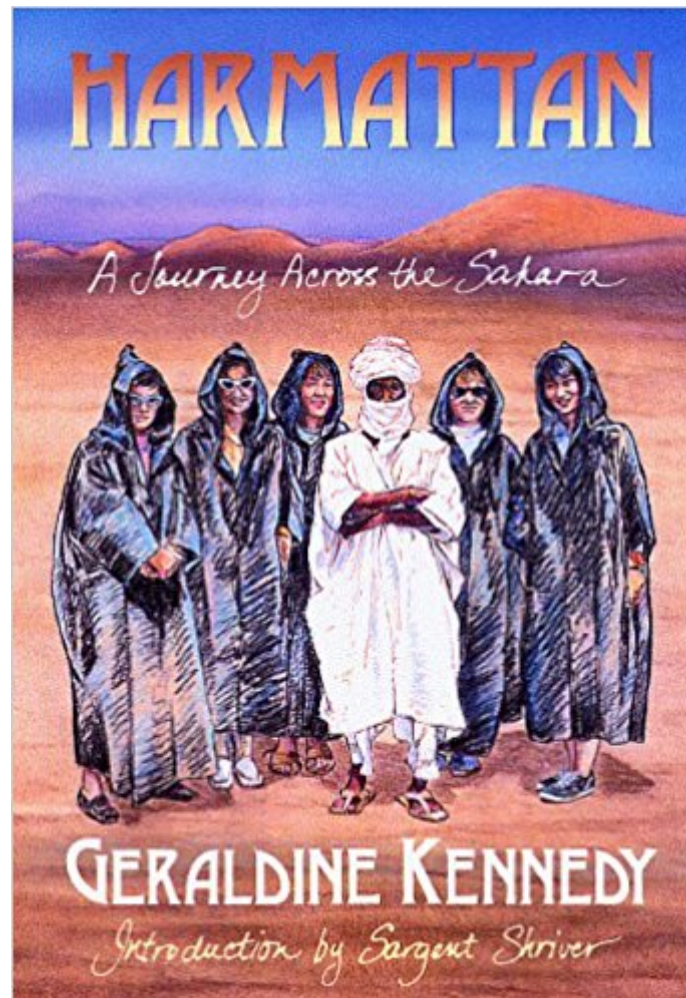


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Harmattan: A Journey Across The Sahara



Book Information

Hardcover: 289 pages

Publisher: Clover Park Pr; First Edition edition (January 1994)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0962863211

ISBN-13: 978-0962863219

Product Dimensions: 1 x 6.5 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 19 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,792,116 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #15 in Books > Travel > Africa >

Western Africa: Mali, Mauritania & Western Sahara #6953 in Books > Travel > Travel Writing

Customer Reviews

This affecting travel and spiritual adventure concerns five Peace Corps volunteer women teachers in Liberia who in 1964 undertook a seven-week, 4000-mile journey through West Africa, crossing the Sahara from Nigeria to Algiers by train, bus, car and trans-Saharan truck. Writing with a sense of immediacy, Kennedy, who was one of the party and is now a principal planner at UCLA, evokes the magic and awesomeness of the alternately hot and frigid desert lashed by the Harmattan wind and sand. The unpredictable, rugged, often dangerous conditions (the group was abducted by lecherous French gendarmes) served both to forge and strain bonds among the temperamentally diverse travelers, who were isolated by the language barrier and traditional Arab treatment of women. Kennedy judges the adventure well worth the hazards because those the group encountered largely responded generously to "their curiosity . . . respect . . . and terrible vulnerability." Author tour. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Kennedy recounts her journey with four other Peace Corps volunteers across the Sahara from Liberia to Algiers. As the journey progresses, we are acquainted with a variety of intriguing individuals and experiences that were part of the realization of this group's goal. Kennedy matter-of-factly describes the wrath of the desert elements, the search for lodging and transportation, the strain on relationships, language challenges, and the logistics of such a journey. She excels at describing what happens and making observations throughout but fails to generate or relay the excitement one expects from such autobiographical travel accounts. Though the concept has great literary potential, the book itself misses the mark, leaving readers with a feeling of

dissatisfaction. A possible candidate for general collections.- Jo-Anne Mary Benson, Osgoode, Ontario
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If you loved the film "Lawrence of Arabia", if you enjoy beautiful writing and yearn for a good book, if you are intrigued by the Peace Corps mystique, if you like good stories about courageous women, or if you want to relive the spirit of the early '60s in Africa, this book is for you. "Harmattan" is one of those rare books, written with such simple beauty it can be read and enjoyed by readers of all ages. Geraldine Kennedy's book is better written and better edited than most books today from much larger publishers. She knows how to write just enough to sweep the reader into the lives of herself and her four companions who make this epic journey across the Sahara in 1964. The story is gripping throughout, because of the incredible boldness of this trek by five women, and because of the dramatic interplay of the characters. I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in West Africa in 1965 myself, and this book captures the spirit with shocking effect. I stayed up half the night reading it. Reviewed by Linda Donelson, author of "Out of Isak Dinesen in Africa: the untold story"

They had no vehicle, tents, sleeping bags and not much money, but they did have what that first wave of Peace Corps workers in the early sixties had in big quantities: guts, idealism and luck. It was enough to get five American women teaching in Liberia across the Sahara desert without so much as an expedition plan between them. Geraldine Kennedy took off into the world's largest desert with four friends in 1964, bearing the grief of JFK's death into a world in transition. The French influence in Upper Volta, Niger and Algeria was fading and Kennedy skillfully captures the lonely, desperate lives of those stranded French colonials who help sustain the young Americans along the way across the desert. The group runs into a host of obstacles, but perhaps the most brutal was the "harmattan," the incessant wind that blows across the Sahara, lashing the group as it slogged north on trucks, sheep transports, army convoys, oil rigs and taxis. They had to ward off amouous, gun-wielding officials, racist truckers, locusts and friction among themselves. Their Sahara adventure was the highlight of their Peace Corps hitch and landed them on the front page of the "New York Times." Kennedy was the group's leader and as a writer she is at her best when they stop in towns, oases and encampments where they had a chance to settle in for a few days and interact with merchants, officials and missionaries. Unfortunately, the group had little contact with locals such as the Tuaregs or Berbers, and these indigenous nomads are only a peripheral part of the journey. It would have been nice to get more of the cultural and historical backdrop of the region, but the book contrates on the effort, consuming enough, to push through the desert. Part of

Kennedy's motivation to write this book was to inspire her children to make their own improbable journeys

This is a book for any woman who has attempted or dreamed of a quixotic quest. The year is 1964 in newly independent Africa when author Kennedy and four fellow Peace Corps volunteers brave the relentless Harmattan winds across the forbidding Sahara desert. The women do not let the lack of money or safe transportation deter them. If they had thought to ask for advice they would have been told that the trip was impossible, but no one asked. The travelers, on summer break from their teaching jobs, are more acquaintances than friends. Each is changed by the experience, but it is through Kennedy's eyes that we watch the desert test and forge the woman she will become. Her lyrical writing, spiced with a wry humor, involves the reader from the first paragraph:

"Zinder was the place on the edge of the Sahara where they kept and told the desert stories. They knew of the men lost— sixteen Arabs in three trucks swallowed last spring— and those spared, praise Allah, to return to Zinder. A strange sort of anticipation permeated life there, a foreboding of misfortune inevitable as the wind swirling dust through the alleys, against the ancient ageless mesquite, under skirts, and over piles of peppers and yams. The Harmattan blew. Resignation replaced hope. Endurance meant survival. Despite the wind, winter was the preferred time for travel in the desert. Death, the people said, accompanied the summer trips of fools." As a reader, I immediately signed on for this journey. When the five women leave the desert at Algiers, I felt an exhilaration, a feeling of accomplishment. My life also had been enriched by their journey. For I now too am the keeper of one of the stories told by the old men on the edge of the desert, the story of "desmoiselles formidables."

I've spent time in the Sahara Desert a few times during this last year and I was absolutely intrigued by Harmattan. This book allowed me to partake in the amazing adventure these Peace Corp women undertook in the Sahara desert. I visited Tamanrassat and Ghardaia in 2011 and some of the customs described in this story, remain true to this day when. The people are still very tribal and yet wonderfully interesting. I highly recommend this book to anyone who would like to have a taste of what this adventure was like but don't have the means or courage to do it themselves. This book inspires readers to have the courage to explore the unknown because it will change your life forever. Life works in curious ways. I currently work at the American Embassy in Algiers. My daughter is married to the son of one of the Peace Corp ladies in this book. Now this former Peace Corp worker and her son will come to Algeria to do a documentary on this adventure.

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