



## Circling the Sun

*Paula McLain*

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Brought to Kenya from England as a child and then abandoned by her mother, Beryl Markham is raised by both her father and the native Kipsigis tribe who share his estate. Her unconventional upbringing transforms Beryl into a bold young woman with a fierce love of all things wild and an inherent understanding of nature's delicate balance. But even the wild child must grow up, and when everything Beryl knows and trusts dissolves, she is catapulted into a string of disastrous relationships. Beryl forges her own path as a horse trainer, and her uncommon style attracts the eye of the Happy Valley set, a decadent, bohemian community of European expats who also live and love by their own set of rules. But it's the ruggedly charismatic Denys Finch Hatton who ultimately helps Beryl navigate the uncharted territory of her own heart. The intensity of their love reveals Beryl's truest self and her fate: to fly.

## **Circling the Sun Details**

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Author : Paula McLain

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## From Reader Review Circling the Sun for online ebook

### Carol says

**What An Extraordinary Life!** Set in 1920's Africa, young Beryl (Clutterbuck) Markham grows up "wild" after her mother's abandonment at age four and her father's at age sixteen yet she overcomes adversity and learns to stand on her own (*many times over*) becoming a well known horse trainer and first female pilot to cross the Atlantic.

While Beryl doesn't always make the best choices in her tumultuous life, she is one tough lady who loves her homeland and fights for her independence albeit learning some very tough lessons along the way.

This wonderfully descriptive story is filled with her many disastrous relationships, scandals and heartbreakingly disappointments but brought back fond memories of one of my favorite movies....Out of Africa.

Beryl Markham's memoir West with the Night is now a must-read!

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### Camie says

I can't add much to the great reviews already written which highly praise this beautifully written poetic book of historical fiction based on the life of Beryl Markham. Set in Colonial Kenya ( 1920's) where her mother deserts her at age four along with her father, a rugged pioneering man who raises thoroughbred horses, she becomes an amazingly strong trailblazing woman. Having been partially raised by an African tribe, married off at age 16 when her father's business venture goes belly up, and becoming one-third of a scandalous love triangle between Karen Blitzen and Denys Finch Hatten, two people who will later co-author the classic memoir Out Of Africa , she flourishes against all odds. Paula McLain who wrote the bestselling story of Ernest Hemingway's wife Hadley, The Paris Wife, is immeasurably talented when it comes to bringing her characters to life. Combining breathtaking descriptions of the African terrain , the subtle and not no subtle nuances of social convention at the time, and Beryl's great love of horsemanship and later aviation, she has written a novel that serves to remind one why they love to read. I've ordered Beryl's memoir West With The Night and look forward to reading the story of her life in her own words. Meanwhile this one goes on the favorites shelf. 5 stars

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### Dee says

Paula McLain's latest novel, narrating the life and times of pioneering aviator and horse racer Beryl Markham, is labeled as historical fiction that transports readers "to colonial Kenya in the 1920s." With that kind of a sales pitch, you'd expect at least a halfway realistic portrait of the manners and social conditions of the times, with more than one token black character thrown in. It is, after all, a novel set in Africa, based on a historical figure.

Yet, *Circling the Sun* is all about white colonialists and their self-enclosed world on their plantations in the

East African Protectorate, where the natives are hardly more than an exotic backdrop for the adventures and love affairs of a British floozy. As somebody who considers Proust a page-turner, I cannot fault a book for portraying a select social circle and ignoring unsavory realities. However, if you want to put on your rosy glasses and paint nostalgic pictures of worlds that never existed, there are better places than white settlements in colonial Africa.

Those were the times, after all, where Africans were banned from direct political participation. In 1942, six years after the closing date of this novel, a resistance was launched by several tribes against colonial rule that in the 1950s and 60s saw some 90,000 people executed, tortured or maimed by the British (according to Al Jazeera, not the novel.)

If *Circling the Sun* had at least touched on such issues, it would have gained much in realism and could be called a historical novel instead of glorified chick-lit or self-indulgent, shallow outpourings of nostalgia. The book could have, at the very least, stepped out of Markham's mind for a sentence to give a larger context.

Knowing how the novel romanticized a painful chapter in Kenyan history made this an uncomfortable read that felt about as real as a Harlequin novel. The first part of the book offered a heartwarming tale of an innocent childhood spent in the wilderness; of an unruly British girl, or tomboy, playing with a boy from a nearby tribe before social conventions force them apart. The flowy writing and atmospheric setting reminded me of coming-of-age stories set in the wild, in the tradition of *The Jungle Book* or *Anna of Green Gables*.

I wanted to carry on. I thought the girl would grow up, and we'd get something more than a children's tale. We'd get the reflections of a grown woman living in complicated times, observing social tensions and race relations. A woman who defied conventions and lived on her own terms. Who flew across the Atlantic and mounted wild horses.

But Markham only grows more annoying and selfish with age. She refuses to stop riding when she becomes pregnant, and this is held up as an example of an uncompromising lifestyle. She falls in love with a man after he throws some Whitman quotes her way, then hops into bed with another she doesn't care much about before he flees the country to escape scandal. She keeps talking about being financially independent, but keeps using men for money. Ahead of her time? Not when it comes to birth control.

I don't mind reading about narcissists, cheaters or idiots and their ridiculous life choices. They're types that are central in many of my favorite novels. But what's infuriating is when a selfish fool is held up as a role model for women, and when a tedious account of her affairs and intrigues is called a story that "transports you" to Kenya.

I skimmed the last third of this book, frustrated that such a self-indulgent character was being passed off as progressive. The writing, which flowed richly at the start, degenerated into passages similar to those Hollywood quasi-intellectual quotes of the "if you build it they will come" variety. Tired dialogue, with cliche reflections on the nature of women's independence.

After meeting Karen Blixen, aka Isak Dinesen (author of *Out of Africa*.) Markham starts comparing herself to Blixen and theorizing about which woman can snag the rustic, Whitman-quoting adventurer who's now her "soulmate." Years later, when the two say goodbye, Markham has her *Field of Dreams* moment and reflects on the novel that Blixen would soon write about her years in Africa:

"And from those pages, I would be absent."

... And that's all the more reason to read Dinesen.

(I don't know whether Markham was really this tiresome in the flesh, or whether *Circling the Sun* just portrays her as such. Perhaps those interested in her eventful life would do better to read her memoir, *West with the Night*, which won Hemingway's praise, instead of this rosy-coloured "oh my Africa!" colonialist romance.)

More reviews on my blog.

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### **Elyse says**

Until I was about to read "Circling the Sun", all I knew about Beryl Markham was of her record breaking voyage across the Atlantic, in 1936, ....Her extraordinary accomplishment.

I'm reminded that a person's accomplishments -and character are not always of equal measure.  
Beryl Markham was a complicated female -during times when being a complicated female was complicated!

The storytelling is emotionally wrenching yet intellectually rigorous. On one hand its clear Beryl is a - independent female -- yet a couple of the choices she makes, had me wonder ...why did she second guess herself and make dependent choices? There was a devastating situation in Beryl's life that -if happened to me --I don't think I could breathe... just so sad!

I asked myself --was Beryl a woman to admire? Was she a woman I would have been friends with?  
I'll tell you one thing, I'm a little mad at the author --Her book had me reading all night long!! And..now I want to know a little more about this woman's character! --Talk about her with others anyway! Darn -this author --for writing a captivating book! :)

Perfect Book-Club pick!

Look at values-friendships-marriages-failed marriages-births-abandonment-dreams-dreams at all costs- family loyalty-gossip-secrets-loss-love-freedom--

I fully enjoyed this gorgeously written page-turning historical novel!

Thank you to the publisher and Netgalley!!

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### **Jaline says**

Paula McLain's writing is so vivid and cinematic, I felt I was right in the story rather than reading it. In this

book, a fictional biography of Beryl Markham, I could play alongside Beryl and her young companions, be involved in training horses alongside Beryl, and fly the Atlantic from England to the East coast of North America. I could adventure on safaris, rub elbows with royalty and experience the anguish and joys of love, marriages, and lovers. I could feel a yearning for Africa, her vast spaces, Technicolor sunsets and stars that seemed like "they wanted to perch on my shoulders".

Beryl Markham led an extraordinary life and Paula McLain's writing captures it all, serving it with the flourish of a master chef. This book is a beautiful banquet of descriptions and characters that are so real you can savour them on your tongue long after the banquet is over.

This is a banquet you will not want to miss as it ignites all your senses and satisfies while leaving you wanting more.

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## **Kavita says**

If you are thinking of picking up this book, make sure you fall within one of the following categories:

- 1) People who love horses
- 2) People who love reading about insipid love affairs
- 3) People who enjoy colonialist attitudes and the complete erasure of the existence of the native population

Unfortunately, since I don't fall within the three above criteria, I despised this book. I have never before read such a random and pointless book in my life. Supposed to be the *life and times of Beryl Markham, adventuress extraordinaire*, the book reduced it to the *horses and love affairs of Beryl Markham, prize idiot*. It starts off promisingly enough, with Beryl's childhood in Kenya, but quickly deteriorated once she had to get married. For pages and pages, it was all about horses and then, more horses, then horse races, and then more horses.

Once that was done, Denys Finch-Hatton makes an appearance and the most boring love triangle in the history of romance takes place between Denys Finch-Hatton, Beryl Markham and Karen Blixen. Don't bother reading the book - I can tell you all about it. Denys is an asshole who hunts animals and considers Africa "his", goes around having affairs and claims he is a "free spirit". Karen is his main woman, who spends her time pining for him when he isn't around and trying to force him into a marriage when he is. Beryl is impressed with Denys' stupid interest in poetry and slept with him a few times, and goes about thinking there is a "special connection" between the three of them. There, you have the gist of the book in a nutshell.

Then at the last, there are a few pages on Beryl learning how to fly. I suppose we should thank the author for including anything at all that doesn't feature Denys Jerk-Arsehole.

If Beryl Markham were alive today, she would sue the author for defamation. The woman did so many interesting things and forged new frontiers for women. But all that this book discusses is her fascination for some silly man and the illegal immigrants and their boring lives in Africa. The writing is repetitive and banal and nowhere as evocative of Africa as the blurb would have you believe. In fact, this is a romance book of the most terrible kind, masquerading as genuine historical fiction.

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### **Jeannie says**

I loved this book! Beryl Markham was a very strong, independent woman. She was a horse trainer and also learned to fly. I wish I could have known her. I plan to read more about her. While I didn't always agree with the choices she made, I liked that she was so determined and accomplished so much. I felt sad about her relationships and that she struggled in that area of her life. What an amazing life she lived though.

The writing in this book is lovely.

"If it was a very long night, and sleep didn't come at all, I would let every guard down and think of Denys. Perhaps he was sloped in one of Karen's low leather chairs by the millstone table, reading Walt Whitman and listening to some new recording on the gramophone. Or in his storybook cottage at the Muthaiga, sipping at nice scotch, or off in the Congo, or in Musai country after ivory or kudu or lion, and looking up, just then, at the same tangle of stars I could see from my windows.

How close people could be to us when they had gone as far away as possible, to the edges of the map. How unforgettable"

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### **Rebecca Foster says**

**(Nearly 4.5)** This is just as good as *The Paris Wife* – if not better. I didn't think I was very interested in aviatrix Beryl Markham, but McLain proved me wrong. What a life story, and what terrific storytelling to do it justice. Before she ever thought of flying solo across the Atlantic, she was just Beryl Clutterbuck, raised in Kenya by her father in the 1900s–10s. She became one of Africa's first female horse trainers, and its first professional female pilot. McLain describes her African settings beautifully, and a delicious love triangle between her, Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen) and Denys Finch Hatton forms the kernel of the book.

(See my full review at BookTrib.)

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**Related reading:** There's a (very) short story about Beryl Markham in *Almost Famous Women* by Megan Mayhew Bergman.

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### **Esil says**

I haven't given my rare 5 star rating to a book in a long time, but I am giving *Circling the Sun* 5 stars without any hesitation. Paula McLain's fictionalization of the early part of Beryl Markham's life completely engrossed me. I knew nothing about Beryl Markham before reading *Circling the Sun*, but as told by McLain she is a fascinating woman who grew up very unconventionally in early 20th century Kenya as the white daughter of a horse ranch owner. It is a great story and the depiction of Beryl is fabulous. It is such a risky venture to write a fictional account of a real historical figure. There is so much room for over romanticizing, for imposing contemporary sensibilities on the historical figure, or for mechanically drowning readers in too much historical detail. I had some reservations about McLain's depiction of Hemingway's first wife -- Hadley Richardson -- in *The Paris Wife*, but hats off to MacLain for her depiction of Beryl. Who knows if it's an

accurate depiction, but Beryl felt real, multidimensional and -- although struggling against the norms -- grounded in her historical context. And I felt right there in early 20th century colonial Kenya -- experiencing Beryl's sense of loss at her mother's departure when she was 5, her strong but not quite adequate relationship with her father, her bewilderment as a child bride and her ability to move on, her relationships with people who helped and hindered her in being so fiercely independent, her strong attachment to Kenya and nature, and her humour, strong sense of self and sexuality. McLain does a great job depicting a world in which the options for women to live independently were close to nil, and the price Beryl paid over and over for trying to do so. And while it's not the main focus of the book, I like the way MacLain handles the issue of colonialism; it is not portrayed as a romantic backdrop; it is shown as often ugly and the perverse playground of wealthy spoiled Europeans, and yet a true home to someone like Beryl who didn't really belong anywhere else. Highly recommended to anyone who likes strong historical female figures and/or an interest in 20th century colonial Africa. Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy.

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### **Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says**

*Beryl Markham was brought to Kenya by her British parents. But her mother could never settle there and left soon home with Beryl's older brother. Beryl was then brought up by her father who let her run free on the farm and no governesses or school could tame the wild Beryl and she was barely seventeen when she married for the first time.*

Paula McLain has painted a vivid picture of this strong wild girl who grows up to be just a strong wild woman who defied the social norms for women at the time. She knew the writer Karen Blixen; both women loved Danys Finch Hatton. She was a great racehorse trainer and she loved to fly.

I enjoyed reading this book immensely. I love the movie *Out of Africa* and it was a great pleasure to read about Beryl Markham and get another insight into the lives of Karen Blixen and Denys Finch Hatton and, of course, get an insight on Beryl herself. In many ways she just had a very tough life, abandoned by her mother and later on her father and her two marriages that were portraited in the book were both disastrous. And, the love of her life was she sharing with another woman and their time together was cut short.

I had a hard time reading the ending because I knew how it would end for her and Denys. That's the negative thing about reading a book about real people. You know how it all will end. Also, it was a bit hard to read about her and Denys because in my mind he and Karen have always been a couple since the first time I saw *Out of Africa*. I loved Beryl and Denys together, but at the same time, I felt that they were betraying Karen. It's tough sometimes to read books.

*I received this copy from the publisher through NetGalley in return for an honest review! Thank you!*

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### **Lori says**

I am so happy to say that I thoroughly enjoyed this novel. The characters were richly written and as unpredictable as the African landscape they lived in. Beryl Markham was sixteen years old when she was thrown into a social climate that turned out to be harsher than the hot African heat and wilder than the horses she loved to train. She made many bad decisions for which she paid a high price, but through it all she never

gave up on herself. I have a great deal of respect for her because of that. After finishing, an hour Googling images of Beryl, Karen and Denysin really added to my enjoyment of this... another winner from McLain. 5 stars.

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## Margitte says

*Circling The Sun* caught my eye with its beautiful cover, first and foremost. I had this book for so long now, never got to it. It was time.

Oh the chain of events. Or sometimes also called *fate* or *destiny*, right? I first read about Beryl Markham in *Almost Famous Women*: Stories by Megan Mayhew Bergman.

Beryl Markham piqued my interest then, especially when this remarkable women wrote an autobiography, *West With The Night*, which had Ernest Hemingway glowing from head to toe.

In 1925 Ernest Hemingway, in a letter to California restaurateur George Gutekunst, wrote:

*"Did you read Beryl Markham's book, *West with the Night*? ...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 this girl, who is to my knowledge very unpleasant and we might even say a high-grade bitch, can write rings around all of us who consider ourselves as writers ... it really is a bloody wonderful book."*

After reading *Circling The Sun* a fictional biography of Beryl Markham(born Clutterbuck), I understood why Hemingway did this. This kind gentleman in part wanted to help a struggling independent woman to get on her feet. However, the book did not stir too many pots in the 1940s, but changed Markham's final years when it was republished in the 1980s and hailed as the masterpiece Hemingway thought it to be. She could enjoy the final years of her life in comfort.

And what a life she lived in Kenya.

*"Softness and helplessness got you nothing in this place. Tears only emptied you out."*

Abandoned by her mother as a young girl, growing up on a horse farm, getting married several times, and trying to make it on her own in a man's world, and in 1936, became the first woman to fly solo and nonstop from east to west across the Atlantic. Britain's Amelia Earhart. Although she was born a Brit, she was Kenyan in heart and soul.

*"I learned to watch, to put my trust in other hands than mine. And I learned to wander. I learned what every dreaming child needs to know—that no horizon is so far that you cannot get above it or beyond it. These I learned at once. But most things came harder." —BERYL MARKHAM, *West with the Night**

*"We must leave our mark on life while we have it in our power." —KAREN BLIXEN*

*Circling The Sun* brought this unconventional woman's story alive in the most beautiful contemporary prose. The author borrowed characters from *Out of Africa* by Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen, to populate Beryl's story

and establish the connection between Karin Blixen and Beryl: Denys Finch Hatton, Lord Delamere, Berkeley Cole, Karin Blixen and her husband baron van Blixen, and a few more.

Not keen on a proper education, Beryl would ultimately be schooled by the men in her life instead.

First it was her father who taught her everything she would ever need about horse training. She would become the youngest licensed horse trainer, and first women in the world, at the age of eighteen.

Her childhood friend, Kibii, a child of the Kikuyu tribe, taught her how to hunt, to understand the rules of nature, and to survive in the African bush. He would remain her truest friend throughout her life.

Denys Finch Hatton and Berkely Cole inspired her to read, and become the Schezerehade of her own life story.

*Before Kenya was Kenya, Green Hills was alive and my father loved me. I could jump as high as Kibii and walk through the forest without making a sound. I could bring a warthog out of its hole by crinkling paper. I could be eaten by a lion and live. I could do anything, for I was in heaven still.*

*Before Kenya was Kenya, I threw a spear and a rungu club. I loved a horse with wings. I never felt alone or small. I was Lakwet.*

Their story evenings would result in her eloquent autobiography several years later.

Tom Campbell Black taught her everything about flying, airplanes, machines, reading maps. Denys Finch Hatton who was her lover, was also her mentor in conquering the skies.

The nostalgia of the tough but idyllic life on the African savannas are so vividly described in this book. A fine balance was established between background and story. A perfect balance to be exact.

The author portrayed the private Beryl. The person nobody really understood. The one who hid her pain and disappointments. She captured the emotions and thoughts of a scared young girl, a gutsy young woman, and a pioneering survivor of a challenging life.

The book is written in the same spirit as Kuki Gallman's books: ***I Dreamed of Africa*** AND ***African Nights***. Many authors captured this magic of the African landscape. Africa still has that allure, always will have it.

*Circling The Sun* also settles comfortably into the same nostalgia as Alexandra Fuller's ***Cocktail Hour Under the Tree of Forgetfulness***, AND ***Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight***, although the two authors experienced two different periods in colonial history. However, the ambiance of the British settlers's often promiscuous lifestyle, with debauchery thrown into the social mix, and the almost vulgar exploitation of wildlife, mineral resources and African people, were (lightly) mimicked in this book. Very lightly, compared to Doris Lessing who did not mince words in destroying the settlers' delusional self-importance and grandeur. But in this book, the Brits's African lifestyle, away from England's rigid society, was still treated with understanding and even compassion. They were spared. :-)

(A different view, but a wonderful read is: **The Poisonwood Bible** by Barbara Kingsolver. There's no comparison between the two books, of course. It's just another excellent book which captures the soul of Africa very well.)

It was a tough life, demanding great sacrifice and creativity to survive.

*Like your quinine for malaria," Berkeley added. "A measure of good champagne helps, too. I don't know what it is about Africa, but champagne is absolutely compulsory here."*

This was an excellent read. Now fate will take its course. I will have to read *West With The Night* by Beryl Markham herself.

Paula McClain says in her author's note:

*From the moment I read even a few sentences, *West with the Night* took powerful hold of my imagination. Beryl's descriptions of her African childhood, colonial Kenya in all its seasons, and her extraordinary adventures fairly leap off the page—but more striking to me is the spirit behind the words. She had so much nerve and pluck, plunging fearlessly into vast gaps between the sexes, and at a time when such feats were nearly unthinkable. I hadn't ever encountered anyone quite like her—a woman who lived by her own code instead of society's, though that cost her much. Who would have fit perfectly into Hemingway's muscular fiction, but she actually lived!*

*Beryl was undoubtedly complicated—a riddle, a libertine, a maverick. A sphinx.*

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I rest my case. I love Africa. I love this book.

## Carol says

**The Hook** - I liked the writing in McLain's Paris Wife but not the subject. After discussing it with my book group and meeting the author, I liked it better, but still the subject, anything to do with Hemmingway, was not for me. Circling the Sun sounded much more intriguing and I knew it was a better fit.

**The Line** – The publisher has requested that no quotes be used until the book is published late July. I'll respect that and actually must, as you'll discover if you read the rest of my comments.

**The Sinker** – My sincere thanks to Ballantine Books for providing the e-galley of Circling the Sun. Procrastination found me 30+ pages from the end when my copy expired. Imagine my surprise when I stopped reading to watch a movie and came back to the book only to find that little box with the dreaded words, expired, or whatever it says. A visit to Edelweiss, confirmed its demise. My fault clearly but oh, did I mourn all my lost highlighting and notes, etc. I had planned to document these the very next day, as I knew I was getting close to the possible pulling of the title. Now, I'll just have to sum up my thoughts from what I remember and wait until the publication to read the ending.

I was hooked by Circling the Sun right from its first pages with Beryl (now Markham) getting ready for her transatlantic flight. McLain immediately takes a detour here, leaving the famous flight for someone else to probe. She moves us backward in time to Beryl's childhood in Kenya and her early abandonment by her mother. Though her father is a presence the lack of the woman's touch allows Beryl to grow into her own shoes, resilient, independent, with a strong love for nature and the land. After a few missteps, she becomes not only a horse trainer, but also owner and a woman with some tumultuous relationships with a variety of

men. The sweep of the story reminded me of Out of Africa and then I realized one of Beryl's triangular loves was Denys Finch Hatton who also was involved with Karen Blixen, who under the pseudonym of Isak Dinesen, wrote that stunning memoir.

I absolutely adored Circling the Sun. It is well researched and like any good fiction based on fact, it will find me finally adding West With the Night to my TBR pile. No matter that I didn't quite finish Circling the Sun. I know a good book when I read one.

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### **Angela M says**

Beryl Markham is a flawed character - certainly , probably as flawed as the real person that this fictional autobiography is based on and as flawed as most of us , but I could not find a flaw in the way this story was told. The writing from the first sentence describing her plane , the one she flew across the Atlantic , is mesmerizing and then moves to the unbelievable descriptions when she first arrived in Kenya as a little girl and in the days beyond - simply beautiful writing.

I read an advanced copy and the publisher at the beginning requests that you not quote anything until comparing to the final version, so I won't . But I really wish I could - so I could give a little sense into how lush and descriptive the writing is that makes you feel as if you are standing there on that farm in Kenya , or can feel what Beryl is feeling and convince people that they should read this book .

Abandoned as a young girl by her mother who leaves Beryl and her father to return to England, Beryl forms a bond with her father and begins a life long love affair with Kenya . She becomes an amazing , independent woman , a horse trainer in a world dominated by men and later an aviatrix flying solo across the Atlantic. Her independent spirit fostered by her aloneness as she ran wild as a child and which couldn't be tamed by school, by her father or her husbands is beautiful to see , I have to say.

Of course , the book's focus is Beryl, but there are many other fascinating people, many of whom are expats and the relationships they have to each other, many of which are extramarital. Everybody seemed to be in love with someone other than their spouse . And some men with multiple women as in the case of Denys Finch Hatton . But that was life in this tight Kenyan community. So many free spirited people or careless depending on your perspective . It's heartbreaking at times but oh so uplifting at others . You may not agree with everything Beryl did but what a life , what strength, what motivation to do what she wanted to do .

If you loved Out of Africa, the book and/ or the movie, you will be enthralled . You'll see the same beautiful and wild Kenya and meet again with Karen Blixen and Denys Finch Hattan. I wish I could do justice to the wonderful story telling and writing by Paula McLain. The author notes that Markham wrote a memoir called West With the Night and I look forward to reading it .

Thank you to Random House Publishing Group - Ballantine and NetGalley.

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### **Cathrine ?? says**

**3.75★**

Just a few thoughts as there is not much I can add to so many other great reviews.

I felt it was better than *The Paris Wife*. The descriptions of Africa just stunning and what I enjoyed the most. I kept picturing the cinematography and hearing the musical score from *Out Of Africa* which enhanced my enjoyment of this book. I had to slow down my reading pace towards the end as I was racing to the finish wanting to move on from all the personal romantic entanglements and horse racing and get back to where the book started, her flying. I was disappointed that part of her life ended up playing such a minor roll. I am left feeling that I might have appreciated reading her memoir *West With The Night* more. Overall an entertaining story with gorgeous descriptive writing.

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### **Michael says**

This makes a great companion read with Beryl Markham's memoir *West with the Night*, which is about growing up on a horse farm in colonial Kenya in the early 20th century. At age four, her mother left the family to return to England, and Markham grew up with a lot of self-reliance, learning to do hard farm work and playing mostly with Masai tribal children. She succeeded in becoming a successful racehorse trainer and later a bush pilot, the precursor for her achievement in the 30s as the first woman to fly across the Atlantic from east to west. The wonderful vignettes about key points and epiphanies in her life in the memoir is well complemented by this linear narrative account of her story. At first I was disappointed on how pale this version was when it covered the same events. But it made up for it by filling in the blanks left by the memoir, and the fullness of her as an imagined person came alive for me as the novel spun her trajectory out in an emotionally engaging way not possible with the more crafted and abstracted perspective of a retrospective autobiography.

Many may object to the enterprise of biographical fiction from the start. What chutzpah a writer must have to try to create a simulacrum of a real person, to project their feelings and thoughts and make up dialog and actions for her and others in her life based on the slimmest of outlines. Often in historical fiction, real people in history are just window dressing to enhance the reality of the fictional characters. In other cases, history is being enacted as a play, and the portrayal of important figures as a center in the drama can represent a legitimate theory for how they came to contribute to significant events in history. For such a golem to rise out of the pages as recognizably human, the author needs to take chances and contrive the blood and guts and the confusion and despair that real life is full of. Often McLain seems too respectful of the real Markham to make up such elements, with believable lusts and rages and jealousies, and she comes off as bland. That turned out to only be a first impression. But after 100 pages or so that feeling went away of her character took flight for me. Beneath that stoic and brave exterior and moderated expression, we can feel her passions and the sense of her foundation in the grace of understanding by three people, her father , the Masai Kibii (Ruta as a man), and sometime lover Denys.

The achievement was less about creating the “real” Markham and more about midwifing an imagination of how someone like her could emerge as a special product of this place and time, with seminal influences from family and friends. How someone like her could acquire the capacity to meet and surmount the challenges she faced and become someone so ahead of her time as a woman not bound by the constraints of roles set for gender, class, and race. In her play with the Masai children, she made a special friend with a boy Kibii, learned to compete and hunt with him using spears, and gained a respected identity and tribal name from his father. Much later, as an adult drinking in a club in the village that was Nairobi, she could make a story of herself for others:

*Before Kenya was Kenya, I threw a spear and a rungu club. I loved a horse with wings. I never felt alone or small. I was Lakwet.*

Something in McLain's writing that really sings for me is her vision of how she came to see the tragedy of abandonment by her mother as an important wellspring for Markham's character:

*Gradually it became harder to remember my mother's face, things she had said to me, days we had shared. But there were many days ahead of me. They spread out further than I could see or wish for, the way the plain did all the way to the broken bowl of Menengai, or to Kenya's hard blue peak. It was safer to keep looking forward—to move my mother to the far edge of my mind where she couldn't hurt me any more, or to imagine, when I did think of her, that her going had been necessary. A kind of forging or honing, my essential test as Lakwet.*

I am huge fan of stories that capture how the place of one's origin shapes our identity. The continuation of the cited passage, from early in the book, rises high on my pleasure meter:

*This was certain: I belonged on the farm and in the bush. I was part of the thorn trees and the high jutting escarpment, the bruised-looking hills thick with vegetation; the deep folds between the hills, and the high corn-like grasses. I had come alive here, as if I'd been given a second birth, and a truer one. This was my home, and though one day it would all trickle through my fingers like so much red dust, for as long as childhood lasted it was a heaven fitted exactly to me. A place I knew by heart. The one place in the world I'd been made for.*

Markham was unlucky in love. When drought and impending bankruptcy forces her father to plan a move to Capetown, she makes the mistake of marrying an older man at age 17 as a ticket to staying in Kenya. Unfortunately, he turned out to be a violent drunk. She manages to break away and survive as a horse trainer. She makes a valuable friend with Karen Blixen, a charismatic coffee plantation owner later known to the world through her book "Out of Africa." Her example as a married woman unafraid to have affairs gives her courage to try out her own forays of the heart while pressing for a divorce. But her most persisting love was for a man she couldn't have, one Denys Finch Hatton, an adventurer and safari guide who also was the love of Karen's life. The very qualities of a wild, independent spirit that they both loved made Denys as one who "wasn't for having":

*I hadn't loved him anymore perfectly—and I understood that, fondly. We had both tried for the sun, and had fallen, lurching to earth again, tasting melted wax and sorrow. Denys wasn't hers, or mine. He belonged to no one, and never had.*

Eventually she finds love with a different sort of man, a gentle and wealthy aristocrat from England who claims a desire to fulfill her ambitions to have her own horse farm in the land she calls home. But on a visit home with her and their infant son, he changes his mind under the influence of his dominating snobby mother. The scenes with her visiting her son, telling him stories of Africa and promising to show it all to him someday, were particularly moving for me.

The transition to becoming an aviator comes late in the book. The connection to riding dangerous unruly stallions is not hard to make. Despite the experience of a number of friends dying in airplane crashes, she can't resist the opportunity of learning to fly from her friend Tom. I loved McLain's account of her affinity for this new challenge and way of seeing the world. :

*"It does seem like pure freedom," I told him. "If you can forget the risk, that is." "The fear never completely goes away. It makes everything sharper."*

...

*Tom kept us up, tracing a wide circle over our valley towards Njoro to the east and Molo to the north. The tipoff the wing was like a bright, silvery wand. Watching it, I felt a whisper of hope and something like redemption. It wasn't God I saw at this height, but my rift valley. It stretched in every direction like a map of my own life. Here were Karen's hills, the flat shimmer of Nakuru in the distance, the high ragged lip of the escarpment. White-bellied bird and red dust. Everything I'd lived through lay unfurled below me, every secret and scar—where I'd learned to hunt and jump and ride like the wind; where I'd been devoured a little by a good lion; where arap Maini had stopped to point at a clover-leaf shaped print in the drying mud, saying, "Tell me what you see, Lakwet."*

*This valley was more than my home. It beat in me like the drum of my own heart.*

I have come to believe that fiction can often be more true than non-fiction. What can we really know from all the poses and roles that people from real life leave behind in letters or memories of those around them? After going through a couple of divorces, I've learned clearly how people have to compose simplified stories to make sense of their own complicated lives. Maybe this book doesn't help me know the real Beryl Markham, but I am happy with a potent version of someone very much like her. The short version of her life as she ponders future challenges rings as true to me, or at least as a truth:

*I would survive them the way I had long ago, when my mother boarded a train and became smoke. The tribe had found me then, and given me my true name, but Lakwet was only a name after all. I had forged her myself, out of brokenness, learning to love wildness instead of fearing it. I thrive on the exhilaration of the hunt, charging headlong into the world even—or especially—when it hurt to do it.*

My thumbs had to go up from the homage McLain made to Beryl's memoir in her afterword. The story is recounted how its publication in the 40's made only a blip in readership and disappeared from common sight until republication in the 80's. McLain argues against accusations that Markham's husband, who was a ghostwriter, might have been the true author. I also appreciated her acknowledgement of serious mysteries about her inner life, while at the same time expressing amazement of how much she got into channeling Beryl:

*Beryl was undoubtedly complicated, a riddle, a libertine, a maverick. A sphinx. But strangely, when I was writing her character and pitching myself deeply into her world, she became more knowable and familiar to me in some ways than Hadley Hemingway in my novel "The Paris Wife."*

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### Diane S ? says

The first time I read about Beryl Markham was in a short story collection, Almost Famous Women: Stories. That was really the first time I had ever even heard about her. This book was nothing short of amazing.

The descriptions of Africa and Beryl's love for her native Kenya definitely shone throughout this novel.

Her love for Denis, Fitch Hatton was heartbreakingly

Her struggle not to conform, to be what others thought she should be led her to accomplish so much by the age of twenty eight, even though she went through many heartbreaks and start overs in the meantime. Her

determination and love for her horses and childhood friend, a Kenyan native, always pulled her through.

McClain has found her place in literature, I can't imagine anyone else doing as well with the women of history as she does. Her writing, her descriptions, her characterizations are amazing. The amount of research that went into this novel is documented in the author's afterword. A brilliant rendering of an amazing woman's life.

ARC from publisher.

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### **?Karen says**

Out of Africa is a favorite movie in my house. Robert Redford is at his best as Denys Fitch Hatton, and I do a mean imitation of Meryl Streep's awfully accented, "I had a farm in Africa." Really. So when I learned that this book is in the same Kenya setting and that Denys and Karen would make an appearance (actually they make many appearances), I knew I had to read this. And I was fortunate to snag both an ebook from NetGalley, and an ARC from LibraryThings, of which I alternated reading and quite enjoyed the experience.

If you saw the Streep/Redford movie, you may recall Felicity riding in on a horse occasionally. That character was based on Beryl Markham, our protagonist and narrator here. Beryl is just a wonderfully unique character, having grown up on her father's farm in Kenya after her mother decided to take herself back to England. Beryl is allowed to run wild, and she remains pretty untamed and self sufficient through her life, culminating in her historic flight across the Atlantic from England to N. America, the first woman to do so.

Upon becoming an adult, she doesn't know much except horses and farming. With abandonment issues, now from her father as well, Beryl finds that horses and other men respond well to her. But the men in her life eventually leave her, as they sense she is meant for independence, not to mention great adventures, something hard to fathom from a woman in that time and place.

The more I read this wonderful book, the more I fell in love with it. Did I feel the same for Beryl and those around her? Probably not. Many questionable decisions and lifestyles, but at least none of the characters are cookie-cutter perfect or predictable. The heartfelt storytelling had me entranced and moved to tears. I loved every word.

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### **Jen says**

The luscious writing of this novel will transport you to the dry rolling hills of Kenya and quench your thirst after a long drought. It is an exquisite story of Beryl Markham who grew up on the plains of Africa to become a legendary 1st woman horse trainer and later, a pilot. It's her path to self discovery through the disastrous relationships and love entanglements that define whom she became. A wild and adventurous spirit, much like the horses she worked to tame. I loved her character, her passion, her honesty and her courage. Truly a time when such feminism was resisted and discouraged.

I adore novels set in Africa and during this time period circa 1920's and 30's. This is such a rich and captivating story that I will relish reading the next McLain novel. 5 \*\*\*\*\*

Thank you to goodreads and random house for an advanced reader's copy.

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## Dianne says

Thanks to NetGalley and Ballantine Books for an advance reader copy of this book.

Well, color me surprised! I tend to avoid fictionalized accounts of historical women because they often drift into “chick lit” territory where I prefer to stick closer to a true biography. I have not read “The Paris Wife,” so I had no idea what to expect with Paula McLain but I was delighted to find that she was up to the task and crafted a credible, well-written and gripping account of the early life of Beryl Markham.

I had never heard of Beryl Markham. She was the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic from east to west in 1936, but she was a pioneer in many more ways, including being the first licensed female horse trainer in Kenya. The story is book-ended with her famous flight, but the meat is in the middle which spins out Markham’s life from early childhood to her early thirties. It’s a remarkable and unconventional life, and Markham is both flawed and inspiring. Equally compelling (if not more so) is the setting. Africa in the early 20th century is the vivid co-star of this book. Supporting cast members include “Out of Africa” author Karen Blixen (pseudonym Isak Dinesen) and her lover, Denys Finch Hatton, who was also Markham’s lover.

This was a hard book to put down. I recommend it highly – very well done.

Entirely coincidentally, the next book I read was “Almost Famous Women” by Megan Mayhew Bergman. One of the stories in Bergman’s book, “A High Grade Bitch Sits Down For Lunch,” is about Beryl Markham and her training of the wild and dangerous horse, “Messenger Boy,” which was covered in “Circling the Sun.” The reference to her being a “high grade bitch” is a quote from Ernest Hemingway in reference to Markham’s 1942 book, “West With the Night:”

*“Did you read Beryl Markham’s book, West with the Night? ...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 this girl, who is to my knowledge very unpleasant and we might even say a high-grade bitch, can write rings around all of us who consider ourselves as writers ... it really is a bloody wonderful book.”*

Rumor has it that he made a pass at Markham and was rebuffed, hence his assessment of her character. Go Beryl!

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