



Circling the Sun Reader's Guide

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READERS GUIDE

A Reader's Guide

A Conversation Between Paula McLain and Lily King, author of *Euphoria* and *Father of the Rain*

Lily King: How did the idea for this novel find you?

Paula McLain: Ideas are so interesting, aren't they? Sometimes they're skittish as hummingbirds—but other times they storm into your life and steal your car keys and simply will not take no for an answer! I know from previous conversations that the concept for *Euphoria* completely hijacked you when you happened on a biography of Margaret Mead—though you'd never, ever thought you'd tackle a historical novel. For me, I was deep into another story when I was given a copy of Beryl Markham's memoir, *West with the Night*. The minute I let the book fall open, I was riveted to Beryl's amazing life, but also swept away by some quality in her voice—a unique blend of toughness, daring, and nostalgia. She's so tender when she addresses her memories of Africa, and so aware of how the place brought her most alive. I was hooked hard and instantaneously.

I should mention that in Cleveland it was January and freezing. I want to go to Africa, I found myself thinking. I want to go to Africa NOW. The quickest way to get there was to give in to the world of the book. And I did—in a big way. The first draft flew out of me in just a few months, faster than I'd written anything before.

LK: Did you feel a connection to Beryl Markham even before you began writing the story? In what way?

PM: It was almost eerie how quickly Beryl took hold of my imagination and drew me in. As I tried to explain, her voice got my immediate attention, and the fierce contours of her personality, too. But for a book to work for me, I have to be more than interested in

my subject. I have to feel deeply bound to them--and that our lives are somehow twisted up together. It's mysterious, and incredibly intimate. The first time I felt this way was when I began to write *The Paris Wife*, about Ernest Hemingway's first marriage to Hadley Richardson. Writing from her point of view was like channeling her. Becoming her. With Beryl the intensity was even greater, because I was discovering that we had a surprising lot in common--we both grew up with horses, we both married young, to men considerably older. And we both grew up without our mothers. These parallels in our lives definitely made me feel I had access to her as a subject in a really singular way--and had me wondering if I haven't always been meant to find and write about her.

LK: When you write historical fiction, you have to accept the fact that you are inventing dialogue and scenes and emotions for people who really lived. How does that feel? Does your responsibility to the facts as you have learned them ever come into conflict with your responsibility to the novel you are trying to create? Have you ever had to violate one in favor of the other?

PM: What a wonderful question, Lily. In one respect I think it's an incredible privilege to be fleshing out the lives of these remarkable people, illuminating the hidden particulars, and bringing history to life in an intimate, human way. But the terrain does get tricky at times. Through the reach of imagination, we presume to know all kinds of things that can't be known. And then there are the times, as you mention, when the facts either don't jibe with or can't support a moment that feels right for the story, or for the emotional arc of a character. For example, I've never come across any piece of evidence that suggests Karen Blixen knew Beryl was in love with Denys Finch Hatton. Nor is there any record of the two women confronting each other about Denys, acknowledging their rivalry. But as I drew toward the end of my last draft, I just kept thinking there should be such a moment, because the story needed it, but also because the characters--and their real-life counterparts--deserved it. These were strong, smart women--not pushovers or shrinking violets by any means, and not inclined to hide their heads when the truth came knocking. When I was still stewing about my authority to invent such a moment, my editor brought it up as well, wanting the scene, and feeling it demanded to be there. And now it is.

LK: Have you always loved history?

PM: I've always loved biography, to be sure. One the first books that ever really touched me as a young reader was the story of Annie Oakley. I think I checked it out of the library ten times when I was a second or third grader, feeling obsessed with her. But history . . . well, history was boring! All those survey classes I took as an undergraduate, memorizing the names of generals and dates of important battles, put me in a coma. Then I took a class in graduate school that sort of blew me away. It was social history, focusing very specifically on women's stories from Colonial times through the Industrial Revolution. We read the diaries of factory workers, and housewives living in the Massachusetts Bay Colony--and suddenly the real business

of what it meant to live in those time periods came alive for me. That's the feeling I'm trying to replicate when I research a time and place for a new book: being totally sucked into that world in a visceral way. A reader once told me she thought historical fiction was like a living wax museum. Isn't that a wonderful way of thinking about it?

LK: Which part is more thrilling to you, the discovery of all the details of your subject's life or the creation of your own story out of these details?

PM: I think it has to be the threshold place between those two things—when in the sifting through of facts and materials I come upon a detail that gels the story for me. For *The Paris Wife*, it was when I arrived at the end of Hemingway's memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, at the line where he says of Hadley, "I wished I had died before I ever loved anyone but her." I believed him, believed he regretted betraying her (with her friend Pauline Pfeiffer, who would become his second wife) for the rest of his life. And that broke my heart. Right then, I knew the novel was, more than anything else, about the rise and fall of a marriage.

Similarly, when I was researching Beryl's life, I found myself wanting to know how she became such a bold and fearless woman, aeons ahead of her time, ready to take on all sorts of things women simply didn't do. Part of the recipe, it seemed to me, was Africa itself, how she came of age in such a wild and expansive place. But just as consequential was her mother's leaving. That early loss forced her to toughen her skin, and to thrust herself toward the people and things that might do her harm, rather than running from them. That's when her character fully materialized for me, and I knew I wanted to explore her childhood and early adulthood more than her adventures, later in life, as a famous aviator.

LK: Before I read your novel, when I thought of Denys Finch Hatton and Karen Blixen, I saw Robert Redford (who didn't even try to be British) and Meryl Streep. I read somewhere that you loved that movie, too, and maybe have watched it as many times as I have. How did you get them out of your head to create your own version of these two?

PM: It was no short order—let me tell you! I've watched that movie countless times and have whole chunks of it memorized. And some of the scenes are burned indelibly into my brain—like when they go up in the vintage biplane, and Meryl Streep reaches back and touches Robert Redford's hand, and the flamingos are flying, and the musical score is swelling. Seriously, if that doesn't make you cry, something in you is broken!

But the further along I got in my research, the more a switch seemed to flip. The real Finch Hatton—though he looked nothing like Redford, and was almost completely bald!—became so compelling and irresistible for me, I couldn't help falling for him. At one point, Karen Blixen's letters and photographs covered my desk. Her voice and face

filled my head. . . . Meryl couldn't compete after that, no matter how great she is at accents!

LK: It's daunting, taking on another culture and time period. What was most challenging?

PM: Maybe the most challenging thing was taking on colonialism, which—politically speaking—is sort of abhorrent to me. But Beryl did grow up in that world. I didn't want to give her my opinions and a stump to shout them from, but rather to represent her enmeshed, insider point of view as accurately as possible.

LK: What was most surprising?

PM: I think the greatest surprise is just how wild and irreverent those folks were back then. Cocaine, opium, wife-swapping: You name it, they did it! It makes us seem terribly conservative now, nearly a hundred years later.

LK: How did you decide which part of Beryl's life to tell?

PM: I imagine that if you gave ten writers the same facts and sheaves of research material, they'd tell ten different stories. It's so individual, what we respond to in someone else's life. For me, what came alive first and most plaintively was Beryl's African childhood. I'd always loved frontier stories—the Little House books, *The Swiss Family Robinson*—and was transfixed by the idea of what it must have been like to grow up at the edge of absolute wilderness, in a place so new “you could feel the future of it under your feet,” as Beryl writes in *West with the Night*. I grew up with horses, so that's another bit of her life that really spoke to me. Oh my goodness, but the horse training and racing was fun to write!

LK: Did you go to Kenya for your research, and if so, how was that trip? Where did you go? What did you discover?

PM: I did indeed go to Kenya, and it was easily the coolest thing I've ever done. I started in Nairobi, visiting the places that meant a lot to Beryl and that, believe it or not, still stand almost a hundred years later. I saw the Muthaiga Club, Karen Blixen's farm (now a museum), Denys Finch Hatton's grave. I spent time in Njoro, where she spent her girlhood. The land that was her father's horse farm still is a horse farm, and the current owner has refurbished the storybook cottage Beryl's father built for her when she was fourteen. I stayed there! I also went horseback riding in the bush, slept in a tent (though a pretty fancy one) in the Masai Mara, and flew in an open-air vintage biplane. Every moment of my trip was absolutely incredible, mostly because of how privileged I felt to be stepping, as if through a time machine, into her world.

LK: One of the relationships Beryl had that most intrigued me was her friendship with

Kibii, her best friend from childhood. Did that relationship ever go further than a friendship? It seemed like it was often teetering on the verge of something more.

PM: Several of Beryl's biographers have suggested that left to their own devices, as they often were, Beryl and Kibii were probably each other's first sweethearts, experimenting with one another as adolescents do . . . the out-in-the-bush version of playing doctor. That seems likely to me as well, though Beryl never confirmed or denied it in an interview. What strikes me in their alliance even more is how they grew from being the fiercest of competitors to the most loyal of friends over the course of their lives. They knew each other so well, and trusted and valued each other for many decades. I find that quite moving.

LK: Toward the end of the novel, Beryl says, "I've sometimes thought that being loved a little less than others can actually make a person rather than ruin them." Is this your thought, or did Markham ever say or write something like this? Can you explain further what she means?

PM: In that line, I'm actually extrapolating something Beryl said of her father in an interview toward the end of her life: "I admire my father for the way he raised me. People go around kissing and fussing over their children. I didn't get anything like that. I had to look after myself. . . . Funnily enough it made me." Her independence and undeniable resilience were born out of her unconventional upbringing, to be sure. Though we might see the circumstances of her girlhood as heartbreaking—the disappearance of her mother, the benign neglect of her father—I wanted to call attention to the fact that Beryl never played the victim or felt sorry for herself, but in fact sharpened herself on those losses, becoming stronger. Becoming herself.

LK: The dreaded final question: What's next?

PM: There is more than a smidgen of dread in that question! It's not always obvious, when I think about something new, what's going to swim up from the deep to activate my imagination, or even that something will. I'll bet you have that fear too—that one of these days the muse might hang up a "Gone Fishing" sign and vanish? But I'd very much like to get to a place where I can fight back against the panic and uncertainty, and simply be at rest, waiting for the spark of inspiration.

For today at least, that seems doable. I'm sitting at my desk, looking at my yard full of barren, skeletal trees. Nothing seems alive out there, but spring is going to come soon. It always does eventually!

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. At the beginning of the book, Beryl reflects that her father's farm in Njoro is "the one place in the world I'd been made for." Do you feel this is a fitting way to describe Beryl's relationship with Kenya, too? Does she seem more suited—more made for—life there than the others in her circle? Is there a place in your life that you would describe the same way?
2. While it is clear he loves his daughter, do you feel Beryl's father is a good parent? Do you think Beryl would have said he was? Did you sympathize with him at any point?
3. Beryl is forced to be independent from a very young age. How do you think this shapes her personality (for better or for worse)?
4. After Jock's drunken attack, D fires Beryl and sends her away. Do you understand his decision? Despite all the philandering and indulgent behaviors of the community, do you feel it's fair that Beryl is judged so harshly for the incident?
5. How would you describe Beryl and Denys's relationship? In what ways are they similar souls? How does their first encounter—outside, under the stars at her coming-out party—encapsulate the nature of their connection?
6. Karen and Beryl are two strong, iconoclastic women drawn to the same unobtainable man. Do you understand how Beryl could pursue Denys even though he was involved with Karen? Did you view the friendship between the women as a true one, despite its complications?
7. Why do you believe the author chose the title *Circling the Sun*? Does it bring to mind a particular moment from the novel or an aspect of Beryl's character?
8. When Beryl is quite young, she reflects that "softness and helplessness got you nothing in this place." Do you agree with her? Or do you think Beryl places too much value on strength and independence?
9. When Beryl becomes a mother herself, she is determined not to act as her own mother did. Do you feel she succeeds? How does motherhood spur her decision to exchange horse training for flying? Could you identify with this choice?

10. After Paddy the lion attacks Beryl, Bishon Singh says, “perhaps you weren’t ever meant for him.” Do you think that Beryl truly discovers what she is meant for by the end of the novel?
