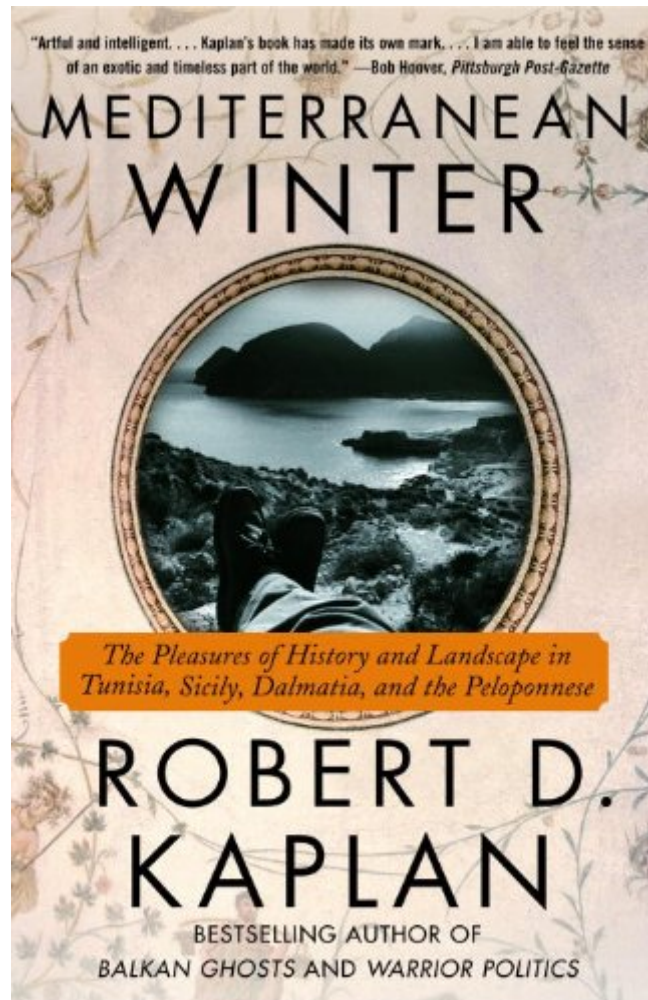


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Mediterranean Winter



Synopsis

In *Mediterranean Winter*, Robert D. Kaplan, the bestselling author of *Balkan Ghosts* and *Eastward to Tartary*, relives an austere, haunting journey he took as a youth through the off-season Mediterranean. The awnings are rolled up and the other tourists are gone, so the damp, cold weather takes him back to the 1950s and earlier—a golden, intensely personal age of tourism. Decades ago, Kaplan voyaged from North Africa to Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece, luxuriating in the radical freedom of youth, unaccountable to time because there was always time to make up for a mistake. He recalls that journey in this Persian miniature of a book, less to look inward into his own past than to look outward in order to dissect the process of learning through travel, in which a succession of new landscapes can lead to books and artwork never before encountered. Kaplan first imagines Tunis as the glow of gypsum lamps shimmering against lime-washed mosques; the city he actually discovers is even more intoxicating. He takes the reader to the ramparts of a Turkish kasbah where Carthaginian, Roman, and Byzantine forts once stood: “I could see deep into Algeria over a rib-work of hills so gaunt it seemed the wind had torn the flesh off them.” In these austere and aromatic surroundings he discovers Saint Augustine; the courtyards of Tunis lead him to the historical writings of Ibn Khaldun. Kaplan takes us to the fifth-century Greek temple at Segesta, where he reflects on the ill-fated Athenian invasion of Sicily. At Hadrian’s villa, “shattered domes revealed clouds moving overhead in countless visions of eternity. It was a place made for silence and for contemplation, where you wanted a book handy. Every corner was a cloister. No view was panoramic: each seemed deliberately composed.” Kaplan’s bus and train travels, his nighttime boat voyages, and his long walks in one archaeological site after another lead him to subjects as varied as the Berber threat to Carthage; the Roman army’s hunt for the warlord Jugurtha; the legacy of Byzantine art; the medieval Greek philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon, who helped kindle the Italian Renaissance; twentieth-century British literary writing about Greece; and the links between Rodin and the Croatian sculptor Ivan Mestrovic. Within these pages are smells, tastes, and the profundity of chance encounters. *Mediterranean Winter* begins in Rodin’s sculpture garden in Paris, passes through the gritty streets of Marseilles, and ends with a moving epiphany about Greece as the world prepares for the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens. *Mediterranean Winter* is the story of an education. It is filled with memories and history, not the author’s alone, but humanity’s as well.

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Customer Reviews

This is travel writing the way it was meant to be - Informative, concise and illuminating. Kaplan relives his journeys from many years ago as he first travelled through the Mediterranean struggling with being a free-lance writer. Most of the book is recollections from more than 20 years ago although there are comments from recent trips back to some of the locations and a wonderful recent interview with Patrick Leigh Fermor, author of *A Time of Gifts*, and other well-known travel books. The down-side of reporting on these decades-old journeys is that some of the spontaneity and opinion is lost. I find that sometimes I learn more from disagreeing with a travel writers' hasty opinion than in boring, well-edited neutral reporting. However, in this case, I think that the elapsed time has given this account nuances and a filtered content that add to the writing. It's as if the ensuing decades have concentrated the meaning and subtleties of the journey. The part on Tunisia was replete with history of the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Berbers, and Carthaginians. Sicily was filled with the Greek influences on this place. Dalmatia, in previous Yugoslavia, and Greece were well-represented. I confess I particularly enjoyed the recent encounter with Patrick Leigh Fermor who in his 80's is working on the last book of the trilogy about his travels in the 30's on foot from Holland to Constantinople. If you haven't read his first two, you need to. Kaplan also includes a list of books that he considers essential to understanding these regions. It is excellent and is a good

start to understanding these areas in depth. Overall, excellent and gripping - which is hard in travel writing.

I have become quite accustomed to reading insightful and thought provoking works by Robert Kaplan, but this one caught me by surprise. This work is an amazing achievement. Technically the book chronicles Kaplan's first venture into the Mediterranean, but it does much more than that. We see the Mediterranean through the eyes of a young man on eager to discover the world. What we also get however is the insight of a man who made this region his base for many years. The prose of journalist who has honed his craft for over twenty years. The reflections of a scholar who seems to have absorbed everything ever written in the English language about the places he visited. We learn a great deal in this book. As is always the case with Kaplan we get an historical understanding for why a certain people are the way they are. It is astounding how much is commented upon and discussed in this slender volume. Kaplan has packed every page with his observations and reflections and while they are complex and replete with references to other works he somehow manages to keep his prose light and fluid. It is difficult to explain, but if you buy the book you will know what I am talking about. Read this if you love the Mediterranean. Read it if you are fascinated by history or if you really enjoy profound lyrical prose.

One of Kaplan's most recent works is an excellent read, suitable for a lazy Sunday morning when one is noshing on a bagel and daydreaming about traveling the southern 'fringe' of Europe. The prose is captivating and lyrical, particularly in Tunisia and Dalmatia. It is also a fascinating look at the development of the man as he makes his leap from 'travel writer' to 'current events' writer and journo. One point in the book stands out in my mind. This is Kaplan's encounter with a West-hating North African, who nonetheless comes to develop a wary friendship with the author. Over time, Kaplan's acquaintance grows out of his radicalism and acquires a middle-class lifestyle, with a job and a mortgage. (Which development followed the other is left up to the reader to decide.) I only caution that those who approach Kaplan's work from his hard-hitting current events books might be slightly let down with this effort. One can certainly see the beginnings of the memes and keen insights that Kaplan sprinkles liberally throughout his other work. However, this is a book about history and the 'deeper' pleasure of travel, not a meditation on the state of things to come.

This is a delightful piece of travel writing by one of the genre's masters as he wanders through some of the most history-rich real estate in the world. Covering both sides of the Mediterranean --in winter,

no less -- Kaplan weaves into his narrative the historical heritage and significance of each place he visits. At each stop he shares his personal impressions, as well. One of the most endearing qualities of this book is the tribute he pays to other travel writers who covered the same ground over the years, ranging from the Homeric era to modern day. For me, the book ended perfectly, as Kaplan concludes his trip at the Greece home of Patrick Leigh Fermor, the legendary travel writer and war hero, whose books chronicling his walk across Europe as the storm clouds of WWII were gathering, remain travel writing classics. Kaplan has paid his dues as a journalist, with his years of visiting mostly third world countries, staying in ratty hotel rooms, surviving on boiled eggs, and spending endless and boring hours on buses to nowhere. This has given him rare insights into our world and its people -- insights he generously shares with us. It's like taking a trip with a master traveler. A masterpiece.

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