



# The Towers of Trebizond

*Rose Macaulay*

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Hailed as "an utter delight, the most brilliant witty and charming book I have read since I can't remember when" by *The New York Times* when it was originally published in 1956, Rose Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond* tells the gleefully absurd story of Aunt Dot, Father Chantry-Pigg, Aunt Dot's deranged camel, and our narrator, Laurie, who are traveling from Istanbul to legendary Trebizond on a convoluted mission. Along the way they will encounter spies, a Greek sorcerer, a precocious ape, and Billy Graham with a busload of evangelists. Part travelogue, part comedy, it is also a meditation on love, faith, doubt, and the difficulties, moral and intellectual, of being a Christian in the modern world.

## The Towers of Trebizond Details

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Author : Rose Macaulay

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## From Reader Review The Towers of Trebizon for online ebook

### Sarah says

Aside from the brilliant first line this book had the hardest beginning 15 pages I might have ever read. I consider myself pretty well read with a fairly extensive vocabulary and I was lost amongst the obscure religious terms, random capitalization, run-on sentences and excessive use of "said" as a verb. Disappointing since the book's premise had such promise. There were a few moments of brilliance and some great quotes but too little, too late. Not much of a plot here either. I know books are subjective but I seriously can't even with the many 5 star reviews of this book.

Favorite quotes:

"' Have good friends, dear,' she says, ' make to yourself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, and you'll be all right everywhere.'"

"And this failure of the Christian Church, of every branch of it in every country, is one of the saddest things that has happened in all the world. But it is what happens when a magnificent idea has to be worked out by human beings who do not understand much of it but interpret it in their own way and think they are guided by God, whom they have not yet grasped."

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### Cphe says

Read this as part of a challenge on Goodreads. Thoroughly enjoyed it and think that it is one of those novels that can be read more than once to gain further insight.

The story unfolds through the eyes of Laurie as she travels with her eccentric Aunt Dot and the High Anglican Father Hugh Chantry-Pigg. Their mission is to "spread the word" to the Muslim world.

Along the way they encounter various "personalities". This novel has a wonderful opening line that sets the tone for the story. I really enjoyed these eccentric and intrepid travellers along with the camel who has a starring role. This is more than a travel book and there are some wonderful insights from Laurie. It's written of a bygone era and I doubt that I'd undertake to travel alone through Turkey on a cantankerous camel let alone sample unknown elixirs of dubious quality.

The characters are somewhat "dotty" and otherworldly, quite delightful overall. There are serious themes throughout the novel it's not all "light" reading fare.

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### Michael says

This book was a pleasant surprise, full of understated humor and wisdom about the pull of the ancient world on the self and the scope of human aspiration and folly over religion. It fits the bill for my love of travel books that portray together an outer journey and an inner journey of the traveler. As a novel we are looking

through the mask of young Laurie as she recounts a tale of traveling with her Aunt Dot and a stuffy old Anglican priest, Father Chantry-Pigg, under the goal of scouting out communities along the Black Sea for their promise as targets for Anglican missionary work. They travel mostly by camel, which they bring by boat from England to Istanbul, and, after picking up a car and their Turkish friend, a lady professor converted to their church on a former stay in London, set out to the east along the Black Sea. Even before this motley crew hits the road, it's clear that mostly they are out on a lark.

It's practically in Aunt Dot's blood to seek out the most remote, inaccessible communities in her work for the missionary society, especially in areas with an ancient, exotic history. It's a family tradition for centuries to fuse the evangelical metaphor of fishing for souls to convert and actual fishing. She loves camping out under the stars. Her subversive personal mission is to nurture the hunger for freedom among women under the yoke of submission and constraint of Islam and other religions. Chantry-Pigg tolerates her radical streak and aligns with her desires to visit all the ruins of the ancient they can fit into their travels. His obsession is with the Byzantines and the continuity of the Greeks in their high civilization. He is a constant advocate for the High Anglican traditions closest to Catholicism, but he is not driven by missionary fervor. Instead, his secret aim seems lie with sainthood, as he wants to test out the healing powers of relics has spirited out of churches back home. Each hopes to have adventures significant enough to justify turning their journals into books. Laurie's job is to prepare watercolors which might be used to illustrate Dot's book.

An early high point to their trip is their visit to the alluring exotic Trebizon, ancient capital of Byzantium in decline from the 13th to 16th centuries after the Ottoman Turks made their empire, and long a commercial gateway to Persia and the Caucasus. The Muslims there are not receptive, and they are miffed that the Seventh Day Adventists and Billy Graham's crusades seem to be making more inroads in the fishing business. But their professor friend, Halide, doubts that any branch of Christianity can make significant lasting conversions of the Muslims. And despite the secularism brought to Turkey by the regime of Attaturk, the women she feels will never brave the choice to desert conservative traditions. The choice to go bareheaded is still governs provincial societies far from Istanbul.

*“They said it led to unbridled temptation among men.”*

*“Men must learn to bridle their temptations,” said aunt Dot, always an optimist. “They must be converted too.*

From her own wavering conversion, Halide sees a particular lack of fit for the Anglican faith, and she reflects back to Laurie what she already knows on how this goal is not what really drives Dot:

*They have said to me, ‘The Bible, yes. Jesus Christ, yes. Holy Communion, no.’ And the Church of England, isn’t it, is built around Holy Communion, what you call the Mass. That is what your Father Chantry-Pigg would tell people; and it won’t go well with Moslems, I can assure you. I know what I talk about. Dot is a romantic woman, her feet aren’t on the ground. She thinks she is practical, a woman of business, but no, she is a woman of dreams. Mad dreams, dreams of crazy impossible things. And they aren’t all of conversion to the Church, oh no. Nor all of the liberation of women, oh no. Her eyes are on far mountains, always some far peak where she will go. She looks so firm and practical, that nice face, so fair and plump and shrewd, but look in her eyes, you will sometimes catch a strange gleam. Isn’t it so?”*

As they continue further east, they start to feel the lure of Armenia and climbing Mount Ararat. But the prospect of finding Seventh Day Adventists at the top waiting for the Second Coming tempers their enthusiasm. Instead they both find themselves wishing to visit the Caucasus, full of ancient ruins of the

Tartars, to imagine a time of trade in Circassian slaves, to experience people who drink the fermented mare's milk called koumiss. I won't say anything more about their adventures, but instead I will delve a bit into the story of Laurie, who continually draws the reader onward on a quest to know what makes her tick.

We get to spend more time with her in Trebizon, which she notes as "a place which had some strange hidden meaning, which I must try to dig up." In this part of a long riff about the Byzantines she captures so well the sense I have gotten from visiting places with ancient history:

*...they had had no dull moments, they had babbled and built and painted and quarreled and murdered and tortured and prayed and formed heresies and doctrines and creeds and sacramentaries, they had argued and disputed and made factions and rebellions and palace revolutions, and to and fro their feet seemed to pass among the grasses that had been marble floors, and the last Greek empire brooded like a ghost in that forlorn fag end of time to which I too had come, lost and looking for I did not know what, while my camel munched on leaves of the carob tree outside the ruined wall.*

*Towers of Trebizon in a fanciful rendering by Pisanello, 1436*

We come to learn that Laurie, despite her family history, cannot fully commit to the Anglican faith because she is not ready to confess for her sins (which I ain't telling). And that she is not above using a bit of blackmail to garner favors to make her way (is that a form of feminism?). And as we follow her delightful journey south through Turkey, and on through Cyprus, Syria, and Lebanon to Jerusalem, we feel the need to pin her down as either a cynical realist or romantic dreamer. Along the way she acquires a Barbary ape as a pet, and you will be challenged to figure out what kind of game she (and Macauley) are playing over the impossible things she is able to train the ape to do. It is a relief not to hold back on feeling the comedy in this tall tale.

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### •Karen• says

I didn't howl, no, but I certainly snorted in quite a few places.

Yes, it is funny and absurd and all over the place and skewers travel books and travel writers and publishing and the press and spying and the iron curtain (Burgess and Maclean) and it's incredibly erudite too, with Xenophon and the Euxine Sea and Priam and Hecuba and translators of the Classics and people travelling round these ancient places with an ancient guidebook in their hand and only seeing what they already know, and the snobbism (isn't snobbism a word?) of people who think that Venice is 'spoilt', which basically means that there are just far too many vulgar tourists there (with Lonely Planet rather than Arrian of Nicomedia, I suppose), but we're not vulgar, no, because we're travellers and we're writing a book about Something Serious, yes, and there is a chess-playing, car-driving ape called Suliman, it has all those things as well as having narrator whose faux-naive voice stops it from being twee, which it so easily could be, but isn't, so what, in that clichéd phrase, dear girl, what is there not to love?

All the bleeding religion, that's what's not to love. Because Laurie is 'Christ-haunted' as Flannery O'Connor

put it, or rather not so much Christ-haunted as religion-haunted. She has a brand of 'flimsy and broken-backed but incurable religion'. So there's an awful lot about religion, because rather than being glad to be shot of the whole useless baggage, Laurie is a bit obsessed with getting back into the fabled city shimmering on a far horizon. Poor girl still believes that "at the city's heart lie the pattern and the hard core, and these I can never make my own: they are too far outside my range."

They were never even anywhere near mine.

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### **Christy says**

That's it. This book has usurped all my top ten and is now and will possibly forever be, my favorite book.

In a book quirky, comic, and tragic, a woman travels through Turkey (by camel and jeep) with her adventurous zealous Aunt Dot who, enabled by the Anglican Missions society, has a vision of emancipating Turkish women from their Muslim enslavement by tempting them with the freedoms of the Modern West and the Anglican church (hats, tea parties, education etc.) They are joined by the septuagenarian Father Chantry-Pigg, who dreams of converting Muslim heathens to the warm bosom of Christianity with his High Church relics and simultaneously discovering those long lost Byzantines (Greek; Christian) in the heart of the new secular state of Turkey (Muslim usurpers of Byzantium).

The narrator records the travelers movements, the camel's rascally temperament, the landscape, the culture, the food, the Russian spies, humoring the ridiculous efforts of her aunt and Father Hugh. Her doubts about her inherited faith make her moments of illumination insightful and never pious. She is a woman who cannot escape her connection to the Church, but also cannot escape her estrangement from it.

Religious history and rituals, travel, history, myth, romance, despair, frisky camels - this book has it all. It is an entertaining romp, funny, insightful, and deeply sad. There can be no better combination.

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### **Jeanette says**

Truthfully, two 5 stars in one week!! THANK YOU, GR friends- and both from genre less visited.

An absolute masterpiece. OMG, why is it so rare that this level of wit, erudite comparison and pure exuberance can be filtered into less than 300 (277)pages within the last 50 years?

Well- no review or synopsis here of plot because others on this page have done it better. But this travel covers not just Turkey and other countries in the Mideast (early 1950's) but also discourse and depth of comparison and relationship to LARGE chunks of Western Civilization's history/philosophy/religion/tribal identity- you name it. From the Greeks onwards- definitions of the soul and conscience and our logic over our love. And even to the questions of which, if any, animals have souls. And of course the Christian eyes on the state of the Moslem woman folk met. Amidst such glorious tales of humor and descriptive nature.

But the straight form of long run on sentences with hardly a paragraph indent! You would think that a detriment. No, the whirl enhances and it enlarges the emotion.

Reading a few other post reviews after finishing this book, I was rather flummoxed by the level of judgment against Laurie's (no spoiler here) let's say- the mistake or outcome at the very end of the book. And also at the adjectives used to describe the organized religion dogma inclusions of length and other human religious FAITH contexts within this novel of The Towers of Trebizon.

It's the very dichotomy of Laurie's self-described condition. Within BOTH categories. Is "the problem" from within her own soul's belief ability or is it within organizational entity of Church itself- its authoritative practice. Not a pejorative issue against Laurie as an individual person at all. Tragedy happens. Humans are forever distracted and flawed. They have temperaments and they do make mistakes. It is in the very nature of being human. There is no total attention perfection- never completely.

But the fun in this book! And the serendipity sneakiness! And the physical and communicative obstacles to surmount!

So glad I had so many years in Roman Catholic schools from the 1950's onward, so I could chew the full bite of the apple on this one. And yet I still had to look up at least 4 or 5 different new English words, at that, during this read.

Absolutely delightful. Surely in the top 10 I will have read in 2014, although it is only April. And that first sentence is not the only great quote.

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### **mark monday says**

oh to travel, isn't that just the thing, everyone's favorite hobby, to get away and have adventures, see life from different angles, take in history and view the panorama of the world all at the same time, you go some wheres and see some things, but unless you are traveling for pure thrill-seeking or just to find a new setting to drink and to flirt, you go to someplace and see those things and you are really seeing all the things before them, the history of a place, reading and thinking and dreaming about all the things that used to be in that place, and so you find yourself in front of something that is quaint or beautiful or melancholy or depressing or even inexplicable but it is much more than that specific thing or place, it is at once itself and also all the things that came before, things you can never see and can only imagine. oh to time travel, that would really be the thing.

the 1956 novel Towers of Trebizon is about a trip to Turkey and beyond, and then back again to England. our narrator is Laurie and is accompanied, at first, by eccentric Aunt Dot and the vaguely malevolent Father Chantry-Pigg. they have different goals: Dot wants to emancipate women, Pigg wants to convert Muslims into high Anglicans, Laurie wants to relax & paint & contemplate history and religion & think on an adulterous, long-lasting, still current love affair. the whole thing is quite deadpan and, I suppose, almost stereotypically "upper-middle class English" - chatty, often dry, eccentric, judgmental, amusing, and amused. for a fully grown and obviously well-educated character, Laurie has an almost peculiarly child-like voice, faux-naïf I suppose. but perhaps not so faux at times. and at other times, not so naif either. while there is a genuine and alternately irritating and charming innocence to Laurie's every thought process, there is also an odd and winsome sort of wisdom as well, one that casually demolishes religion and government and nations and nationalism at every turn.

the style takes some getting used to. as with many of my reviews, I tried to imitate it a little bit, in this case in my first paragraph. many long, long sentences, full of asides and off-kilter bits of commentary, often followed up by a brief, to-the-point sentence that runs in a different direction. so at first it was a challenge for me to stay focused on the story at hand as I lost myself in all the rather fabulously constructed but initially quite distancing prose. but as is often the case with me, a challenging style will also keep my interest, even when I'm being frustrated, and so after a few chapters what was a difficulty became a genuine delight. a witty and enchanting delight.

whimsical Laurie nonchalantly brings home an ape (the kind of ape is never specified), and there is a charmingly detailed little sequence showing the ins and outs of living with and training an ape who you want to act and think as a human. this is a minor (but thematically relevant) part of the book, but it is so delightful that I had to mention it.

because this novel is so droll and delightful, it was a painful shock when it took a surprise turn towards the tragic in its final act. shocking but it also rang true - a bleak and clear-eyed and not very warm kind of true. well, I guess I should have been warned when that one character gets eaten by a shark early on, and not much is made of it - Towers of Trebizon has a fist of cold iron underneath that lovely little glove.

Laurie travels like I've traveled: slowly, preferring to really get to know a place in its current incarnation while simultaneously imagining all the lost wonders of what came before. I suppose it can be a rather melancholy way of traveling, looking at the present but devoting as much time to the contemplation of the past, what has been lost and what can never be seen again. so I really *got* Laurie, I connected to the character and Laurie's oddly offhand, distracted, casual, thoughtful but still rather shallow way of looking at the world. I've also traveled through Turkey and been to many of the same places. Surprisingly, not only did I understand and agree with her assessment of the country and its people - over 50 years later! - I also found I was in almost complete sympathy with her thoughts on so many other things: how history can be viewed and how the history of humanity itself and its never-changing nature can be viewed - two entirely different things; religion in general and her confused and rather longing thoughts on God and belief; how love can feel and what that feeling can turn into when the object of your love is forcibly and permanently taken from you; how a person can then distract themselves with all the wonders of life and the world, and so how a person can just carry on, survive, a part of you dead but the rest of you still able to live and find pleasure and even delight in what the world has to offer, a shadow of true happiness but at least not a pale one. Trebizon's towers, and the city itself, will always be a place where Laurie can return, in her mind or in person, as a place that soothes and delights, a kind of constant, both a sweet memory and a pleasing reality... but how can any such place be the same, be seen as the same even if it actually remains the same, how can it give the same reward when you yourself have been changed?

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### **Dillwynia Peter says**

This is one of the most bizarre books I have ever read - and I have read some truly strange stuff.

I found the book moved along a gradient from comedy to almost essay and that takes some doing, especially as, I the reader, didn't object. I laughed loudly and frequently at the bizarre behaviour, discussions and commentary of our narrator and companions. The chief theme - Anglo-Catholicism is not to everyone's taste and I suspect it would lose some readers, but this was a theme dear to Macauley's heart, and one not well expressed in literature. In fact, I doubt that many people are even aware of the Anglo-Catholic sect within the Church of England (the Queen is one BTW). I grew up in a High Church household, but not deeply within

the Anglo-Catholic theology. I wouldn't encounter this sect till living in Sydney and singing.

It also helps if you have been raised on Stella Gibbons and Nancy Mitford. If you don't have this background, you just won't find this funny, and more likely ponderous. However, if you are a fan of these two writers, then you will be captivated by her writing and will be sucked in, and most likely deal with the occasionally mildly preachy to didactic discussion on religion. Macauley never gives you a definitive answer, just her thoughts, feelings and beliefs. I did like this as I don't want to be told the absolute truth on philosophical concepts.

Macauley describes a world that has vanished: a world that sees the British Empire as a dominant force, and that the English will travel, be well versed on the antiquities of the Middle East, but almost totally ignorant of the present (only a 2000 year discrepancy). But she does hint - the Empire is crumbling and her influence is waning. She also makes a comment on how the Levant felt about the British interference immediately after the 2nd World War - another interference now forgotten, but still felt.

The book is rich in concepts - xenophobia, empirical ignorance, fads in publishing (everyone is writing a book on Turkey), religion, missionary work and its affects on the locals, differing cultures and globalisation. All are treated in an idiosyncratic way, and shows a woman who was well read, highly educated and on the ball on contemporary issues.

This novel is also autobiographical. This comes as a surprise to the reader, but it sort of explains the very strange ending; which I will admit felt incongruous and about the only truly weak point in the novel (I don't wish to spoil your pleasure & is hinted or discussed in other reviews here).

I plan on reading more Macauley as a result of this novel. This book also have one of the most famous strange opening sentences: Take my camel, dear.

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### **Renata says**

Read this humorous, warmly satirical, adventure-travel novel years ago and was just reminded of its pleasures as I began a reread of the authors collection of essays appropriately titled Personal Pleasures. Certainly high up on that list should be one titled On Rereading of Favorite Books. If Rose Macaulay were still with us today, her line from the essay Booksellers Catalogues would be a reflection on the pleasures of Good Reads: "To Read these catalogues is like drinking wine in the middle of the morning; it elevates one into that state of felicitous intoxication in which one feels capable of anything. I must control myself, and not write to booksellers in haste ..." Or, for me, not keep adding to my towering TBR list!!! "In short, I am sober again. But I am glad I was drunk"

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### **Elizabeth K. says**

I should probably warn people that I'm on a weird kick of 1950s English popular fiction by women. And this was enormously popular when it came out. A young woman accompanies her aunt and a priest on a tour of Turkey. There are a lot of jokes about Anglicanism, many more than I thought were possible, actually. This was intriguing on several levels -- it's fairly interesting right there on the surface, and also a great look at the time when it was written, and fun to compare and contrast to what passes for popular literature today. It's

also one of those books that ends up being about something quite different than you suspect: it would appear to be a book about touring around Turkey on a camel, and it turns out to really be about personal moral responsibilities and obligations.

Grade: A-

Recommended: It's a strangely good book, but it has that unsettling quality that sometimes happens when a book isn't timeless ... it's very much of its time and reading it involves significant emotional discordance.

2008/47

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## Tony says

*"Take my camel," said my aunt Dot, as she climbed down from the animal on her return from High Mass.*

First lines. I love them. Because, if they're like this, how can you not stop whatever you're doing and insist on finding out just who could write such a thing!

And who couldn't love a camel?

I'm about two reviews away from a discussion of how I may not be a feminist though I would very much like to be one. [You may want to read that first - *The Pumpkin Eater* - even though it's not written yet, to understand what I'm trying to say.] So, with that confusing preamble, I think this is one of the great Feminist novels. But since I may not be one, I could be wrong. So Aubrey you should read this and see if I'm right. And Janet, you should read this since you keep your passports. Karen, you'd howl. Garima, you'd howl. Fionnuala, you'd fall in love with it. Kalliope, you too. Michael, you might book a steamer to Turkey. Geoff, you might book a steamer to Turkey. Annie and Sara (if you read this), you should read this. Lisa and Ted, you're not reading this? Is something wrong? Nathan, not all weird stuff is modern and male. Even, dare I say it, real life people should read this too.

Laurie is traveling with her Aunt Dot (and that camel) and the Dickensian-named Father Chantry-Pigg to the Mid-East, the Crimea (so topical) and Turkey and points beyond. Dot and Pigg are on a missionary quest, but aunt Dot also is obsessed with gathering intelligence of the ill-treatment of Moslem women (so more topical). It's less clear why Laurie is accompanying them since she has her doubts. Dot and Pigg, an unlikely duo, cross illegally into Russia. Laurie deals with the underlying theme of her adultery. She is unashamed.

*I was a religious child Laurie says, when I had time to give it thought; at fourteen or so I became an agnostic, and felt guilty about being confirmed, though I did not like to say so. I was an agnostic through school and university, then, at twenty-three, took up with the Church again; but the Church met its Waterloo a few years later when I took up with adultery; (curious how we always seem to see Waterloo from the French angle and count it a defeat) and this adultery lasted on and on, and I was still in it now, steaming down the Black Sea to Trebizon, and I saw no prospect of its ending except with death--the death of one of the three people, and perhaps it would be my own.*

The camel isn't the only animal with a starring role. There's an ape: a chimp, I think, named Suleiman. This strained credulity. A chimp that learns to drive? But, Laurie took him to church. High Mass. And Suleiman participates. Long after I forget the rest of the story, if I ever do, I will remember Suleiman in church, mimicking the other worshippers.

Read this.

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### **Shawn Mooney says**

The first chapter or so, in which the family background of Aunt Dot is sent up so hilariously, was an absolute and utter delight. As soon as the group of eccentric Brits begin their tour of Turkey, however, I was put off by the headache-inducing density of the cultural and historical references, and most of all by the superior, smug—indeed, racist—tone of the humor. British satire works best when it pokes at British folks and culture; it quickly becomes odious when outwardly directed.

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### **Mary Ronan Drew says**

Towers of Trebizond Rose Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956) is one of the strangest novels I've read. It certainly has one of the strangest opening lines I can think of:

"Take my camel, dear," said my aunt Dot, as she climbed down from the animal on her return from High Mass."

A charming opening with a sharp hook. Who can resist wanting to know what this camel is doing in Oxford and what other eccentricities we will find in Aunt Dot's daily life. The narrator's low-key humor draws the reader into the story as well as our curiosity about aunt Dot.

The narrator's name is Laurie, and she goes off with her aunt, Dorothea ffoulkes-Corbett, and Father Hugh Chantry-Pigg, a Church of England priest, to convert the Muslim women of Turkey to high-church Anglicanism. Aunt Dot, who is thought to have been inspired by Dorothy L Sayers, has traveled the world for many years but now finds much of it "spoiled."

"Abroad isn't at all what it was." She looked back at the great open spaces of her youth, when one rode one's camel about deserts frequented only by Arabs, camels, flocks of sheep, and Gertrude Bell.

The book takes on many aspects of a travel guide as the party, joined in Constantinople (as Father Chantry-Pigg insists on calling it) by a feminist Turkish doctor who converted to Anglicanism during a visit to England, travel along the coast of the Black Sea to Trebizond, once the capital of the Empire of Trebizond (early 13th to mid-15th century. It was the birthplace of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1494.)

Having no success with their missionary attempts, Aunt Dot gives her camel to Laurie and she and Father C-P slip across the border into Russia. Laurie in the course of her travels to Biblical sites re-examines her faith. She has chosen love over the church and is engaged in a long-term adulterous relationship. (The author was the mistress for 24 years of a former priest.) The camel, who has mental health issues and is suspected of substance abuse (azalea flowers) provides Laurie's transportation to these evocative places and the animal probably has a deeply significant meaning, though I can't discern what that might be.

The ending of the book surprised me. The whole novel surprised me, with its combination of humor, satire, philosophical musings, feminist rhetoric, a weak and wandering plot, and mystical religion. It is highly thought of by those whose thoughts on such matters carry weight and it won the James Tait Black Memorial

Prize for fiction.

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### **Cindy Erlandson says**

This is a both deliciously hilarious and deeply serious travel story, by an author who is very knowledgeable about history, geography, and especially Anglicanism. Two English ladies and an Anglican priest travel through Turkey together, along with a camel. The priest, Father Chantry-Pigg, has in mind to convert Muslims and plant churches; Aunt Dot is focused on studying the plight of Muslim women, hoping that teaching them about the freedom that Christian women have, will cause them to want to become Anglicans. Laurie, an artist who is Aunt Dot's niece and the narrator of the story, is traveling mainly so that she and her aunt can collaborate on a book about Turkey. Along their way they keep running into the Billy Graham Crusaders and other brands of Christians, which leads to a lot of discussion about the competition between them, especially between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. The main serious strand of the story is about Laurie's long-time estrangement from the Church, due to her ten-year involvement in an adulterous affair. She meets her lover on their trip, and exposes to the reader many of her profound thoughts on her pains and struggles with faith. Profound food for thought about the mysteries of being a Christian, intertwine with zany scenes such as Laurie trying to teach an ape to drive, and even worship in church! This is a thoughtful, wild-and-crazy, thoroughly enjoyable book! I'll probably read the whole thing again.

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### **Stephen Hayes says**

A delightful novel about a High Anglican attempt to reclaim "the abandoned places of empire". The narrator Laurie and her (her sex is unclear until near the end of the story) aunt Dot, together with her aunt's Anglo-Catholic chaplain Father Hugh Chantry-Pigg, set out for Trebizond, the site of the last Roman empire, with a camel. They are joined by a Turkish feminist who they hope will help to liberate oppressed Turkish women by converting them to High Anglicanism.

They meet interesting people, including other British travellers writing Turkey books, and eventually Laurie's friends go their separate ways, leaving her with the camel, and rather short of cash. She has begun to doubt the sanity of the camel. But eventually crosses Turkey and travels through much of the Levant with it.

I've just finished reading it for the third time, but as the first time was nearly fifty years ago, and the second time about thirty years ago, I'd forgotten much of the story. But in the intervening time I've learnt quite a bit more about the places visited by the characters in the novel, and some of their history. William Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain* covers much of the same ground, and also gives some of the history of the places, and so reading it a third time made some of the obscurer bits come to life.

It is all interspersed with the protagonist's observations of people, and thoughts about life, the universe and everything, which are sometimes funny and sometimes bitter-sweet sad. Much of this is semi-autobiographical, because, like Laurie in the story, Rose Macaulay was herself torn between the Christian faith and adultery.

Another interesting thing about reading it again after fifty years is that the world has changed and the Christian church has changed, or at least the Anglican Church that the main characters belong to. I can read other books of the same vintage, such as *The Dharma bums* by Jack Kerouac and scarcely be aware that

more than fifty years have passed since the book was written. But in The towers of Trebizon one is far more aware of the changes. Travellers in the Levant needed two passports, one for Israel and one for everywhere else. The Six-Day War had not taken place, and much of Jerusalem was not in Israel. And on the eastern border of Turkey was the USSR, or the U.S.S.R., as they wrote it in those days, with the Cold War in full swing. It was a world in which Islamophobia wasn't even thought of, and perhaps the word itself had not been invented yet.

The church scene was even more different. For the Roman Catholic Church, Vatican II lay in the future, while the Anglicans have changed in ways too numerous to mention. This can be seen in a conversation between Aunt Dot and a Roman Catholic, where Aunt Dot is saying that Roman Catholics could at least be polite in Anglican churches, even if they don't believe they have the Mass, altars, or real priests.

Aunt Dot ended by saying that even if we had no altars and no Blessed Sacrament on them, it would only be polite of outsiders to bow where we thought we had them, especially at Requiem and Nuptial Masses, and also to join in the Creed and the Lord's Prayer at christenings instead of shutting the mouth tight as if afraid of infection, which looked so unchristian and stuck up.

"I suppose," said Aunt Dot, "you would walk into a mosque with your shoes on," which was not really fair, as Roman Catholics do take off their hats in Anglican churches, and even, I think, in dissenting ones.

"And I suppose *you*," said the Roman Catholic, "would, if you had been an early Christian, have offered a pinch of incense to Diana, out of politeness to the pagans."

So they left the subject and played croquet, which is a very good game for people who are annoyed with one another, giving many opportunities for venting rancour.

There is just so much in that conversation that would be quite unimaginable today.

One of the more amusing parts is where Laurie, left on her own, and unable to speak Turkish, memorises some phrases from a phrasebook, and one that she uses frequently, "I do not understand Turkish," seems to produce strange reactions in the hearers. It was some time before she realised she had copied the Turkish for the wrong phrase in the phrase book, and that what she had been telling people was "Please would you telephone immediately to Mr Yorum."

The thing that persuaded me to reread the book this time was the curious desire, expressed by advocates of the "New Monasticism", to "relocate to the abandoned places of empire", in conjunction with a report of the Divine Liturgy being celebrated, for the first time in 88 years, in an abandoned monastery near Trabzon, the Turkish name for Trebizon. Though it wasn't Anglican, that seemed, in a way, the fulfilment of the vision of Aunt Dot and Father Hugh Chantry-Pigg, and in a photo of the monastery, the scenery was spectacular. I blogged about it at Reclaiming the Abandoned places of Empire | Khanya, and, in a more general sense, at Notes from underground: Abandoned places of empire. And for that, it seemed that it might be worth reading the book again.

It was.

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## **Whitaker says**

This is no *Under the Tuscan Sun* or *Riding the Iron Rooster*. It is not a travel narrative with breathless or sardonic descriptions of a land and its people. It is, instead, a personal meditation on religion and love loosely based on a period of time that Rose Macaulay spent in Turkey.

She was, at that time, having an affair with a married man, a situation which clashed fiercely with her Anglican beliefs. Her love and guilt are recounted with typical English understatement and detachment. For example, in one episode recounted in the book, she takes on a week-long journey on camel-back to meet up with her lover on the coast of Turkey. She comes down with a fever during the journey but soldiers on regardless. This is recounted with a dry and wry stoicism:

Very soon I began feeling dizzy and strange, and when I came to I was still on the camel but in a coma, and this was the Turkey sickness, or possibly it was the camel sickness, and one made the other worse...I wished I had kept a few of aunt Dot's bottles and pills in case any of them were good for the Turkey sickness, but the only bottle I had was the green potion I had got from the Greek sorcerer in Trebizond.

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Her account of this troubled period in her life is made all the more moving because of her steadfast refusal to pity herself. Readers looking for insights into Turkey, however, should look elsewhere.

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## **Laurel Kane says**

Great read. I was supposed to read this book for a literature class i took at UCLA last summer, but didn't quite get to it. Macaulay writes in that British we're-all-crazy-and-kooky-and-we-think-it's-normal-and don't-realize-it's-actually-hysterical kind of way. At some points I was laughing out loud (teaching the monkey how to drive Aunt Dot's car!). The characters' names alone were humorous(Father Chantry-Pigg). The end, however, is devastating, but made me like the book even more because I didn't realize that I actually cared for Laurie until tragedy struck.

It was also incredibly interesting to read about their exploits traveling around in early 20th century Turkey. Aunt Dot is convinced that the Muslim women just need to be shown how "backwards" their way of life is (via the Church of England). The women will then have no choice but to become enlightened and cast off the religion and traditions that have oppressed them for so long. This book was written almost 60 years ago and there are still many people in the Western world who think this way! I do appreciate that Laurie then later talks about how she feels its "rude" to go into another country and attempt to convert the natives away from their own traditions.

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I definitely recommend this book, especially to those who have been reading more modern novels about women in the Middle East (Three cups of Tea, etc.).

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## **Hirondelle says**

I wish I could have divided this book into two parts - the parts with Aunt Dot ( and Father Pigg) and the parts without them. The parts with Aunt Dot I adore and would be, are, all time favorites. The rest of the novel, I am very sorry Laurie, but I do not believe in you. Not that I believe necessarily in Aunt Dot, but it is much easier to just go along and enjoy her eccentricity.

Back to Laurie and my problems with him/her, one thing this book is utterly remarkable about is that how hidden the narrator's gender is. On my book blurb Laurie is considered a she, wikipedia and most of the internet seems to think Laurie is a she. I have just finished reading the novel and I am far from sure. There are references to adultery being the sin which removes Laurie from the church (rather than homosexuality) and there are mentions on a dreamy what-if passage to what if Laurie and Vere were married and had children. So those are for Laurie being a female.

On the other side, none of this is totally conclusive and I find Laurie rather unbelievable as a young woman trekking alone and feverishly through Turkey in a camel, in the early 1950s. There is never any consciousness of any worry of coming out "provocative" (like drying in the sun after bathing, in the presence of a nice turkish boy), or worry about rape or pregnancy (and Laurie does spend nights with Vere), and all chauvinistic reactions seem to be to Aunt Dot, and when she is there. Laurie as a character feels more believable if he is a man, and the "sin" which he can not come to terms with his love for another man, a married one at that. Laurie and Vere are more believable and understandable and even likeable to me as a gay couple which could not be together too openly, than as some "other woman" story. Because as a woman, Vere's appeal is not quite convincing, as Laurie admits he is selfish, his wife never with him, his marriage no impediment to him spending lots of holiday time with Laurie. If the random clues to Laurie being female being meant to misdirect unsympathetic general audience of the time it would make sense to me, since emotionally and intellectually, it all makes more sense if Laurie is male. It also makes it more poignant though that might be a matter of taste.

I had some trouble with Laurie's method of narrating dialog, it is hilarious often, but it is tiresome when overdone, and sometimes it is overdone. I found some anedocetes of Laurie, like trying to tame the ape, just more Aunt Dot than a real character whose motivations and actions I could understand. All the understatement and eccentricity, the lack of candour about \*something\*, make for a distance between me and Laurie which make just not \*get\* his/her feelings and crisis of faith.

All that being said, I did love the book. As I mentioned on a comment it reminded of mellow Waugh ( if one can imagine Waugh ever being mellow), but all kinds of the books Evelyn Waugh wrote, all together in one: the satyre and eccentric characters, the travel writing, and the agonizing over religion in sin. Just a lot more mellow!

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### **Beth Bonini says**

This is one of those mid-century 'classic' British novels that is still cherished by devotees of the period, but not particularly well-known now - except for, perhaps, its famous opening line: "**"Take my camel, dear," said my aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass."**" It took a while for me to fall in love with it, but fall in love I did. I would actually give it 4.5 stars . . . only withholding that last half of a star because there is something in its tone (rather arch) which lessened the emotional intensity of it.

By the first chapter, the author has managed to discuss camels, 500 years of Anglican church history and

fishings - all of which are integral to the novel's plot. It's difficult to say what the novel is, exactly, because it's part travelogue and part moral journey (which reminded me, although the tone is completely different, of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*). The premise of the plot is an expedition into Turkey and other countries of the Levant for the purpose of religious conversion of the Muslim 'natives' for Christianity. But really, one gets the feeling that the main characters are there mostly to have exotic larks. Aunt Dot - doughty adventurer, feminist and staunch Anglican - has joined forces with Father Hugh Chantry-Pigg, the Turkish feminist Dr. Halide and the narrator Laurie, but the odd little group are only loosely united in their belief systems, and soon become unstuck. Much of the novel is about Laurie's solo journey, which (literally) winds along the Turkish coastline into Syria, Jordan and Israel and (figuratively) is a spiritual journey.

At first, the novel seems to be about a particular sort of English person (upper middle-class, well-educated in the classics, stricken by wanderlust) whose goal in life seems to be one of having adventures in any country other than England. The trio of Aunt Dot, Father Hugh and Laurie are all well-educated in the classical world, and they are there more to observe and admire; the conversion part seems to be secondary. (I was also reminded of E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*). There is also a running joke about their desire to get a book out of their adventures, and how the entire area is overrun by missionaries, writer and spies. It all takes place in a vague sort of post-war (II) period, but except for allusions to the Soviet Curtain - which plays a role in the storyline - it feels almost 19th century. Throughout, the tone is deceptively light. It's consistently humorous, but not with the sort of humour that makes you want to laugh.

One of the peculiarities of the novel is that one is never entirely sure if Laurie - the narrator and protagonist - is male or female. At first, I thought female, and then I definitely thought male. And then at the end of the novel I thought female again, but I wasn't positive. The author carefully avoids using any kind of pronouns, and then is also the matter of names: Laurie's lover is called Vere, and both names are completely gender-neutral. The novel is meant to be based in large part on the author's life - not only her family background, but also her ambivalent relationship with her own religious faith, and the long affair she had with Gerald O'Donovan (a former Jesuit priest and married man). Biography would suggest that Laurie was female, but in fact the novel seems more plausible with a male narrator - partly because it seems unlikely for a young women to be travelling alone in that part of the world. Also, the character just seemed male to me in terms of behaviour and mannerisms. I cannot help but think that Macauley made this all deliberately vague, but I cannot recall any book I've ever read in which the sex of the protagonist wasn't clear and obvious.

This is definitely one of those novels that as soon as I finished I felt quite tempted to start again from the beginning. There are such beautiful descriptions of scenery and history that I wanted to set on my own expedition of the Levant, and I felt horribly ignorant about that part of the world and was frequently interrupting my own reading to look things up. But really, the heart of the novel is about faith and belief and what it means to be human. I felt quite moved by certain passages - for instance, when Laurie talks about how the desire to be morally good - and the surprising ending of the novel was shattering. Although the narrator's voice never becomes earnest or serious, there is actually a great deal of philosophical depth to Laurie's journey. I also found myself thinking quite a lot about the rise and fall of human civilisations and the ancient clash between the Muslim and Christian world - and then relating them to present day struggles. Although it doesn't 'read' as modern at all, it felt surprisingly relevant.

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### Mitch says

I wanted to read this book because it was a humorous fictionalized trip to Turkey (where I've been) on the part of the author, along with her eccentric aunt and a camel. What could go wrong?

Well, this: the book was overloaded with references to esoteric religious references (Anglican, High Church, Low Church, Roman Catholic, etc, etc, etc...) that were mainly meant to show how ridiculous they were. Unless you were an expert in these, the semi-humorous/semi-serious religious arguments went flat in short order. And they kept right on coming.

Some of this was clever, funny and enjoyable... and then~

The plot and the book both ended with a tragedy linked to the narrator's pettiness. It's actually pretty horrible and I am not sure why the author chose to do this.

I cannot think of any personal acquaintance I'd recommend this book to.

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