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Paperbacks: Nonfiction

REVIEWS BY ROSS LECKIE

QUICKSANDS A Memoir
 by Sybille Bedford
 Penguin, £8.99

Sybille Bedford (1911-2006) was born a moneyed German Jew and brought up in Germany, Italy, England and France. Although she remained rootless and restless, "to be someone who wrote was what I had wished to be from childhood, seeing it as an exalted calling. My limitations were large: an almost entire lack of formal education, a lack of facility in getting words on paper; great natural sloth." Yet, with her fine late novels *A Legacy* and *Jigsaw*, she succeeded.

This memoir charts that painful partition, exchanging Huxley for Hemingway, as Bedford flitted about in Europe's inter-war bohemia. That is interesting, as is her "account by an amalgam of fragments" of her chastened and curious childhood. Her military father lived off her mother's money and collected antiques, preferably from before 1700. "There was a Renaissance wardrobe and a Gothic prie-dieu in what passed as my nursery."

But a greater reason to read this book is for its perspective on the 20th century, "the long years when the perennial deeds of human courage, crime and madness were committed the world over in an unfathomable crescendo". There is much wisdom in these pages. "Very little has changed in our nature since we set out from the caves . . . Much has changed about the means by which we are able to torment and kill." Bedford wrote that after 9/11, not the Second World War. This book leaves a salutary sadness that we should heed, but will almost certainly ignore. In *Search of a Man Caught Between*

THE ORIENTALIST East and West
 by Tom Reiss
 Vintage, £7.99

A joy of the internet is a website called abebooks.com, where out-of-print books abound. It would be the best place to go to find a copy of a very good novel entitled *Ali and Nino*, purportedly by one Kurban Said, first published in German in 1937, revived in the 1970s in various translations and finally published in Britain in 2000. Ali is a Muslim, Nino a Christian, and they fall in love in Azerbaijan on the eve of the Russian Revolution. The novel has many morals for our similarly strained multicultural times.

Who was Said? Tom Reiss went to the Caucasus to research oil — and found a pseudonymous novelist instead. This is a gripping account of how he established that Said, also known as Essad Bey, was really Lev Nussimbaum, born in Baku in its first oil boom. Like Disraeli, he was a Jewish Orientalist who believed that Arabs were Jews' blood-brothers — Jews on horseback, as Disraeli said.

This is Nussimbaum's story, assiduously uncovered from the "dogged miracle of old papers", compellingly told, and stranger than any fiction. He grew up in Persia, then fled from the

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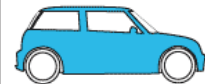
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Bolsheviks to Berlin where he styled himself a Muslim prince and became a bestselling author who lectured in America. He was an "ideological Houdini . . . in a decade when race and religion were as fixed as a death sentence". Nussimbaum is a model for our own epoch, and this fine book does him full justice at last.

THE BURNING OF BRIDGET CLEARY A True Story
 by **Angela Bourke**
Pimlico, £8.99

In 1895, a young married woman named Bridget Cleary disappeared in rural Ireland. Many believed her husband's insinuation that she had been taken by fairies. "I do, I do, I do believe in fairies," chant the children in Peter Pan. Most of us no longer believe in anything much now, although our need to believe persists in our prurient fascination with movie stars' and footballers' patently plastic lives.

Bourke is a distinguished Irish academic, yet there is refreshingly little mumbo-jumbo such as "vernacular stigma theory" and "inter-disciplinary studies" in this meticulous account of the Cleary case. Arcane sociology aside, it succeeds as a study of belief and superstition and resonates with our contemporary experience of, for example, the apotheosis of Diana, Princess of Wales. Because she was lionised by the Cork, Dublin and London newspapers as much as her husband was vilified, Bridget Cleary was one of the first tabloid celebrities. Her story shows, now as then, how the media both exploit and form our views.

In fact Bridget had been burned to death by her husband, possibly because he thought her a witch, or because she bore him no children. So Bourke's tale is remonstrative in other ways: domestic violence, chauvinism and ancient antipathies still surround us. In Tipperary the children still sing, apparently: "Are you a witch or are you a fairy/ Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?"



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