



Zarafa: A Giraffe's True Story, from Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris

Michael Allin

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In October 1826, a ship arrived at Marseille carrying the first giraffe ever seen in France. A royal offering from Muhammad Ali, Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt, to King Charles X, she had already traveled 2,000 miles down the Nile to Alexandria, from where she had sailed across the Mediterranean standing in the hold, her long neck and head protruding through a hole cut in the deck. In the spring of 1827, after wintering in Marseille, she was carefully walked 550 miles to Paris to the delight of thousands of onlookers.

The viceroy's tribute was politically motivated: He commanded the Turkish forces then fighting the Greeks in their war of independence, and hoped his gift would persuade the French not to intervene against him. But the viceroy and his intentions were quickly forgotten as France fell in love with its "beautiful stranger." *Zarafa* chronicles the full story of this remarkable animal, revealing a kaleidoscope of history, science, and culture that opens an exotic window on the early nineteenth century. From the Enlightenment's blossoming fascination with science to Napoleon's ill-fated invasion of Egypt in 1798—from the eminent French naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire to Bernardino Drovetti, French consul general in Egypt and tomb robber extraordinaire—the era was full of memorable events and characters. Michael Allin deftly weaves them into the story with an appreciation for detail and an uncommon affection.

The giraffe's strange and wonderful journey linked Africa and Europe in mutual discovery. Although her arrival did not keep the French out of Ali's war, she became an instant celebrity in Paris and over the next eighteen years she fascinated all of Europe. Through Michael Allin's narrative skill, *Zarafa* stirs the imagination as it provides a new context for the history of a distant age.

Zarafa: A Giraffe's True Story, from Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris Details

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From Reader Review Zarafa: A Giraffe's True Story, from Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris for online ebook

Drew says

Beautiful, wide-ranging. The best kind of biography (one that puts the life of its subject in complete context).

Susan Reyna says

Excellent, well-researched story of a giraffe who travelled from Egypt to France almost 200 years ago. I learned so much about the geography, culture, and history surrounding the event.

Sally T. says

Delightful and interesting!

Karen says

The story of Zarafa's 4,000 mile journey from central Africa to Paris early in the nineteenth century is interwoven with the fascinating history of African/Egyptian/French relations from Napoleon through Charles X in this slim but well researched book. Michael Allin, who takes the liberty of naming the apparently nameless giraffe Zarafa for the Arabic term zerafa which translates as "charming" or "lovely one," does an excellent job of pulling a very complicated political history together into a very readable and interesting story. The gift of Zarafa was meant to cement relationships between Mohammed Ali and Charles X and guarantee French support in Ali's bid to conquer anything he cared to conquer. The gift was part of the horrific and mercenary rape and pillage of African, particularly Egyptian, historical artifacts and natural resources - animals and slaves - that were sold, traded, and given away as useless detritus during that period in history, mostly to finance Ali's powerful reign.

The lovely story of the gentle Zarafa's relatively peaceful journey to Paris where she lived contentedly for eighteen years in le Jardin des Plantes contrasted with the bloody conquests of the power hungry political figures of the time made for a very interesting read.

Clare O'Beara says

This is a lovely book with much research into the times and wider history of the cultures and countries involved. A young female giraffe was sent as a present from Egypt to post-Napoleonic France; she had been captured by hunters who killed her mother, very young, and needed to be fed on milk for years.

This book explains how she was raised and walked or transported by boat from the smaller Nile rivers to the

main course and the delta; she sailed to France and was walked the rest of the journey, about fifteen miles a day at two miles an hour, following her milk cows and handled by African stable men who were handsomely rewarded for their devotion. The King of France installed her in a royal menagerie and she was highly popular with everyone who saw her. Zarafa was praised for her elegance and gentleness, though some horses were afraid of her and the trip had wrecked the health of her procurer.

We also hear how the Romans had brought ill-fated giraffes to Europe in earlier times, while nations paid for every modernisation by exporting slaves. We see that Lake Nasser behind the Aswan Dam has raised the water table of the Sahara area, so that in some places the desert is coming to life, but unfortunately salt is creeping up with damp into temples and tombs, wrecking the paint. Experts reckon that in two hundred years there will be nothing left of the wall paintings and hieroglyphics. Removing antiquities has helped to preserve them in museums around the world. France carries the linking tale of Napoleon and the revolutions.

At times the account is less than riveting if you are not a student of this historical period. But the giraffe, and the idea of telling her tale, with those of the people who handled her, is lovely.

Max Renn says

i really was looking forward to loving this book. on paper it looked perfect. the charming tale of a gentle giraffe's long journey from the headwaters of the Nile to the heart of Paris complete with fairy tale pashas, dashing tomb robbers, devoted handlers and lovable bureaucrats (!?) to pump the romantique.

unfortunately, despite this wealth of potential loveliness, too much of this slender volume reads like an accountants diary. perhaps its the source material, apparently the lions share of primary documentation were official records and expenditure forms, but the rote diversions regarding route, timing, costs, miles traveled per day, etc... interrupt what should be a fantastical travelogue that ambles along itself at a giraffes graceful loping gait.

whats really sad is that 'the goods' are there, you just cant lose yourself in them the way you should. all that being said, i think this is a delightful readable book full of wonder, and i do recommend it, i merely mourn for the essential and treasured bit of perfection it could of so easily been.

Book Concierge says

The book is subtitled: *A Giraffe's True Story, From Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris.*

In October 1826 a ship arrived at Marseilles carrying the first giraffe ever seen in France. She was a gift from the Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt to the King of France; a politically-motivated offering to ensure a powerful ally. Zarafa had already travelled over 1,000 miles to that point, but still needed to get to Paris. Eventually it was decided that the best approach would be to have her walk the 550 miles from Marseille to Paris, where the King awaited the presentation of this extraordinary gift.

Allin did exhaustive, and difficult, research. Many of those who were responsible for capturing and transporting the exotic "camelopard" were illiterate; crude or inaccurate translations further muddled the story. More importantly, the kinds of detailed records that Allin needed to confirm the giraffe's itinerary (and

to flesh out the story) – bills of sale for feed and lodging, for example – were long since destroyed as unimportant. Still, Zarafa was such a sensation in France that her presence had a wide-ranging effect – ladies had their hair coiffured *a la Girafe* (piled so high they had to ride on the floors of their carriages), children ate giraffe-shaped gingerbread cookies, towns along the giraffe's route named streets and squares in her honor. She was, indeed a celebrity.

So the book should have been fascinating and interesting to someone like me – a lover of natural history as well as world history. My assumptions were wrong. The sections that dealt with the difficulties, inventive solutions and plain delight of Zarafa's actual journey were the most interesting to me. On the other hand, Allin's book bogged down in details of the politics and changing military powers of the time. In total, I thought it was okay. I'm glad I learned about this tiny little detail of history, but I'm not telling everyone to run out and read it.

Allie says

This is an incredibly charming and well-written and researched book. Michael Allin condenses a lot of complicated political history of the 18th and 19th century in a straightforward and clear way, all entwined around the journey of Zarafa the giraffe. I was especially excited to read about Zarafa's brief stay in Valence, where I used to live in France. My only complaint is that I wish it was longer. I wanted to know more about Zarafa's life in Paris, but I guess the really interesting story is of her voyage from Africa to the Jardin des Plantes. For anyone who has visited the Jardin, this book will make your next visit more interesting as you imagine where the much loved giraffe lived during its life as an adopted Parisian. And for anyone who hasn't, Michael Allin perfectly captures the grace the well-plotted garden still possesses today.

Daren says

I quite enjoyed this book - more the parts actually about the giraffe than the history lesson, but as a whole I have it in there with a solid 3 stars.

Other reviewers have criticised the non-giraffe aspects of the book, but without this history, there would be so many unanswered questions. There would necessarily be references to many people and without the background to their actions and motivations it would be a confusing read. Even now, I am less than convinced I have a clue about the history of Egypt and France in this era. Also it would be a very short book if it was limited to the giraffe telling.

On a side note, I can't tell whether this edition of the physical book, being rather narrow for its height is a subtle nod to the Giraffe, or whether this was a necessary device to reduce text width and pad this book out to its 215 pages! Anyway, some nice reproductions of sketches, maps etc and the book itself is rather nice.

Tittirossa says

E' la storia della prima giraffa giunta, nel 1826, sul suolo europeo, regalata dal viceré d'Egitto al re di Francia Carlo X. Interessante ma niente di più di un resoconto. Non c'è pathos, abilità narrativa, storia. Avvincente come una tesi di laurea.

Bonnie says

I bought this book for my giraffe-loving father several years ago and spied it on the shelf when I was visiting at Thanksgiving. My father gave it a lukewarm review, but it wasn't long and I love giraffes, too, so I brought it home to read. There was surprisingly less about the giraffe, Zarafa, than I expected. Nearly the first half of the book is dedicated to Egyptian and French history and the relations between the two countries. In fact, Zarafa's 550 mile walk from Marseille to Paris is almost glossed over. I would have found it entirely disappointing if not for the descriptions of "Zarafamania" in Paris, which were amusing, and an enchanting letter describing the giraffe: "One can say that the Giraffe has nothing elegant or graceful in the detail of her forms; her short body, her high and close-together legs, the excessive length of her neck, the declivity of her back, her badly rounded rump, and her long and bare tail, all these things contrast in a shocking manner; she seems badly built, unbalanced on her feet, and yet one is seized by astonishment at the sight of her, and one finds her beautiful without being able to say why."

David L. says

Charming, amusing, even Fascinating! Who knew. I gave this book a mention in my just-published journal: *Across Two Novembers: A Year in the Life of a Blind Bibliophile*. I said this: "On an historic note, in 1827, Muhammad Ali, Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt, sent a young female giraffe to French King Charles X as a royal gift, to firm up relations between the two countries. Her journey by ship, her walk across France, and Paris's reaction are described by Michael Allin in *Zarafa: A Giraffe's True Story*, from Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris."

www.dldbooks.com/davidfauchaux/

PS I must research and find out what else this writer has published.

Bob Newman says

"Necked Came the Stranger"----a tall, but true story

If you think about history books as beer, then this one is definitely 'Bud Lite'. You're thirsty to read a good book, so you reach for ZARAFa. You chug it down. Hmm. Definitely liquid but not much of a kick. Well, OK, who could resist buying a book about a giraffe? Not me, who always loved those weird-looking creatures. But I like well-organized books of history too, and I fear that this is not one of them. It's a kind of "cabinet de curiosités" as found in the France of the Enlightenment, but in the early 21st century, I feel we might expect something deeper, something that gave us a story to hold on to. Perhaps, to return to beer, a drink that would quench one's thirst, not only just wet the whistle. Editing is a problem. The same information is repeated in many places, and on p.140-141 even a line is repeated. This reveals a certain hastiness. Michael Allin must be congratulated on a great idea, a nice collection of illustrations, and some pleasant writing. I would certainly try his next book, because I think he has what it takes. ZARAFa, however, does have certain failings. The book jacket promises "a fairy tale for grown-ups", but fairy tales are not usually so diffuse. You can read this book in a few hours, but if you are looking for information about giraffes, about the historical period concerned in Egypt, France or the Mediterranean, don't expect much here.

Greta says

Really enjoyed this adventure story of a giraffe's journey from Sudan to Paris, France. Learned quite a bit of French history in the course of reading Michael Allin's story. The politics of the early 1900s among the world powers surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Hope visit the Jardin des Plantes when we are in Paris.

Gerald McFarland says

An amiable account of the politics back of the gift of a giraffe to King Charles X of France and this remarkable animal's long journey in 1826-1827 from far south in Africa to Paris.
