

The Photographer's Wife by Robert Sole
A Book Review by Susan Cofer

This is a review of a book that is almost impossible to buy. *The Photographer's Wife*, published in translation by the Harvill Press in 1999 is now out of print. The author, Robert Sole, can't be Googled beyond the skimpy information of the book jacket. He was born in Cairo in 1946 and moved to Paris at 18. For 30 years he's been a writer and editor for *Le Monde* where he now is ombudsman. Sole has written other books but they too are out of print in English. This is a pity because he is a brilliant writer who can engage his readers with humor, reportage and sympathy for his characters.

In *The Photographers Wife* he tells the tale of a photographer named Emile (Milo) Touta, a Greek Catholic Egyptian of Syrian descent. Milo owns a portrait studio in Cairo. His dreams are far bigger than his talent. As the story opens Milo encounters the barefoot Dora Sawaya painting a seascape on Fleming beach near Alexandria. He courts her and soon she becomes "the photographer's wife" also known as the Mameluka -a nickname given to her by the many children of the extended Touta family. It is with this name that Sole introduces the first of many references to the history of Egypt and weaves together the woman and her country. In a thoroughly believable way he uses Milo as the mouthpiece of much of that history. We know from the first page that Milo has a "glib tongue" with a "fund of stories to tell -sensational anecdotes that never appeared in the newspapers." It is through these anecdotes that the reader learns about Egypt while the century turns from 19th to 20th. But other characters too serve Sole's purposes. One is the handsome British captain intent on winning Dora's affections by writing to her from the front in Sudan. Those letters tell of the fight with the Dervishes at Abu Hamid in 1897, the retaking of Omdurman and the famous meeting of the British and French at Fashoda. In addition to the Syrian Catholic Egyptians and the British soldier there is the French couple, the Popinots, Seif, the Moslem hothead wishing for rebellion, the ostrich feather trader Richard Tiomji, and Nonna, the grande dame of the Touta family, who keep this book lively. Yet at the core is the story of Dora, a woman with a deep love for her husband, a talent for art that can't be suppressed, and an independence born of intelligence.

Early in the book Milo and Dora have a first dance. Sole describes her by comparing her to her friend:

"Milo's previous partner had been slightly built, limp-wristed, and so politely submissive to his lead as to seem non-existent. Dora, by contrast, was very much "there". Supremely alert to the music, she might almost have been leading the dance."

Throughout the book we learn how "supremely alert" Dora is to other things, except perhaps her love for her husband. She "leads the dance" with her force of will, but is unable to see what she sacrifices to do so.

Robert Sole has given so much life to his complex female character that one can only wonder how he could see so sympathetically into the heart of a woman. He has woven into the story some chapters written from her point of view that seem authentically female. He delineates her talents and exposes her faults. It is clear that he cares for her. It could be that for him she is Egypt.

Susan Cofer