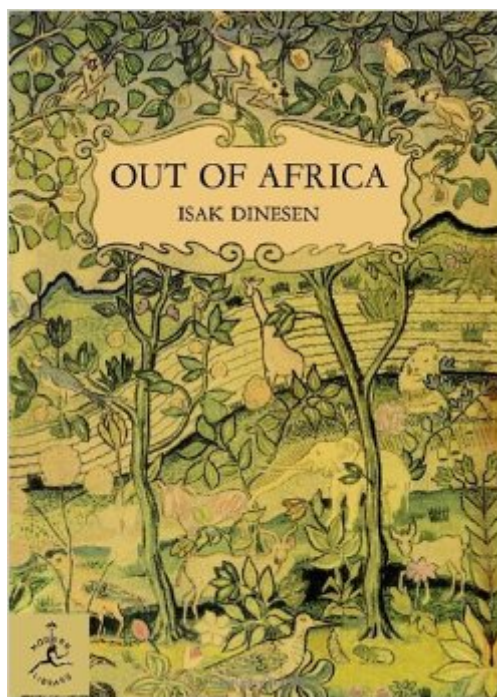


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# Out Of Africa (Modern Library 100 Best Nonfiction Books)



## Synopsis

Selected by the Modern Library as one of the 100 best nonfiction books of all time! In this book, the author of *Seven Gothic Tales* gives a true account of her life on her plantation in Kenya. She tells with classic simplicity of the ways of the country and the natives: of the beauty of the Ngong Hills and coffee trees in blossom: of her guests, from the Prince of Wales to Knudsen, the old charcoal burner, who visited her: of primitive festivals: of big game that were her near neighbors--lions, rhinos, elephants, zebras, buffaloes--and of Lulu, the little gazelle who came to live with her, unbelievably ladylike and beautiful. The Random House colophon made its debut in February 1927 on the cover of a little pamphlet called "Announcement Number One." Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer, the company's founders, had acquired the Modern Library from publishers Boni and Liveright two years earlier. One day, their friend the illustrator Rockwell Kent stopped by their office. Cerf later recalled, "Rockwell was sitting at my desk facing Donald, and we were talking about doing a few books on the side, when suddenly I got an inspiration and said, 'I've got the name for our publishing house. We just said we were going to publish a few books on the side at random. Let's call it Random House.' Donald liked the idea, and Rockwell Kent said, 'That's a great name. I'll draw your trademark.' So, sitting at my desk, he took a piece of paper and in five minutes drew Random House, which has been our colophon ever since." Throughout the years, the mission of Random House has remained consistent: to publish books of the highest quality, at random. We are proud to continue this tradition today. This edition is set from the first American edition of 1937 and commemorates the seventy-fifth anniversary of Random House.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Isak Dinesen, nee Karen Blixen, lived in East Africa for almost twenty years making a living as the proprietor of a coffee plantation. *Out of Africa* is a memoir of her experiences there. But the book is so much more. The stories are interesting to be sure. They relate to the plantation or the people and events that one way or another impacted her life there. But it is Blixen's writing that I found so sublime. I have never read anything like it. The way Blixen turns a phrase is both lyrical and enchanting all at once - you become literally swept up in the words and imagery. It is obvious that Blixen loved Africa - something about the continent got under her skin. In a similar fashion her words have gotten under mine. I have read *Out of Africa* several times; each time I marvel at the beautiful language she uses. Read this book and I am sure you will feel the same way.

I'm another reader who comes to *Out of Africa* by way of Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*; and it became recommended reading before I visited Kenya for myself in the early 90's. So, having just finished it and now half way through *Shadows on the Grass*, my overall impression is a pleasant one. I enjoyed Dinesen's writing style very much, and would agree with many readers that *Out of Africa* deserves a place among the classics in English literature. It's Karen Blixen's memoirs of her time in Kenya around WWI, living and working on her coffee plantation near Nairobi. Her descriptions of the Natives, her European friends, the land, the animals, flora and fauna are incredible. The chapters shift back and forth in time, some focused on specific events and individuals, some more whimsical and anecdotal. Reading *Out of Africa* transports the reader into early 20th Century colonial Kenya, and more concretely, onto Ms. Blixen's farm at the foot of the Ngong Hills. Years later she takes up her time in Africa again in *Shadows on the Grass*, talking more about her loyal Somali servant & right-hand man, Farah, taking a more philosophical tone regarding "masters & slaves", Native superstitions, manners, and so on. *Shadows* is inferior in many ways to *Out of Africa*, and it feels more like an "addendum" to the main work, which is poetry by comparison. By the time she writes it, she seems to have grown slightly more distant, and well, Colonist European. As for *Out of Africa*, if you've seen the movie version and are looking for it here you're in for a surprise because the book contains no overt romance between Karen & Denys, nor mention of siphylous, nor much in the way of Karen's own personal life. Her ex-husband, Bror is almost non-existent. That makes sense seeing that she wrote under a pseudonym for whatever reasons. Still, I was slightly disappointed not to find more personal thoughts or emotions from her, or

discussions regarding the political, historical, or economic backdrop of Kenya. Or the workings of the coffee business there. (I have yet to read it, but from what I gather "Uhuru" by Robert Ruark is an excellent novel dealing with these types of affairs in Kenya in the next generations after Blixen, in the 1950's & 1960's). Also, Blixen is very much a product of the times and her colonial attitudes and mindset sometimes come across as condescending or negative towards the Africans (mostly in certain passages in *Shadows* though). However, I do believe that in her frequent comparisons between the animals, land, and Natives Blixen is actually praising and admiring the people, not being racist or mean, as one reviewer here claims. She frequently praises the Kikuyus, Masai, and Somali she lives with for their numerous attributes (as well as the European settlers) and for their simplicity and harmony with nature, versus the repressed and "civilized" Europe she comes from. One other thing that's different from the movie is her attitude towards hunting. In the movie it's as though she doesn't hunt at all, but in the book she specifically mentions her initial desire to shoot one of every kind of local game (though she does later express some distaste for hunting, she remains enthusiastic about shooting lions, comparing it in *Shadows* to "a declaration of love" and hunting to being a sort of "love-affair"). She means respect, but oh how the times have changed now with all the big game enthusiasts shooting game with . . . cameras from pop-top mini-vans!

Once I let go of the movie (its own masterpiece of beauty & cinematography) and my intellectual curiosities, and came to accept Blixen's memoir as it is, I enjoyed it more and more as I read on. I took my time reading it, savoring it, and reflecting upon my own safari experience (with a camera) in Kenya not too many years ago, and found much to admire and contemplate in her writings, even if from a different era. While *Out of Africa* isn't especially deep or philosophical, nor dramatic or emotional, it somehow comes across as a grand novel, and there are moments when all of the above hit you. This is due primarily, I think, to Blixen's having lived a fascinating life in a unique period and place, and knowing how to tell a story without overdoing it - she just writes her own experiences. One good example of this balance can be found in one of my favorite chapters entitled, "A Fugitive Rests on the Farm" from Part III. In it, a Swedish immigrant and traveler named Emmanuelsen stays briefly on Karen's farm, discusses his lonely and peripatetic life with her, and eventually walks off into the Masai reserve all alone, putting his fate into God & the Masai's hands. The sparse detail and images are great. Likewise, her remembrances with Denys Fitch-Hatton are wonderfully scenic and memorable as well, and subtly romantic. All the vignettes she relates are mostly undramatic, straight-forward, and though unforgettable. *Out of Africa* is a unique literary memoir and journal of a diverse group of people come together in one specific place and time, bonded together by the very soil in which the coffee trees they lived for were once planted, and live

on in these organic pages.

Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen) has been elevated to star status by the feminists for her independent stance and courage, but don't read this book because of that. Don't look for the tragic story of her misguided marriage and the heartbreak and barrenness it brought her, or for descriptions of her love affair with adventurer Denys Finch-Hatton. None of that appears here. Instead, "Out of Africa" is a storytelling book woven in the imaginative Danish style. Dinesen's finely tuned sensitivity is revealed here, as well as her (again typically Danish) well-developed gift for friendship with many kinds of people. In her case this gift extends to African animals as well, like Lulu, the beautiful gazelle who graced her plantation for years. Her descriptions of the Kenya of her day are exquisitely written, factual and magical at the same time. Africa is the star of the book, not Dinesen herself, not the tribespeople or the colonials, not her struggles with raising coffee in land "a little too high", nor her political dealings with the government officials. Her writing evokes the Africa she knew well and loved deeply.

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