

cerise diversions

Green meant mystery. Orange was fiction. And cerise? That distinctive cherry-red cover hinted of adventure, distant lands and strange cultures. For twenty-three years, from 1936 until 1959, the Penguin Cerise series defined English-language travel writing. This autumn marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the very last title in the series, so it is a good moment for *HIDDEN EUROPE* to take a look at an icon of publishing history.

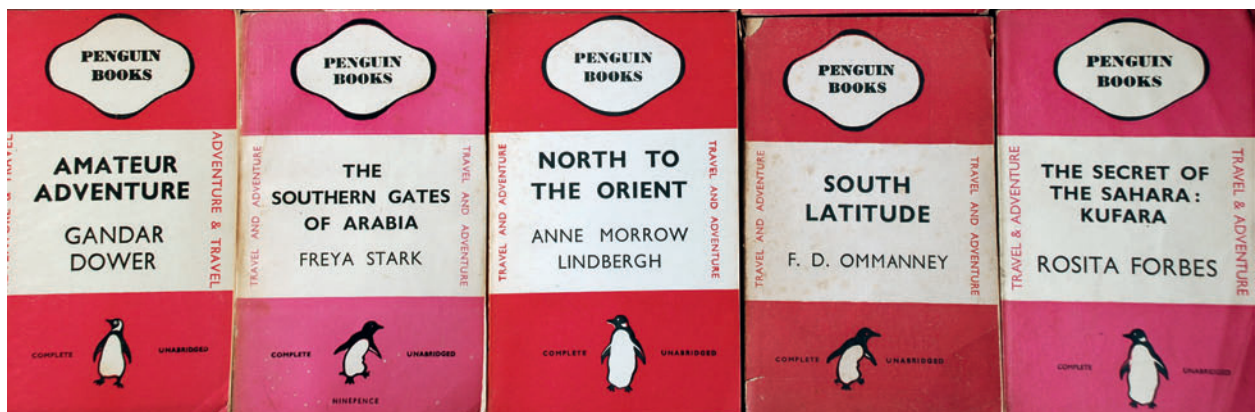
In late 1959 Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* appeared as a paperback in the Penguin Cerise series. The book was not new — it had previously been published as a hardback in 1956. But the appearance of Durrell's book in the Cerise series, which took its name from the compelling shade of the book covers, ensured Durrell's status as the author who had more titles in the series than any other writer. Durrell's humorous account of life on Corfu before the advent of mass tourism was his fourth book for a Penguin series that counted among its contributors such

renowned writers as DH Lawrence, Vita Sackville-West, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh.

'Exciting true stories' was the banner in a nineteen forties advertisement for the Cerise Penguins. The series escorted readers from wartime Britain to Antarctica, the Himalayas, Africa and even to remote Melanesia. These were the days when there were still a few white spaces on charts and atlases, and the Cerise Penguins did their bit in bringing the colour of distant lands to British readers — in pocket-size paperbacks that cost no more than a packet of cigarettes.

The tone of the volumes varies enormously from heady adventure to belletristic indulgence. Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World* nicely manages to combine both extremes in his account of Scott's expedition to the South Pole. The book captures all those elements for which the Cerise Penguins are affectionately remembered — and sometimes also criticised: epic journeys, a romantic idealisation of remote and bleak regions and a preoccupation with conquest.

image of Cerise Penguin covers reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd (photo by Duncan JD Smith)



You might assume that the brief for the series left little scope for the inclusion of Europe in the ranks of Cerise Penguins. But on the contrary, the series included a paperback edition of DH Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia*, in which the writer found on the Mediterranean island an antidote to modernity in a peasantry that was "sensitive to the natural flow of life."

Another important European Cerise title was Norman Douglas' *Siren Land*, an engagingly beautiful and erudite essay on Naples, the Bay of Sorrento and Capri. Like Lawrence's Sardinia, Douglas' Neapolitan foray is more an amiable wander than an expedition. None of the Boys' Own stuff of Cherry-Garrard here. Indeed Douglas is an early advocate of slow travel. He reminds us in *Siren Land* that "many of us would do well to *mediterraneanise* ourselves for a season, to quicken those ethnic roots from which has sprung so much of what is best in our natures."

The Cerise Penguins numbered many women among their authors. Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *North to the Orient*, the first book written by the pioneer aviator, is a fine example of travel writing calculated to appeal as much to children as to adults. Rosita Forbes is the writer whose name features most frequently in the list of female Cerise authors, with three books to her credit. Hers are fabulous tales from a pioneering woman adventurer. Forbes' Cerise trio are accounts of her travels in the Sahara, the Nile region and central Asia.

Other Cerise books by women that are now pinnacles in the literary canon include Freya Stark writing about Arabia, Karen Blixen on Africa and Vita Sackville-West's marvellous account of a journey to Persia. This latter volume is the perfect antidote to the adventurous and often neo-colonial nonsense that kept so many male travel writers busy in the interwar years. Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran* is translucent, meditative and deeply poetic. Virginia Woolf commented that Sackville-West's book is at its most beautiful when nothing is happening. No tussles with man-eating tigers or fording dangerous torrents here.

Sackville-West opens her book with the comment that "there is no greater bore than the travel bore." And in that remark she anticipates the eventual demise of the Cerise Penguins. By 1959 peace,

progress and growing prosperity had expanded the travel horizons of the English reading public. The advent of jet aircraft and cheaper travel meant that many more people were becoming travellers themselves — even though those travels may have been no more adventurous than a motoring

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holiday to the Scottish Highlands or a ferry trip to Calais. Accounts of other people's journeys no longer held quite the same appeal, and the Cerise Penguins were quietly consigned to literary history. But not before the series had brought some of the very best of the world's English language travel writing to a huge readership at affordable paperback prices.

There was an echo of the old Cerise series in the Penguin Celebrations initiative in 2007, when Penguin published three books in a design that recalled the Cerise volumes of old. The three titles selected for the honour of this retro treatment were *Dark Star Safari* by Paul Theroux, *Congo Journey* by Redmond O'Hanlon and *The Shadow of the Sun* by Ryszard Kapuściński. Curiously, the three books are very similar. Each addresses Africa in styles that are variously peevisish, disturbing, compelling or comic.

But do the folk at Penguin really believe that the best travel writing around is only about adventures in Africa? Had the original Cerise series survived into the twenty-first century, we hope it would have encompassed a greater range of travel writing than featured in the 2007 initiative. Sadly Penguin never even used the word 'cerise' in their 2007 publicity. Green is for mystery, orange for fantastic fiction and pink is for distant lands. Cerise, it seems, has been excised from the curriculum. ■

*Readers interested in finding out more about the Cerise Penguins will enjoy www.penguinicerisetraavel.com. This informative website is maintained by Duncan JD Smith, a Vienna-based writer who wrote about his home city in *hidden europe* 27.*