

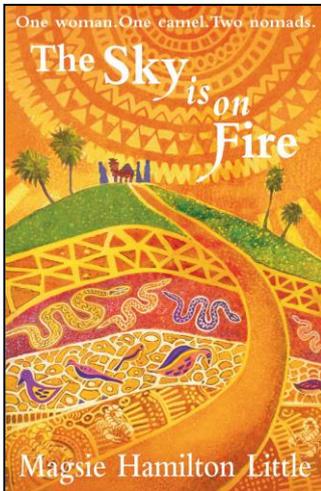
MAX PRESS NEW BOOK: PRESS RELEASE

A British woman, two Tuareg tribesmen and an ailing camel named Fleabag share a journey in the treacherous Sahara. What they learn about each other will remain with them forever.

This book challenges many Western perceptions about North Africa, about Islam, about organisations such as al-Qa'eda and ISIS; and about the tragic plight of refugee families fleeing for their lives...

PUBLICATION DATE: MONDAY 26 SEPTEMBER 2016

"I gathered up the splinters of my heartbreak, tidied them away inside where they belonged, and bought a plane ticket. A trip to the desert was everything I needed"



The Sky is on Fire

One woman. One camel. Two nomads.

by Magsie Hamilton Little (www.magsie.net)

'The desert is full of bad men. It feels hot and it has a lot of sand. Why not go to Dubai? Dubai has shopping,' the bus driver suggested. I smiled back even more innocently than usual.

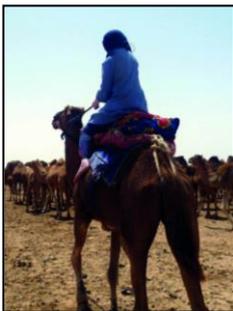


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Non-fiction: travel-writing/memoir Published by Max Press, London www.maxpress.co.uk
Available through: all good bookshops and internet booksellers.
(Also available as an eBook and in a hardback limited-edition)

When the children's charity she had founded in Afghanistan floundered, Magsie Hamilton Little, sold her beloved London flat to help the work continue. Then she travelled to the Sahara desert to rethink her broken life. She wanted to test herself, to challenge her limits as a woman ...

Arriving in Southern Algeria (near the border with Niger) to everyone's surprise – not least her own – she found herself buying and adopting a maltreated and very sick camel called Fleabag ("You can't call her Fleabag," Magsie protested, "She's too beautiful.")

Magsie; Fleabag the poorly camel; Samir, a Tuareg guide; and his father Suleyman begin to treat Fleabag using nomadic plant medicines with limited success. So they embark on a journey across the desert (around the spectacular Hoggar Mountains) to visit the *marabout* – a holy man who, Magsie is assured, will be able to cure Fleabag's 'incurable' wounds.



'She's very independent,' muttered Samir at last, and his father shook his head thoughtfully. He knew all about independent women. They could be as awkward as camels and needed just as firm handling.

On the journey they meet some of the many thousands of refugees who are fleeing the war zones of sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. This book challenges – head on – the tragedy of the refugee crisis and its heart-breaking human cost. What does it mean to be a refugee? How bad do things have to be that parents will risk their own lives and the lives of their children to travel to unknown countries (whatever the risk and whatever the cost) in search of sanctuary?

To reach the holy man, Magsie and her companions brave sandstorms, parching heat, deadly scorpions, disease-carrying insects; poisonous spiders and venomous snakes. But it is their encounters with drug smugglers, gun runners, people traffickers and terrorist organisations that readers may find even more terrifying.

As Magsie and her Muslim guides discuss why it is that some devout peace-loving Muslims become 'warriors for Islam.' Increasingly Magsie begins to distrust her companions and their motives. **Why are they carrying guns? Kidnapping is a very real threat. She is aware that she herself will be regarded as a lucrative cargo.**

With inspiring portrayals of the peoples of the Sahara (their customs, their culture and their beliefs) and with lyrical descriptions of the stunning desert landscapes, the book is also peppered with self-deprecating humour.

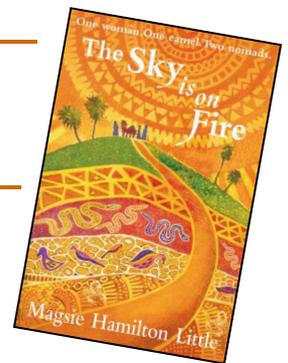
***The Sky is on Fire* sheds light on the very real tragedies caused by poverty and war. Above all, it asks key questions about the deep cultural, political and religious rifts dividing our world today.**

Please see over for information about the author, media opportunities and feature suggestions >>>>

MAX PRESS NEW BOOK: PRESS RELEASE continued

The Sky is on Fire by Magsie Hamilton Little

PUBLICATION DATE: 26 September 2016 Author's website: www.magsie.net



We led into the sun, I consumed by fear of this unknown territory and my inability to deal with it, the two nomads in front of me striding confidently. None of us knew if we would actually make it, or, to be precise, whether I would.



The Sky is on Fire is a beautifully written account of an extraordinary journey deep into nomadic African culture. **Magsie Hamilton Little** gives us a rare glimpse into the lives and values of the Tuareg. For example, we learn that, women hold most of the power and have higher status than the men in Tuareg society. The Tuareg people Muslims but it is the men – not the women – who wear the veil.

Magsie writes about her dangerous desert journey in with candour and wry humour. She provides exquisite descriptions of the breath-taking landscapes and gives us glorious details about the food, music and customs of the desert people – as well as amusing accounts of her attempts to control her camel.

Readers will marvel at Magsie's personal courage as she faces so many dangers in the desert – dangers that comes from the climate and the wildlife but, perhaps more terrifyingly, the manmade dangers (minefields, gun-runners and people traffickers.)

Ultimately it is Magsie's powerful portrayal of the unofficial refugee camps (the tented cities in the desert) and her accounts of the terrifying odysseys made by the refugees which will inspire compassion for those 'new nomads' and will stay with the reader forever. In the end, we realise everyone she meets, even her companions are those same people who seek refuge on our own shores that we see in the news everyday.



He spoke of dignity and truth – values that mattered. He was of the noble Kel Rela, he said, a tribe that put honour above all else. I told him about my own noble tribe of Kensington and Chelsea, which valued those things too. He looked impressed



About the author: **Magsie Hamilton Little** (www.magsie.net)

is a writer, academic and translator. She is the author of the acclaimed *Dancing with Darkness: Life, Death and Hope in Afghanistan* and *The Thing About Islam* (both published by Max Press) and has been an expert contributor to several books about the Middle East, including *Afghanistan Revealed* and *The Rise and Fall of the Persian Empire*. She has also written for *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Beast* and *The Lady*.

Praise for books by Magsie Hamilton Little

- 'A fascinating account – by a brave and passionate pioneer.' **Anthony Holden**
- 'She has the rare ability to get under the skin of a culture and to reveal it with integrity and honesty.' **Patricia Crone**
- 'A gifted new writing talent.' **Alexander McCall Smith**



When we travel we learn things, despite ourselves, that we would prefer not to have learned at all.

Media opportunities:

Extracts/serialisation; Wonderful photos; The author is available for interviews or to write articles.

Please see over for feature suggestions and interview topics >>>>

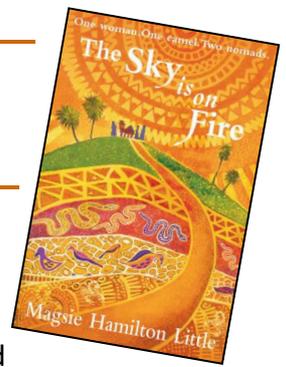


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Feature suggestions and interview topics



THE INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE CRISIS

The plight of hundreds of thousands of refugees and their heart-breaking stories is central to *The Sky is on Fire*.

In Western Europe we see news reports of refugees arriving from North Africa and the Middle East in unsafe, overloaded boats after perilous journeys across Mediterranean Sea but for many of these dispossessed adults and children, their journey starts south of the Sahara. Before they face the dangerous sea crossing, many risk their lives crossing a vast expanse of desert which poses threats from nature (thirst, heat, wild animals, sandstorms) and threat of violence and extortion from gun-runners and people traffickers.

They looked at me imploringly, as if they wanted to leave, as if they wanted me to take them. They longed for better healthcare, security, employment, but to get there required crossing the desert – a journey across a living, burning hell, with only their wits as bargaining chips. They had no money, but they clung to their dignity and their humanity, riches that could never be traded.

Between the devil and the deep blue sea

When Niger (south of Algeria) closed its border with Nigeria in an attempt to contain the activities of Boko Haram, the refugee camps in north-eastern Niger reached bursting point and around 300,000 refugees from sub-Saharan countries became doubly displaced. These people – and thousands from eastern Africa too – are now stranded in unofficial, makeshift refugee camps without sanitation, medical care, clean water or food supplies. In trying to escape the unspeakable violence of their home countries, they are now trapped by their poverty and by the desert. They are easy prey for extortionists and people traffickers.

For the vast majority, it was not the golden backdoor opportunity to enter Europe that they had dreamed of. It was a prison sentence. More and more people fleeing the violence in Niger, Mali and Libya flooded northwards. Many didn't make it. In 2015, ninety-six migrants' bodies were found, among them women and children, who had died of thirst after their vehicles had broken down.

Returning home is not an option for refugees

'Will you ever go back?' I asked the young woman in the red dress.

She answered me in French: 'We do not want to. It is too violent. We are outcasts in our own homes. Still, we have hope the world will remember us one day. We have to be positive for the sake of the children.'

Poverty: the cruellest enemy

Like all illegal immigrants everywhere, they look for work and survive on almost nothing. Their children go hungry. There are no schools or hospitals for them. Tribal feuds and conflict have caused many battles in Africa, but the greatest enemy of all is poverty.

Child refugees: alone in a dangerous world

A group of Eritreans, children travelling alone mostly, were crossing the Sahara in sandals and flip flops, with just a few dollars in their pockets. To get this far they had already gambled what little they had. Their promises had been long broken by people smugglers, those who had taken their hard-won money and abused them.

'And where are you heading?' I asked one child.

'A normal country,' he said, 'One without killing.'

'But you endanger yourself travelling in this way?'

'It is better than being tortured.'

He was like all the other refugees who did not want to risk their lives walking through the scorching hot desert with no roads, but for whom there was no choice. His family had been murdered in the fighting and he was alone.

Please see over for more feature suggestions >>>>

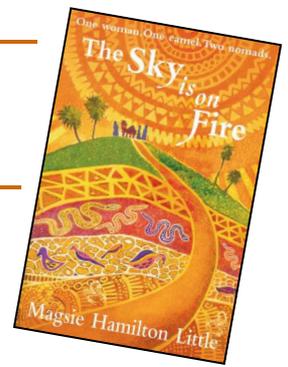


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Feature suggestions and interview topics continued



THE SAHARA DESERT: A sea of sand

Many of the **refugees** we meet in *The Sky is on Fire* hope to survive the perils of the desert in order to eventually cross the sea to reach Europe *The ocean of water is just a stopping point. Before they even reach those perilous, freezing waters and climb into makeshift, sinking boats, African refugees have another ocean to cross, the one of sand. That one is arguably fiercer and perhaps more hostile. No one is ever pulled from its dry waves. Its victims lie buried where they fall, their bodies entombed by the desert sands that drift over them for ever.*

The magnificence and malevolence of The Sahara Desert

Nowhere on earth does the wind's true force feel more unremitting than in the Sahara ... Saharan dust the colour of amber carried to great altitudes can rain down as far north as England. A feeling of absence dominates everything in this landscape. Even the goats look puzzled, as if they wonder where everything has gone, as if they have coaxed their lives from the very dust ...

With shifting sand dunes and so few landmarks, how do nomads navigate in the desert? And how do they find water?

'The map,' he announced proudly, 'is in my head.' He expanded eloquently, regaling me with the breadth of his experience – how he had inherited that inimitable 'desert gene', by which only men of the desert can navigate the sands; how the skills of the nomad required the knowledge of the heavens, the land and its shadows; how he had walked the routes from Abangerit and Niger, from the Moulouya and In Guezzam, relying only on the hassi, the system of desert wells, the secret water sources known only to the Tuareg.



Respect for the power of the desert, its animals and its spirits

I was to think of the Sahara as a grande dame, they said. Cunning was required to outwit her or I would face death. If I treated her with respect, I might just get away with it... I would be at the mercy of her elements – hot sand winds that lasted for days, mists that never cleared. Salt lakes, whose marshy shorelines were lethal, could seize an unwary traveller, casting them into a deep, spongy abyss. Worse still were the treacherous pools of quicksand that lurked unseen on the surface.

If I survived all that, there were the scorpions, jackals, camel spiders with monstrous jaws, white orb-web spiders, tarantulas and horned vipers that would lurk by day beneath the surface of the desert, hunting by night for jerboas and lizards. Most deadly of all, the desert was haunted by Kel Essuf spirits and djinn who would taunt and torment me. Except for the good ones, of course, though they were in the minority.

How do you imagine the sea – if you've only known desert?

'There are boats in your country?' he mused. With faraway eyes, he wondered what kept them afloat. He had read somewhere that they sank very easily and that there were no life-jackets. He had never seen the sea, that unfathomable land that Allah had created, although he had known many who, fleeing their lands, as he put it, took their chances upon the great liquid desert that separated our countries, never to return.

Please see over for more feature suggestions >>>>

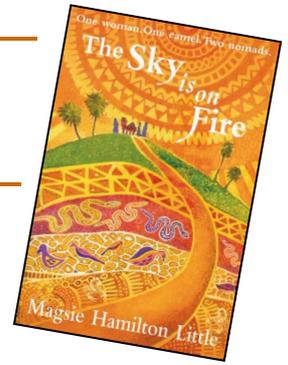


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Feature suggestions and interview topics continued



VIOLENT CRIME AND TERRORISM

Drug smuggling and people trafficking are recurrent themes in *The Sky is on Fire* – and the profits from these criminal activities are often used to arm organisations that many in the West, would label ‘terrorists’. Without condoning violence or extortion, Magsie Hamilton Little examines why some peace-loving Muslims become ‘warriors’ for terrorist groups.

A surge of operatives from Isis was causing problems and the area was becoming more isolated ... Rumour had it that terrorists roamed the peaks armed with AK-47s and Kalashnikovs.

Was the rumour true?

‘There are terrorists,’ he confessed as if he was one. ‘Before terrorists there were bandits and robbers. There are always bad people. It is life.’

Which terrorist groups are operating in Algeria? How would they react to a lone Western woman?

He did not flinch as I asked him straight out about the terrorists operating in Algeria. Either he was brave or he was in league with them. Who exactly were Aqim? What precisely did they believe? Were they sympathetic towards Isis? Was al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb? If so, where were their camps? Crucially, how would they react to a single Western woman travelling with nomads?

People need to earn money to feed their families – but can that ever excuse drug-smuggling and gun-running for terrorist organisations?

‘We have a saying: trust in Allah and tether your camel. People must survive. They must eat. They must protect their families. We are peaceful people, but we must also be warriors,’ said his father. He might have been more forthcoming, but his reticence was understandable. I was, after all, an outsider.

What makes a ‘terrorist’? How can we distinguish between ‘terrorism’ and ‘justified war’?

He had thought long and hard about the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide who felt humiliated and let down by the arrogance of the West, those infidels who destroyed everything and anything that did not agree with them. It was for this reason he had decided to become a warrior.

I put it to him straight. ‘The Qur’an says that you should repay evil with what is better. Then he who was your enemy will become your intimate friend. Physical fighting is permitted only until the enemy seeks peace, then it must stop. If they seek peace, then you seek peace.’

‘But they never do,’ he said bluntly.

Are the West to blame for the rise in Islamic ‘terrorism’ or ‘Holy Wars’?

‘Westerners absorb the shortcomings of their leaders ... Westerners cannot be held responsible, because they are blind.’

‘You mean we have a collective guilt?’ I offered the words half-jokingly. I didn’t want to believe he was serious. I imagined he was just testing me.

‘I think you have to bear responsibility for what has happened in the world.’ As he said this, lost in thought, Samir’s gaze came to rest upon a point on the horizon.

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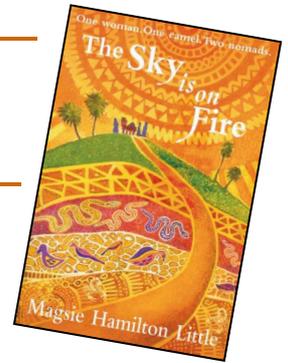


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Feature suggestions and interview topics continued



THE NOMADIC TUAREG OF SOUTHERN ALGERIA AND THE SAHARA

All those interested in anthropology or sociology and those people who are interested in other cultures and ancient tradition will be engrossed in Magsie Hamilton Little's account of her experiences with the Tuareg in *The Sky is on Fire*.

Although the Tuareg have played a huge role in the Sahara – as great as French colonization in the region – little is understood about what drives and inspires them in the modern age. In the past they established a complex society unprecedented in nomadic tribes, and with a sophisticated system of laws and hierarchies.

Who are the Tuareg? – Also known as the 'Blue Men' of the Desert

... my destination was a small town of almost 50,000 people nestling at 4,000 feet in a fold of the Hoggar Mountains in the southern tip of Algeria. Few places in north Africa are as remote. Tamranasset is also the heartland of a people I yearned to know more about.

The Tuareg, the Blue Men of the desert, or the Kel Tamahaq, as they prefer to be known in Algeria, number around two million and belong to no fewer than eight territorial groups. I would be meeting the Kel Ahaggar who live around the Hoggar and Tassil-n-Ajjer mountain regions. In this culture, it is men who wear the veil – the chèche or tagelmust – the faded length of indigo-dyed cloth wrapped about the head.

Like many other nomadic groups, the Tuareg continue to be threatened by conflict, politics and the settled world's constant quest for pure, natural resources.

What is the status of women and girls in the Islamic Tuareg society?

'Everything comes to you from your mother,' say Tuareg men, and it is not hard to see why. More than a century ago, before women had the vote in Britain, Tuareg women were arguably more liberated than in any Western nation. While they remain faithful to the instruction of the Prophet, who advised Muslim women to act modestly and respectfully, at the same time they adhere to their own strong cultural traditions, which afford them powerful rights and incredible liberties. In love, young girls court at the aha and have as many boyfriends as they like before marriage. Divorce is not unusual, and a wife will keep the couple's possessions.

It is women who teach Tifinagh, the written version of Tamahaq, to their children so they can write messages in the sand. Intelligent and independent, they are the designers, builders and owners of their homes over which they exercise rights. In rural communities their days are spent tending goats, tanning leather and weaving palm fibres, making rope and necklaces, cooking and carrying out chores. Noble Tuareg women are also accomplished poets and musicians.

The plight of the Tuareg in northern Africa today: an oppressed people who suffering from ethnic discrimination?

The Tuareg have suffered nothing less than ethnic cleansing. Successive governments have marginalized and terrorized them. The establishment regard the Tuareg as high-handed and brand them slave-keepers. They deny them hospital treatment. Their children are excluded from schools. ... He told how new soldiers in new uniforms swept across the lands like locusts, stole their wells and forced his people to confront the enemy they feared most – that of thirst.

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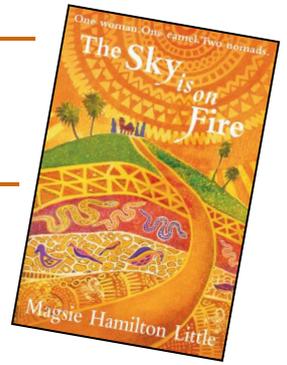


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Feature suggestions and interview topics continued



TEAM-WORK, TACT AND TETCHINESS AMONG TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

Anyone who has ever travelled in a group will recognise the need for diplomacy, consideration and a willingness to compromise if harmony is to be preserved throughout the trip. Nonetheless, travelling with other people can still bring out the worst in us. How much more difficult is it then to travel (and be reliant on) complete strangers who have a different cultural and religious background? The experiences Magsie describes in ***The Sky is on Fire*** show us that ‘cabin fever’ can set in even in the vast expanse of the desert.

‘You never listen. You do not pray. You like snow. You hate rain. You are strange.’ Having spoken his mind, Samir snapped shut.

I guessed it was that state at the heart of all marriages – that of mutual co-dependence. Here, in one of the greatest expanses in the world, we lacked space. I concluded the major problem was my intolerance.

Does it really help to set some ‘ground rules’ before travelling with other people?

Despite working out some ground rules before the desert journey, tensions still arose between Magsie and her Tuareg travelling companions – particularly when politics or religion were discussed.

Somehow, despite all the odds, and against my better judgement, we had a plan, although it was a sketchy one with a raft of stipulations and get-out clauses. The camels had their own set of laws, of course, although they alone were privy to what they were.

Are there topics (eg: politics and religion) that should never be discussed when travelling with others?

I found it almost impossible to believe that he could support the violence and human rights abuses that were happening in Syria.

‘Of course not,’ he said, adding more quietly, ‘Not entirely.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Syria used to be a stable country. It was repressed but it was safe. Your bombing has made it one of the worst places on the planet.’

This particular viewpoint proved unarguable, and he had not convinced me he would not take up arms there if it was asked of him.

We settled on one matter at least: that we had to stop people turning to Isis as a solution.

Or, as Samir said, ‘It is your own fault that people are flocking to Isis.’

Samir and I had glimpsed something else – the gulf of cultural and religious differences that we were both happy to let recede once again into the distance ...

But, as part of the reason for travelling is to explore other cultures and other viewpoints, surely no topics should be off-limits?

How can we ever understand what it is like to belong to another culture? In the East, how is it ever possible to judge what it is like in the West, and vice versa? We are controlled by what we are told, by stereotype and by reputation. The news forces us to guess at the contents of those boxes unknown to us, but we can never really open them.

Please see over for more feature suggestions >>>>



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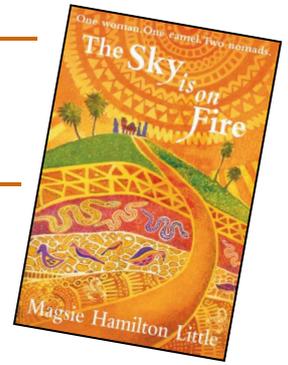
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Feature suggestions and interview topics continued



**THE CHALLENGES OF TRAVELLING:
A lone woman in a hazardous environment
in a Muslim country**

Travellers (and those who love to read about travel) will be fascinated; aghast and amused by the experiences Magsie Hamilton Little describes in *The Sky is on Fire*.

Yattu stood up. He cleared his throat. 'Why would a foreign woman wish to travel alone in this region, only to discover there was nothing of interest beyond the horizon?

'She is a Westerner, with a makeshift sense of life and death,' quipped Anamar. Everyone nodded gravely. They were right, of course. But I was determined.

How does it feel to be regarded as an ambassador of Western society, Christian culture and the morals of European women? Are visitors to foreign countries regarded as 'typical' representatives of their nationality? And should travellers feel a burden of responsibility to conform to the stereotypical perceptions of their nationality?

I wondered what the elders were really thinking. If they regarded it as unusual for a foreign woman to travel alone and admit herself to their home, they had been too polite to say. Experience told them to be on guard. What good had ever come from the West? Everyone who had ever come here had wanted something.

I was not so much a guest as a representative of my country. Worryingly, since none of them had ever been there or were likely to go, I was what they assumed was its epitome. I hoped I had not offended. Western pragmatism is often thought to lack finesse. Dressing modestly, avoiding gazes, such things can be learned, but not the way we walk, our gestures, our skin and the inflections of our voice.

What are the strangest or funniest questions your readers/listeners have been asked when overseas?

When abroad it is not unusual for British people to be asked "do you know The Queen?" or "Is it true that you eat lamb with peppermint sauce?"

When Magsie Hamilton Little first visited the home of her Tuareg guides, the family asked questions such as: "How do you blow your noses where you come from?" and "How do you placate your camels?"

The funniest questions are often the most difficult to answer and can be very revealing about how other cultures perceive our own countries.

Is there such a thing as a shared sense of humour across all cultures? Or is this something that has developed in recent decades thanks to mass media?

Suleyman, the Tuareg camel owner named all his camels after politicians:

'This one we call Putin. He's a brute.' Putin stood proud again, head high, settling.

'This one is Assad. Likes stamping on innocent victims.' Assad let out a foul-mouthed string of abuse.

I knew Suleyman was teasing. It was a humour that belied his deep malaise at a global situation he felt was entrenched and unjust. His nicknames for his camels seemed to echo the old calls to battle with the so-called imperialists that Arab imams have been repeating for decades throughout Middle Eastern countries.

'Are all of them named after politicians?' I asked.

He stroked his chin, eyes sparkling. 'This one is Arnie. He will terminate you if you do not behave.'

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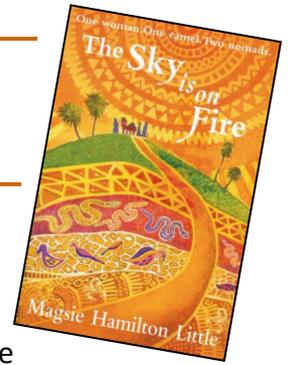


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Feature suggestions and interview topics continued



'FLEABAG' THE CAMEL:

Animal lovers will laugh and cry at the story of 'Fleabag' the rescued camel in *The Sky is on Fire*.

Camels are so notoriously bad tempered and stubborn. Displease a camel and it will spit at you (or worse) but camels ('the ships of the desert') are essential to the people of the Sahara – and the Tuareg people respect and care for their camels. And sometimes, maybe, given time, a camel might decide to be just a little less disdainful towards one or two specially selected human beings....

So how did Magsie Hamilton Little learn to ride Fleabag and then travel so far on her? Are camels intelligent? And can a camel ever be really lovable?

'You have to ride her. She is your camel.'

Fleabag had begun chomping jisrif, but she was not the only one who had bitten off more than she could chew.

If you can ride a horse, will it help you to learn to ride a camel? At all?

His expression said it all: 'It's a foreign woman. What did you expect?'

Fleabag shifted uneasily. She had that glint in her eye, the one that seemed to say, 'What have I done to deserve this idiot on my back?'

'Don't you think we should give it more time, so we can get to know each other?' I said tentatively.

'She belongs to you. You have to show her who is boss,' he said, although it wasn't clear to whom he was referring The act of falling is never an elegant spectacle.

Can you ever really train a camel?

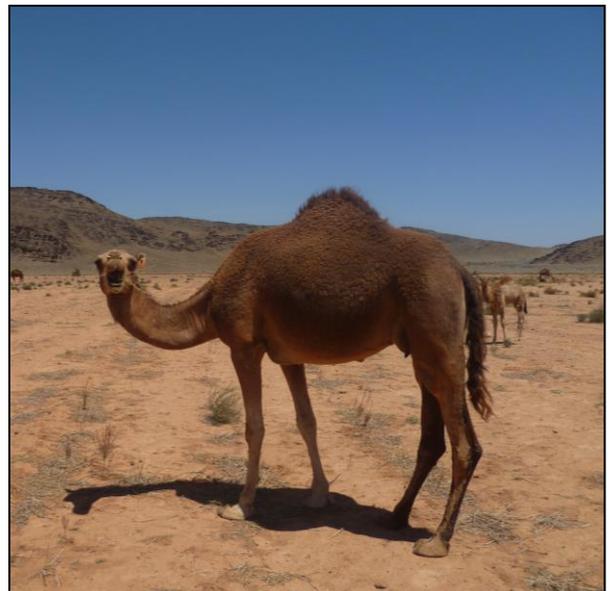
Some say that the camel was put upon earth by Allah the Merciful to help the desert people, but in my view it was put upon earth by Allah the Unmerciful to test the endurance of the infidel.

Can a camel ever really bond with a human being?

What was it with camels, anyway? One minute they didn't want to know you – spent months playing hard to get and vomited on you – and then the next minute they were all over you with their killer Satan breath.

Can camels ever be lovable?

I was intoxicated. I could not help but adore her long, thick lashes, her gungy eyes, her silky soft ears, her blubbery, pouting lips and rotten teeth. I rather liked the fact that her memory was faultless, particularly when it came to human weaknesses – above all, mine. I even forgave her for the ringworm.



To request a review copy or to be put in touch with the author, please contact Elly Donovan PR
elly@ellydonovan.co.uk tel: 0790 508 7779 / 01273 205 246 www.ellydonovan.co.uk

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