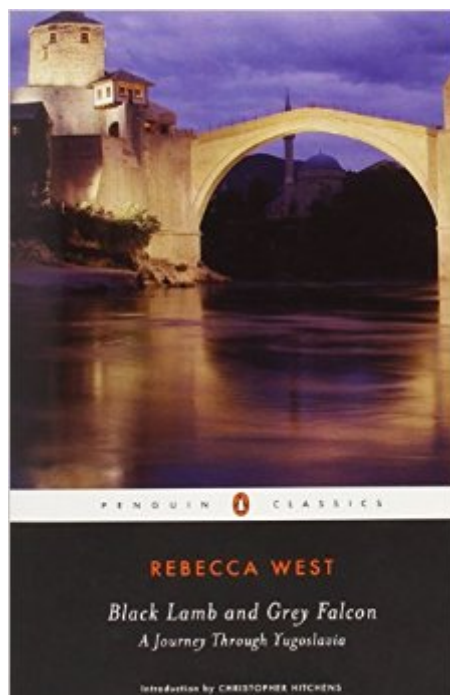


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Black Lamb And Grey Falcon (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

“Rebecca West’s magnum opus . . . one of the great books of our time.” —The New Yorker

Written on the brink of World War II, Rebecca West’s classic examination of the history, people, and politics of Yugoslavia illuminates a region that is still a focus of international concern. A magnificent blend of travel journal, cultural commentary, and historical insight, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* probes the troubled history of the Balkans and the uneasy relationships among its ethnic groups. The landscape and the people of Yugoslavia are brilliantly observed as West untangles the tensions that rule the country’s history as well as its daily life. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I read BLGF after returning to the US after living in the region for over two years. I found and read Robert Kaplan’s “Balkan Ghosts,” while the 1999 NATO action in Kosovo within clear sight of the situation. Kaplan made numerous positive references to BLGF so I found and read that soon after returning to the US. (I do know that Clinton did read BG (and that this led him to intervene in Bosnia-Herzegovina) and so may have read BLGF after leaving office). I suppose it was because of my very personal witness to the Balkans when I was living there, in particular the personal stories and lives that were generously offered by loving and almost pathetically nationalistic people. I found

that RW, regardless of her "only six week" tour of Yugoslavia hit the button on the head in an overwhelming fashion. The personal emotional bias must be understood and the historical meat filtered through it. I didn't find that any history she related was false. What did startle me was how much similar her findings were to my own, fifty years later. When one understands that Tito effectively froze the populations of Yugoslavia in time through the use of forced migrations and a strong secret police force, how this could be becomes easy to grasp. But Rebecca West's journalistic intellect reaches its zenith when after witnessing the ritual slaughter of lambs, makes one of the best arguments against religion I have ever read. At once, she makes the best intellectual and emotional argument I can never have imagined as I read the brilliance of it. How a people come to act as both lambs and falcons, victims of history, myth and legend. The story of the Serbian people and for that matter the Balkans is something not to be missed by anyone interested in the story of civilization.

Love it or hate it, anyone with an interest in the Balkans will eventually have to deal with this book. Rebecca West is one of the giants of 20th century literature. Never heard of her? I hadn't either until I read this sprawling opus. Don't be put off by the size of the book, however (West herself writes that most people probably won't read this book because of the massive length). *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is a travelogue detailing West's travels through 1930's Yugoslavia. The book goes far beyond travelogue as West intersperses massive doses of Slavic history and philosophy with her travel accounts. Not only do we see the things she sees, we understand the mentality of the people. These people she meets and places she visits become almost mystical under her magical pen. I read this book over a six week period at the end of the summer. Like West on her travels, I meandered through the book, reading it religiously at times and then setting it down for a bit to read other things. This might be the best way to read the book. It allows the reader to absorb what West is trying to say without being overwhelmed by the immense amounts of information. I have to say that I was most fascinated by her discourses on Yugoslav history. Balkan history can be a challenge because most of us in the West really don't understand the people or places involved. A section on the assassination of Franz Ferdinand runs on forever and never becomes boring. In fact, I became so enraptured of this event that I started reading other works concerning the assassination. Even though there are some problems with West's interpretation of history, her accounts are so well written that it makes the reader want to go out and read more about these events.

In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Rebecca West weaves together history, ethnography and

travelogue into an encyclopedic and unforgettable portrait of this troubled region. As I explain below, I think there are some marvelous things about this book, and some aspects that are less well realized. On balance, it is well worth the effort, but for somebody considering it, the cautions are worth noting. First the highlights: West is at her best as a reporter. She has a truly brilliant eye for detail, for simply seeing how the people lived, what they wore, how they worshipped and what they did with their days. Her images, particularly of the remote communities and the many churches and religious shrines that she visited, are particularly well rendered. Although the book lacks photographs or drawings, West's very considerable talents for description are such that the reader really gets a feel for a large number of diverse places within the Balkans. She also does an excellent job illuminating a great deal of the history of the region, both relatively modern history (meaning modern at the time the book was written -- 1941) and more ancient history. Modern history at the time West wrote meant dealing with the Balkan wars, the series of rebellions by which the vestiges of the Ottoman empire were overthrown in the 19th and early 20th centuries. West devotes particular attention to the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, which precipitated World War I, an event that at the time of the writing of the book was still relatively recent in the world's memory, and the facts of which were still somewhat controversial.

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