

## FICTION

► Romain Gary killed himself shortly after completing this book, but his final novel is far from a doom-laden tragedy, writes **Malcolm Forbes**

# A BEAUTIFUL TALE OF ENDURING WARTIME LOVE



## The Kites

Romain Gary,  
Penguin  
Modern  
Classics

Romain Gary was a man of many parts and guises. Born Roman Kacew in 1914, he spent his early years living in Vilnius, Moscow and Warsaw, later moving to the south of France with his mother.

When the Nazis occupied his adopted homeland, he fought back by serving in Britain's Royal Air Force. After the war, he worked as a diplomat and a filmmaker. However, it was through the written word that he found fame and achieved acclaim. He wrote more than two dozen books in two languages and under several noms de plume, and became the only author to win the

once-in-a-lifetime Prix Goncourt twice.

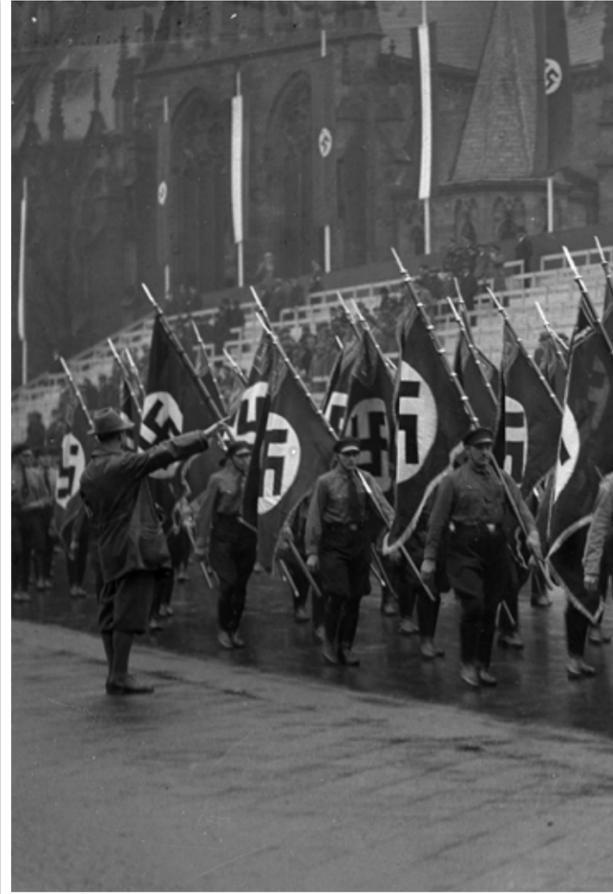
Today, Gary is regarded as one of the most important – and indeed best-loved – French writers of the 20th century. And yet for many anglophone readers, he remains unknown or out of reach. For, with the exception of *Promise at Dawn*, Gary's colourful memoir of his eventful life, English translations of his books are either thin on the ground or non-existent.

With luck, all that is about to change. New to Penguin Modern Classics, and appearing in English for the first time, is Gary's final novel. It seems a strange choice: seldom is an author's last work classed a late masterpiece and deemed a suitable entry-point to the rest of their oeuvre. But that's exactly what *The Kites* represents. Thanks to Miranda Richmond Mouillot's award-winning translation, we have a book to relish and a sample of a remarkable talent.

Gary dedicated this novel to memory, which is apposite, because its hero is both blessed and cursed with an abnormally good one. When we first meet Ludo, he is almost 10 years old and living with his Uncle Ambrose in a small village in Normandy. Ludo's teacher warns Ambrose about his nephew's "excess of memory" – his brain's capacity for storing a wealth of facts and figures.

Needless to say, this aptitude comes in handy at a later stage in Ludo's life. For many years, though, being deprived of "the soothing ability to forget" causes his lovelorn self untold anguish. One day in the woods he encounters Lila, a Polish girl from the aristocratic Bronicki family that owns the neighbouring estate. He falls for her, but then, without explanation, she disappears and he is unable to cast her from his mind.

Four years later, they are reunited and reacquainted. Love blooms. At the same time, war



The narrator's uncle, Ambrose, uses kites to send wartime resistance messages Getty

in France and cut off from Lila, Ludo is exempted from army service – "apparently I'm a little crazy", he says – but instead joins a resistance network, despite having "the firing squad look". He throws himself into his underground duties – forgery, sabotage, facilitating downed Allied pilots – aware that he is playing a dangerous game, yet also a necessary one that will liberate his country and hasten Lila's return.

Gary's novel is a beautiful study of enduring love and a thrilling portrayal of wartime bravery. Ludo's candid, heart-on-sleeve narration is endearing, and we come to share his longing, his fears, and, when Lila goes missing, his desperation.

Ludo is the driving force of the book, and what he does and feels will keep readers turning the pages. But his narrative is illuminated by an array of vividly drawn characters, each of whom leaves an impression. Chief among them is Ludo's kindly guardian Ambrose, a postman, pacifist and kite-maker – or, in his nephew's words, "kite master". All his kites are "little scraps of dreams"; each is named after a famous French figure; some fly as warning signals to Allied forces or contain calls to resist, or notes on the locations of German troops.

We also meet the local restaurant owner devoted to French cuisine and a madam who puts together "a little team" to destabilise the Germans. Count Bronicki steers his family on a reckless course: "No one could ever say for certain whether he was ruined or rich." Tad, the blunt realist, is the perfect foil to Ludo, the airy dreamer. Potted back-stories tell us where characters came from; brief flash forwards reveal where they end up. Shortly after completing *The Kites* in 1980, Gary committed suicide. Readers expecting his swansong to be a bitter, doom-laden tragedy will be surprised to discover it is the exact opposite.

There are dark edges, but hope prevails as both characters and kites soar high "in search of the blue yonder".

looms. Lila's family packs up and heads for the supposed safety of Poland.

"We probably won't be back," Lila's brother Tad tells a horrified Ludo, "but that's nothing, because I'm pretty sure that pretty soon millions of men won't be back anywhere."

As Ludo loses Lila again, the novel shapes up to be an account of thwarted first love. In actual fact, Ludo has more than one tale to tell. *The Kites* begins as a tender coming-of-age story filled with young passions and "the naiveties of childhood". From here, we get a short interlude at the Bronicki chateau on the Baltic Sea in 1939, during which Ludo rekindles his feelings for Lila, comes to blows with his rival Hans and is calmly informed by Count Bronicki that his daughter's marriage to someone like him, of humble stock, is out of the question.

When Poland is invaded and war is declared, the novel changes direction again. Back

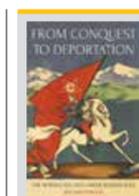
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## NON-FICTION



'The Mountaineers Leave the Aul Before Approach of the Russian Army, 1872' Fine Art Images / Heritage Images / Getty Images

# 'Wild mountain



## From Conquest to Deportation

Jeronim Perovic, Oxford University Press

► Professor Jeronim Perovic's masterful history of the Soviet-Caucasian relationship brings fresh insights into the Chechen and Dagestani peoples, according to **Kapil Komireddi**

Driving in the dark to Vladikavkaz, Tim Cranmer, the superannuated spymaster narrator of John Le Carre's post-Cold War novel *Our Game*, is suddenly overcome by missionary zeal: "I... begged to be allowed to take the Caucasus into my protection".

The collapse of the Soviet Union abruptly deprived the West's engagé writers and intellectuals of the cause that shaped their politics, but the ensuing trouble in the Caucasus – emanating from the pending business of "self-determination" of its peoples in post-Soviet Russia – was a cause of hope for them: their job of rescuing the world's oppressed would have to continue. Journalists dispatched to report from the Caucasus returned as advocates and admirers of its peoples. To "go among the Chechens", Anatol Lieven wrote in *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, "is to go into a



# people' who refused to be tamed

certain kind of morning", to see "the face of Courage herself".

To read Jeronim Perovic's masterly history of the Russo-Caucasian encounter, *From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus Under Russian Rule*, translated into English from the original German by Christopher Findlay, is to get a sense of the antiquity of the sport of simplifying the Caucasus. Soviet historiography at first valorised the (largely) Muslim Caucasians' "heroic resistance" to the "imperialism" of Tsarist Russia, which had spent decades in the 19th century putting down the fierce uprisings of these "wild mountain people", culminating in 1859 in the capture of Imam Shamil – the remarkable figure who brought Chechen and Dagestani peoples under the banner of Islam – and the mass expulsion of the Cherkess and other north Caucasian peoples. But the communist attempt



Caucasian hero Imam Shamil (1797-1871) Hulton Archive / Getty

to portray the peoples of the Caucasus as early class warriors against imperial exploitation didn't quite go to plan. And as the effort to conscript the region and its people for the project to create a new man faltered, the Soviet Union fell back on

the same generalisations about the character of the Caucasians advanced by Tsarist Russia.

An innate resistance to modernity among the Caucasians is an easy explanation for their refusal to go along. But Perovic, a professor of Eastern European history at the University of Zurich, has reconstructed the history of the Soviet-Caucasian relationship in such detail – excavating the suppressed voices of the non-Russian minorities – that there is enough evidence here of minor successes that wilted away, not because of irreconcilable "national" differences, but because of the actions of a "weak state".

The wound inflicted by Stalin's decision to abolish the republics of the north Caucasus and deport more than half-a-million people – all because he believed them to be Hitler's spies and agents – has not healed.

Throughout the 1990s, the

descendants of the deportees waged a war of secession against Russia that at one point resulted in Moscow's clear defeat. The man who led the campaign, Dzhokhar Dudayev, was a former air force general in the Soviet military, and, invoking Russian cruelties, he succeeded in implanting a modern national consciousness in the minds of the Chechens.

Perovic's argument that the support Dudayev received was powered by people's unresolved feelings about their own past is not only persuasive, but may also aid in our understanding of other conflicts.

*From Conquest to Deportation* functions on one level as a rebuke to all those who reduce people in distant lands to causes. Perovic has made a major contribution to our understanding of the Russo-Caucasian relationship in this impressively researched, accessibly written and beautifully produced book.

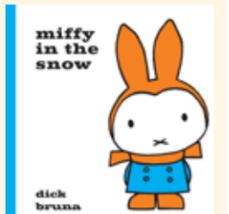
## MY FAVOURITE READS TAHIRA YAQOOB



There is a tendency with lists like this to protest how hard it is narrow down your choices or feel they have to say something profound. I shall do no such thing. My reads are shamelessly populist, books I return to time and again.

Tahira Yaqoob is *The National's* comment editor and was longlisted for the 2018 Mogford Short Story Prize

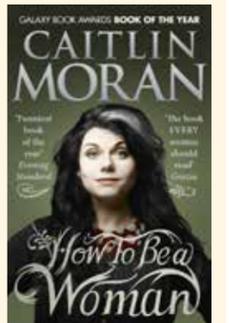
### Miffy in the Snow By Dick Bruna (1970)



I learned to read with Dick Bruna's rabbit; so did my mother, newly arrived in Britain and struggling with English language lessons

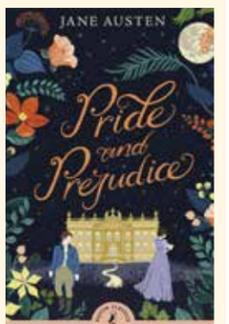
while I sat at the back of class. We felt the same sense of achievement on finishing a book. I distinctly remember her suggesting we read *Miffy in the Snow* together. "No," I said grandly, "I'm too big for that now." Even at a young age, I realised the significance of that moment: that I would have to go it alone in a brave new world. My mother stopped coming to the library with me after that.

### How to Be a Woman By Caitlin Moran (2011)



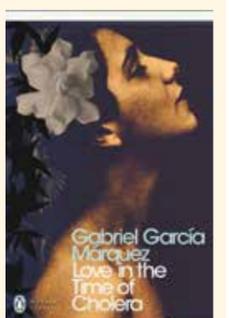
Moran's exuberant, shouty, hilarious take on challenging the patriarchy, giving voice to a new wave of feminism, speaks to the 12-year-old me, the one who pored over copies of *Spare Rib* and biographies of the Pankhursts and dreamed of one day acquiring a bra she could burn. "We're not arguing for the whole world," she reasons. "Just our share." Well, quite.

### Pride and Prejudice By Jane Austen (1813)



Written more than 200 years ago, there is a reason why Austen's gentle comedy of manners still regularly tops book lists. Austen was the wise, witty Moran of her day and Elizabeth Bennet an early feminist heroine. I saw parallels with the conservative Asian community I grew up in, where it was a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman must be in want of a doctor as a husband".

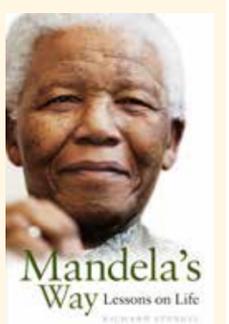
### Love in the Time of Cholera By Gabriel García Márquez (1985)



From the moment, 100 pages in, when Fermina Daza so cruelly, arbitrarily rejects Florentino Ariza, I was hooked. This is no love story but a melancholic treatise on the different kinds of love there are:

obsessive, unrequited love; familial love; dutiful love; and love as a kind of violent epidemic, all set against a backdrop of death and decay.

### Mandela's Way: Lessons on Life By Richard Stengel (2009)



Sometimes it is not just about what you read but where. I picked up this book in the Apartheid Museum in Mandela's homeland. Stengel distills his wisdom into pithy life lessons on bravery, courage, leadership and forgiveness. He reminds us why this luminous, contradictory, extraordinary man was one of the few great heroes of our time.