



Impressions of Africa

Raymond Roussel

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The long-awaited new translation of the most dazzling and unclassifiable work of fiction in any language.

In a mythical African land, some shipwrecked and uniquely talented passengers stage a grand gala to entertain themselves and their captor, the great chieftain Talou. In performance after bizarre performance—starring, among others, a zither-playing worm, a marksman who can peel an egg at fifty yards, a railway car that rolls on calves' lungs, and fabulous machines that paint, weave, and compose music—Raymond Roussel demonstrates why it is that Andre? Breton termed him “the greatest mesmerizer of modern times.” But even more remarkable than the mind-bending events Roussel details—as well as their outlandish, touching, or tawdry backstories—is the principle behind the novel's genesis, a complex system of puns and double-entendres that anticipated (and helped inspire) such movements as Surrealism and Oulipo. Newly translated and with an introduction by Mark Polizzotti, this edition of *Impressions of Africa* vividly restores the humor, linguistic legerdemain, and conceptual wonder of Raymond Roussel's magnum opus.

Impressions of Africa Details

Date : Published January 1st 1988 by Calder Publications (first published 1910)

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Author : Raymond Roussel

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From Reader Review Impressions of Africa for online ebook

Evan says

it was sick when Ricky Jay showed up and started slicing watermelons with playing cards

Bill says

as this book is classified as french surrealism, i was fully expecting it to be a fairly difficult read, with little or no plot.much to my surprise then, when i started reading it, to find that it very definitely has a complete plot. quite a bizarre one to be sure, but a plot nevertheless.it's actually a very readable novel, and i enjoyed it immensely.thanks again oriana.

Andrés Quesada says

La novela de Roussel funciona como un epítome de sus inquietudes artísticas. Es decir, un control desafortunado del descontrol. Impresiones de África, a primera vista, podría pasar como un compendio de fragmentos caprichosos, unos más divertidos que otros, que si bien muestran una actividad imaginaria prodigiosa, difícilmente ameritarían la atención que se le ha dispensado a la obra. La importancia de la obra rousseliana reside en lo formal, o para decirlo de otra manera, en su armado. ¿Y qué de su armado? Que se nos presenta tanto velado como desvelado. El científico loco que es Raymond Roussel nos obnubila con los efectos lisérgicos de la esencia resultante, pero es generoso y corre el telón para mostrarnos los alambiques, los tubos de ensayos y las mangueras que conectan una olla con otra. Lo que hace de Impresiones de África una obra programática (quizás sin querer) es que tiene una coherencia conceptual que involucra desde su fábula (los shows magníficos de Los Incomparables como "fachadas" de un esqueleto oculto que luego se muestra a todas luces) hasta su estructura (circular: en la primera parte expone los destellos, en la segunda, el cómo se crearon y en la tercera, todo vuelve a empezar), y de paso demuestra el poder del método en tanto a posibilidades lúdico/artísticas (desafortunadamente, si se lee una traducción, los juegos de palabras, las homofonías y metonimias no se perciben). La consecuencia de que tanto el resultado como el proceso para obtenerlo pueden ser igualmente artísticos, introduce una cuestión fundamental para las vanguardias y sus diferentes invenciones metodológicas: la escritura automática, el cadáver exquisito, las constricciones semánticas oulipianas, entre muchas otras. Es tan evidente la intención de Roussel de revalorizar "la cocina" de la obra, que unos años más tarde publicó un ensayo donde explica los métodos formales que utilizó para crear sus obras más conocidas. Por si no nos bastó con Los Incomparables.

Esta es una novela fundamental para comprender la dialéctica entre fondo y forma dentro de la literatura. No obstante, si el interés del lector no yace en verificar las últimas consecuencias de un juego formal, de tan alta factura dentro del arte contemporáneo todavía hoy que los trucos vanguardistas y sus "restricciones" ya no divierten tanto, hay escenas que son geniales, otras delirantes y algunas apenas divertidas.

Monty Milne says

A delightfully weird and strange little book, full of the most extraordinary inventiveness. The author was

quite clearly deranged, but the sort of lunatic one would have longed to meet, just to watch what he would say or do next. It's as if Evelyn Waugh's account of Haile Selassie's coronation was touched up and extended by Umberto Eco while he was gorging on magic mushrooms. I loved it.

Chris says

This book, published in France in 1910, is regularly cited as a proto-surrealist work, influential to everyone from Breton to Foucault to John Ashbery, in line with Lautremont's similarly strange (though far more brutal) "Maldoror." (The Oulipo movement also cited Roussel as a "pre-emptive plagiarist" of Ouplipian structures and concepts.) The premise: a group of seafarers heading from Paris to South America on holiday capsize and land on an African coast town, where they are held for ransom by the local emperor, Talou. The book opens with a strange, complex scene in which a ramshackle stage (bearing the title "The Incomparables") shares space with a bust of Kant, a reproduction of the Paris Stock Exchange, and life-size statues with moving parts. Acts come and go that even make a Jororowsky film look like Dreyer. A man paints grape seeds with immensely concentrated patterns, so that when the develop, small murals of Biblical happenings can be seen through the skin of the grape. Another person teaches a giant worm to play a zither. Another can control his mouth and throat muscles so that he can split his voice into four parts, thus singing a full round of "Frere Jacques" by himself. Another creates a plant-generated device that can draw a perfect reproduction of whatever is seen through its viewing window. And so on.

The endless invention is so immersive, so overwhelming, so non-stop, you get about 90 pages in and think, "there's no way this can keep going on for the full 280 pages!" And of course, it can't. It doesn't. Around the mid-point of the book, we pull all the way back, receiving an oral history of the African emperor and his rival tribe, their prevevious generations. We find out why The Incomparables are putting on their performances and showing off their breathtaking devices -- they are simply biding time waiting for the letters sent to their families asking for ransom money comes through. Roussel shows us what's on stage, then pulls back the curtain and shows us how we got there. But like '80s Penn and Teller routines, even the act of showing you the secret doesn't really give away much. In the end, the man still has a trained worm that plays a zither, and another can still make lozenges that turn into beautiful murals when thrown into a lake.

For all these reasons, as I thought about the book, I thought less of Lautremont (and Breton) and more about George Melies. The inventiveness here is all magic tricks, the way early movie special effects were considered large-scale magic tricks. It's also telling that 1910 is the year it was published, as it has a love of, and faith in, inventive machinery and devices to liberate us from our boring existences, a theme that would have been inconceivable 20 years before and would have been unseemly even 10 years later. The trickery lives all the way inside the bones of the writing, too...Amazon reviewers (and others) will tell you that reading Roussel in anything other than the original French is missing a lot, as many of the most improbably descriptions and phrases are built out of elaborate French word games and homonyms. To use an example from the intro of the book: in another story, Roussel started with the line "Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard" ("The white letters on the cushions of an old billard table" and ends the story with the line, "Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard" ("The white man's letters on the hordes of the old plunderers"). Only one letter was changed, but by using words that can have two meanings, Roussel creates two pillars between which he can string the bridge of a story. (A useful companion to this and Roussel's other novel, "Locus Solus," would be the collection "How I Wrote Certain of My Books," which gives many more examples.) The translator notes that even most French readers didn't notice these subtle games of wordplay, and it took until at least 10 years after his death (from intentional barbituate overdose) before the Surrealists and others began to revere him.

As you'd imagine, the first 1/3 of the book goes like gangbusters. The middle section, a fine piece of contrived legend-building, drags a bit. The last third, showing the behind-the-scenes of the big performance, is interesting if not ravishing, and it helps explain some of the more obscure symbols (such as why the bowler hat has the word "PINCHED" on it in white chalk letters).

For being an "art book," it actually reads very well, with a straightforward narrative and a pared-down syntax style the translator took great pains to re-create. The depiction of the talking horses and quadroplegic one-man-bands and whistling epaulets and somnambulent dream generation machines requires some pretty advanced visual thinking, as Roussel clearly describes every cog and flywheel. (This could be made into a pretty breathtaking film that would be equally baffling with either a \$1 million or \$53 million budget.) For a book written by a Frenchman in 1910 about a continent he'd never visited, the depictions of the natives are remarkably free of cringeworthy moments. Though I should note that *Bad Things Happens To Animals* (copyright Monique van den Berg) regularly, though often dispassionately.

The book is exciting and radical in its structure, and unprecedented in its visual splendor. It's also a bit snoozy and skim-worthy in places unless you really like family histories and legends. It's worth a read, and if you're as fascinated as I am with the absurdities that came before Dada and Surrealism, it's a must-read.

Alanseinfeld says

Exhausting - best taken in small chunks

Quinn Slobodian says

The first half of the book consists of detailed descriptions of spectacles arranged for the benefit of an emperor "in that part of Africa near the equator." The performances are incredible and bizarre--a basin/zither set-up allows a virtuosic worm to play Gypsy concertoes through undulations of its body, a limbless man is a one-armed band, a beautiful woman emerges from a hut with walls made from overlapping pages lit from within with a magpie on her shoulder trained to operate life-size mechanical dioramas depicting scenes from antiquity. The setting and the events seems inexplicable, a reflection of the magpie-like gatherings of a pre-industrial culture from the West: the emperor wears a blue evening gown and a blond wig, there is a miniature version of the London stock exchange at one end of the square, portraits of Spanish twin girls are treated and burned as fetishes. The second half of the book, though, recreates the events leading up to the spectacles we've just read about. Every last detail is made to make sense in its own way, without diminishing the wonder it first induced. The book becomes ideology critique and a retold dream at the same time.

Andrew says

The basics of *Impressions of Africa* aren't much different than those of *Locus Solus*. Likewise, there's a dizzying array of curiosities, although in this case, instead of being presented by an icy scientist on his sprawling estate, it's a kingdom on the coast of Africa, performed by a band of shipwrecked ingenues. I suppose that, this being the second Roussel book I've read, I was less shocked and wowed, but it was still entertainingly weird-- I half-imagined Tim and Eric of *Awesome Show* fame putting on half the performances Roussel describes-- and quite often fantastic.

Deanne says

Have to wonder what drugs Roussel was on when he wrote this, or was it a high fever brought on by malaria. A group of shipwreck survivors, some with remarkable talents become the entertainment for an African leader.

Spent quite a while scratching my head, not a big fan of surrealism it seems.

Steven Felicelli says

with Lautreamont, Pessoa and a few others - Roussel is one of the category of uncategorizable authors

David says

This one was remarkably readable for an author so closely connected to the surrealists. Still strange to think that Roussel was a contemporary of Proust. Such a weird book after all, half the book being this surreal pageant of images and then the other half being an explanation of how the pageant came to be, explaining everything in minute detail. It struck me a lot like some of the X-Files episodes, the beginning actually being somewhat of the ending. In any event, saying this one is interesting is an understatement.

Maryann says

One thing is for sure- Roussel had QUITE the imagination! The first nine chapters of the book are descriptions of the fantastic inventions and conventions composed for the gala for King Talu. One hundred pages of descriptions. No story. It got tedious. And honestly, I struggled with picturing what he described, because they were so outlandish.

The story doesn't really begin until the tenth chapter, where it is explained why the gala with all its performances and trappings occurred. After the previous chapters, it's a relief. Things begin to make a little more sense. Chronologically read, the book should go chapters 10-24, 1-9, and 25 to end it. I'm puzzled why it wasn't presented that way, other than to show off, which is the general impression I get from the book.

Food: a totally avant-garde meal. Presented to dazzle, the spectacle is more concerned with appearance than taste.

June says

This is a book full of puns and double meanings--if you can read French. For example, A Farting White Horse in French could also mean a windy mountain pass. So the French reader might read this and think, "Ah...he's talking about Switzerland." The English reader just thinks, "A farting white horse...WTF?" The

whole book is like that. Enjoy.

Katie Cruel says

This translation is a bore. I should have read Dalkey's translation, or better, just have read it in French...

Caleb Wilson says

Sublimely odd parade of mechanical, botanical, and zoological marvels. Plot? Not really. The narrator's exceedingly minute descriptions are hilarious.

Duane Sobczak says

Very bizarre book.

Sean says

Though outclassed in the loosely-defined canon of proto-Surrealism by the fantastical grotesqueness of *Les Chants de Maldoror* or the absurdist metaphysics of Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel's debut novel is nevertheless essential towards contextualizing the proliferation of formalized writing in its wake. Beyond the obvious link of influence to André Breton's Surrealist group, it prefigures the methodology of the Oulipo movement through the use of formal constraints, particularly anticipating the likes of Georges Perec by way of its prosaic objectivity and barrage of categorization. Traces of Roussel abound too in strains of contemporary experimental writing, from John Ashbery's opaque linguistic play to Alain Robbe-Grillet's effacement of the Subject in narrative fiction.

Literary legacy aside, *Impressions of Africa* largely retains its idiosyncratic qualities despite the numerous imitators thereof. Ignoring the questionable racial element of the work—luckily kept to a murmur throughout—the central drama, comprising a succession of stage-act vignettes and their respective dénouements, is laden with a superbly imaginative quality, at times recalling the heights of inventiveness in 19th-century French adventure novels (biographical accounts speak of how Roussel saw Verne as a literary deity), at others, a Rabelaisian extravagance. This momentum is unfortunately brought to a halt during a dry, prolonged historical account that serves to shift the narrative chronology halfway through the novel. Absent here is the wonder so profuse elsewhere, leaving in its place tedium—yet not one severe enough to allow the overall work to give way. Perhaps this inconsistency is merely to be expected from such an erratic mind.

Brent Hayward says

I kind of swam in and out of this book. A litany of strange performances and events at the ceremony of an African leader, followed by equally strange explanations, all centered around a shipwreck. Roussel's work is like nothing else. Geometrical and oblique.

Lukáš Palán says

Kdyz jsem klikal u knihy na I'am finished, tak jsem byl opravdu finished a to ani nejsem Fin!

Rousselovo fantasmagorium Africke dojmy byla velka vyzva a jako mistr literarniho smyku musim priznat, ze jsem to nevydrzel, i presteze jsem se jiz zdarne prekotlil pres bibli dekadence od Huysmanse nebo memoary sluzky Ivety Bartosove. Na strance 259 muj mozek prestal pracovat a jiz se nerozbehl. Toto se mi tedy stava bezne v patek vecer, kdyz reknu "a milostiva, za kolik je ta lahev jaggermeistera?" ale v pripade knih je to tuze vyjimecne. Vlastne doted stale netusim, jestli jsem clovek, zidle nebo mikrovlknka.

Africke dojmy jsou o skupine lidi, kteri na namesti predvadeji nejaky vynalezky a ritualy. Kazdej vynalez je popsanej na patnacti strankach tak slozite, ze kdyz jsem se to snazil predstavit, musel jsem u toho vypadat asi jako Agata Hanychova u ucebnice makromolekularni chemie. Kdyz dojde k bizarni performanci, nasleduje dalsi clovek a dalsi vynalez a toto pokracuje, mam ten pocit, dokud ctenar nezemre. Bylo to, jako bych cetl navod na sestaveni pracky v pakistanstine - 200 krat za sebou.

Me hodnoceni stale osciluje nekde mezi kavovarem, plivajici cernoskou a lokomotivou na analni pohon. Pokud chcete nekoho zabít a v Tete zrovna nemaji novicok, tato kniha je dostupna alternativa.

the gift says

further proof that, for me, the best medium for expression of surrealism, the most effective, the most memorable- is visual not verbal. that is, visual arts like painting, etching, drawing, dance, plays, movies, or even plastic arts like sculpture, ceramics- not writing prose or poetry. maybe this loses something in translation, but for me it is one long, long, description of surrealist performance art, which may be striking, involving, interesting, in itself but not at this remove. in this, the anthropologist in me argues, there is nothing of Africa that offers these impressions...

<http://www.michaelkamakana.com/uncate...>
