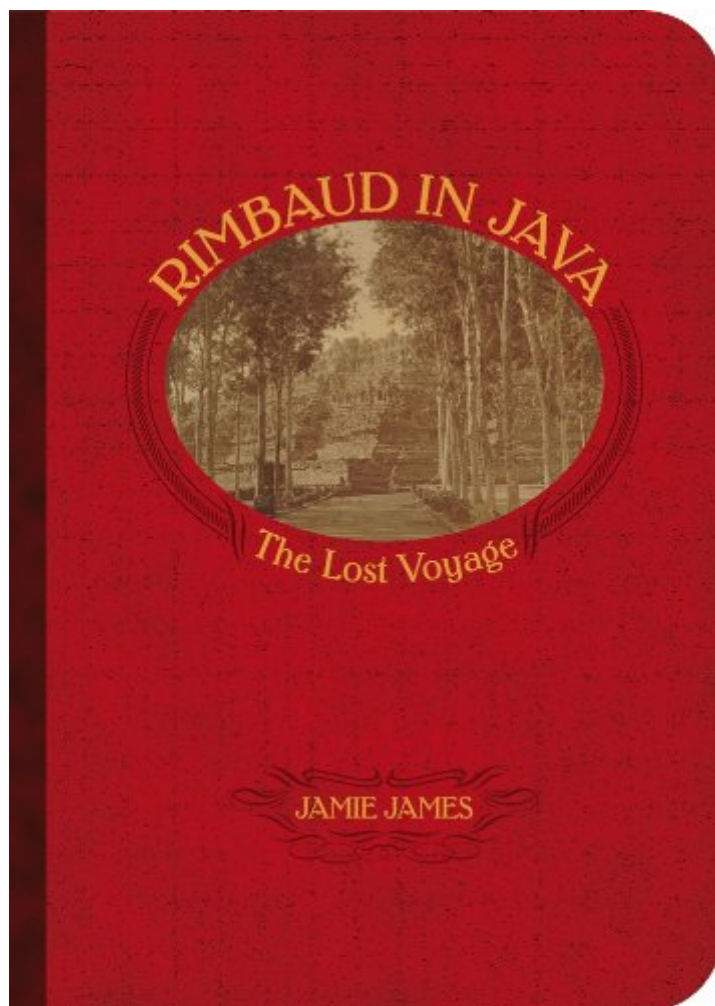


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Rimbaud In Java: The Lost Voyage



Synopsis

In *A Season in Hell*, at the age of eighteen, the French poet Arthur Rimbaud predicted the rest of his life: "My day is done; I'm leaving Europe. The sea air will burn my lungs; lost climes will tan my skin." Three years later, in 1876, he joined the Royal Army of the Dutch Indies as an infantryman and sailed for Java, where he promptly deserted and fled into the jungle. It was the most enigmatic passage in his life crowded with puzzles and contrarities. In the first book devoted to Rimbaud's lost voyage to Asia, the novelist and critic Jamie James reviews everything that is known about the episode; from there, he imaginatively spirals into a reconstruction of what the poet must have seen and informed speculation about what he might have done, vividly recreating life in nineteenth-century Java along the way. *Rimbaud in Java* concludes with an inquiry into what the Orient represented in the poet's imagination, with a scandalous, amusing history of French orientalism. James's surprising book is a richly concentrated blend of biography, criticism and thought-travel, which brings into sharp focus this brief encounter between a great writer and a vanished world.

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Customer Reviews

Jamie James knows a thing or two about obsession. "There are thousands of people (we know who we are)," he writes, "who would take a lively interest if a pair of socks turned up in an old chest in Harar that could be proved to have belonged to Arthur Rimbaud." Where's Harar? You've guessed it: though cognizant of Rimbaud's stature as a forerunner of the Surrealists, the amour fou he shared in his gilded teenage years with the much older, not-pretty-at-all Paul Verlaine, and his part in inspiring Frederick Ashton's bewitching ballet "Illuminations" (to the Benjamin Britten score), I am not one of James's thousands. But as Daniel Mendelsohn's delicious New Yorker review of Bruce Duffy's biography "Disaster Was My God" recently proved, reading about Rimbaud can be great fun. No less was to be expected from Jamie James, whom I edited (full disclosure!) at Connoisseur in the 1980s and whom I count today as a friend. In years past, I have delighted in his account of a visit with Jorge Luis Borges, his exposé of waste at PBS, and his book-length study on the topics of the music of the spheres. Since 1999, James has been living in Bali, whence occasional bulletins and curiosa flow, always in his trademark deadpan style, encyclopedically informed, tartly undeceived. And so it is with "Rimbaud in Java," which James conceived as a novel but retrofitted to nonfiction, recognizing the futility of attempting to project himself into a mind as unfathomable as Rimbaud's. Instead he starts out by serving up just the facts, ma'am, slim pickens as they are. As Rimbaudians (ahem!) know, their idol sailed to Java as a fusilier in the Dutch Colonial Army. The fabled isle was the apogee of his life's journey. No sooner had he arrived, however, than he deserted, leaving a lacuna in his biography that James fills with an imaginative excursus on the Orient in the 19th-century European mind. Sprinklings of sex, pulp fiction, bogus science, and a cameo by Queen Victoria add spice to James's rijsttafel of guilty pleasures. In addition, there are wonderful images, many of them rare, from his private collection, plus generous helpings of Rimbaud's orphic poetry and prose as rendered in James's punctilious English. No, he has no translation for "baou," but then, neither has anyone else. James picks it up, pokes it, and turns it over, but in the end the vocable just sits there, on Rimbaud's page, as inexplicable as his thoughts and images. Whether "Rimbaud in Java" will win Rimbaud new readers, as James says he hopes, is anybody's guess. I felt no such exploratory urge, honestly. On the other hand, the book may very well inspire readers to dig deeper into the Jamie James bibliography. Next on my list: "The Snake Charmer: A Life and Death in Pursuit of Knowledge."

This is a fascinating bit of research into where Arthur Rimbaud disappeared to before he came back and went, finally, to Africa. Summations are plausible and thoughtful. Writer fits a lot into this little

book. A necessary book for those interested in this compelling poet.

This work is unique considering that so little is known about this period of Rimbaud's life. It is a very interesting and unassuming book.

this is on my to read stack. It looks great in the stack. Very much adds to the decor of my reading room. It's a display book.

Jamie James is an excellent writer whose articles in the Wall Street Journal surprised and delighted me. His knowledge of the works of Arthur Rimbaud and landscape of Java inform the reader. He understands the canon of the poet, and attempts to fill in the blanks about this missing year and to put it in context of what Europeans knew and thought about the orient. Obviously, this won't replace the Steinmetz or Robb biographies of Rimbaud, but he knows the subject and tells a good story. I devoured this book in a day at the beach. Good job Mr. James!

as usual, too much said on the life and not on the work, at least it is original even as a pure lie, arthur was a coward, a mummies boy, of bad manners and doubtful aofish education. not possible to believe he wrote the best part of his poetry himself, but who cares, and little does it matter, the man is of no interests, but some verses, tales are gigantic, unreal for the period and ought to be repeated and taught rather than mix in is wasted existence. the book also uncover Saleh, the painter and it is worth reading just for Saleh. arthur remains a 1/4 divinity from high school onward, always fun to quote , recite, toss around with friends who like to be poetic. a must to read, with caution, do not swallow.

I am not a fan, in fact I had never heard of Rimbaud before. I kept waiting for the author to speculate more on what happened in Java, to explain what was happening in Java at the time he "disappeared" there - culturally, politically, socially...The author dwelt on small minor details, such as the meaning of the word Baou and where Rimbaud would have learned it. The only upside - he expose me to a rather interesting, flamboyant and exotic character in Rimbaud himself.

From Music of the Spheres (who knew there was once no boundary between math and music) to The Snake Charmer and now Rimbaud In Java, James continues to step off the common path to bring to us fascinating and compelling stories. Reading a James book is as close as most of us will

get to having a storyteller the likes of John Henry Faulk or Spaulding Gray in your living room for the evening. Always a delight, never boring, without condescension, he is a treasure.

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