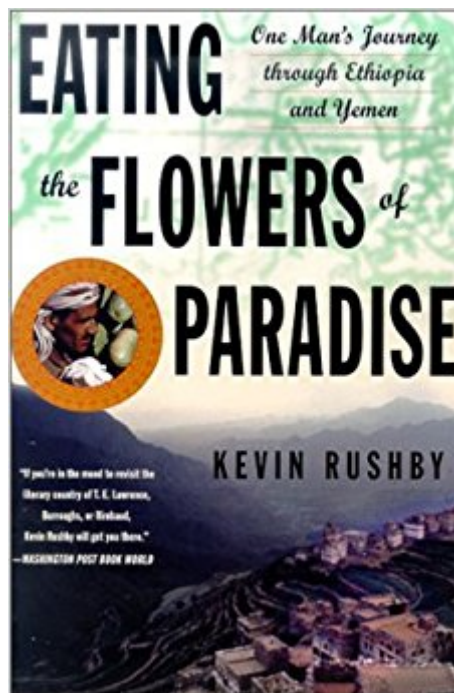




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Eating The Flowers Of Paradise: One Man's Journey Through Ethiopia And Yemen



Synopsis

Ethiopia in Eastern Africa and Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula remain two of the most inviting outposts for travelers seeking the exotic. In these two places, Qat is just one name given to a green leafy plant that is cultivated there. When chewed, the leaves of this plant release two substances that produce a hypnotic, reverential "high," distinctive in the thoughtful state it induces. Kevin Rushby discovered that the use of Qat is a way of life since it plays a pivotal role in all facets of the culture influencing everything from architecture to television schedules.

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Customer Reviews

The title refers to qat, a leaf that when chewed produces a hypnotic effect. When Rushby was teaching English in Yemen, he became enraptured by the drug, which is central to Yemeni social life. Back in Britain and feeling nostalgic several years later, he decided to go back and follow the ancient trade routes of qat, which overlapped the routes of Arthur Rimbaud and the explorer Richard Burton. Rushby's vivid writing reveals places that few visit: Southern Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Yemen. He meets strange and sometimes dangerous characters but finds generosity almost everywhere he goes. This may be how he manages to keep his sense of humor and enthusiasm even when dealing with angry, gun-toting officials or negotiating treacherous hikes along steep mountain passes. This travelog is a little too much of an ode to qat, and because of the nature of the societies Rushby visits, you only get a view of the men's world. Still, this is entertaining reading; recommended for large public and academic libraries.

AKathleen A. Shanahan, American Univ Lib., Washington, DC
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A superior travel narrative of the qat trail, its history and strange quirks, and very strange characters, from newcomer Rushby. Qat is a brilliant green leaf that can be seen “flashing like a broken traffic light” in mouths from northeast Africa to the Arabian Peninsula (and many points beyond, where citizens from these lands have settled). Its effects are highly individualized, and its reputation is not agreed upon: “legal in Britain, banned in the USA, celebrated in Yemen, vilified in Saudi Arabia.” But there is no disputing its pivotal role in the poetry, music, architecture, and family relations of Ethiopia and Yemen, not to mention in television schedules, road-building, and economic status. Rushby engrossingly outlines all of these effects. He had been familiar with the drug for a number of years before he decided to follow the qat route from Harrar overland to Djibouti, across the Red Sea to the coffee port of Mokha, then into the hills of the two Yemens, before anchoring in San’a. It was far from a comfortable journey, but Rushby makes light humor of its tribulations and brings an enormous brio to his subject. His travels are not just in pursuit of the history and culture of qat, for he quickly learns that the pleasure of the plant is in the companionship of using it. He’s a humble pilgrim and a shrewd witness, open to the tales and legends (some of the shaggy variety and some fantastic) told by cabbies and goldsmiths, fakirs and foreign legionnaires and fellow travelers. There is a polish to his descriptions of landscape, thoroughness to his political geographies and social observations, and savvy to his handling of dicey situations with authorities. Like its subject, Rushby’s book can loosen one’s mooring to the everyday world, conveying the reader to darkened rooms high above ancient, exotic cities. -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Ever since I was a kid, I’ve always wanted to visit Yemen. Like author Kevin Rushby, I didn’t want to do research there, earn money there, or take anything away from Yemen. I just wanted to see, hear, feel, and know what that faroff land was like. Thanks to my dear President and his war-loving cronies, I now have a snowball’s chance in hell of ever achieving my dream. Keep on shootin’ George, you’ll definitely solve all problems that way. I must say, though, that the next best thing to a Yemen trip could be reading *EATING THE FLOWERS OF PARADISE*. Though the story of the author’s voyage centers around qat, a leaf from a tree which grows in Ethiopia and Yemen, whose leaves are chewed to induce a feeling of dreamy well-being and melancholy happiness, this is a travel book par excellence. While Rushby starts his solo voyage in Ethiopia, his lack of local language, and the general lack of information about Ethiopia other than what he sees and does

himself, do not entrance the reader. (Nor does he travel in the more interesting parts of the country.) He meets some wild characters [a Nigerian gem smuggler named Cedric or Arthur or...?] and has a few strange adventures in Djibouti, on the Red Sea coast. It is when he lands in Yemen that the book really gets good. Rushby speaks some Arabic. Yemeni rural people come alive in this book, their villages, the hospitality of all, the terraced mountains where qat, coffee, and other crops are grown, the magnificent, rugged scenery of remote parts of the country. Readers may pick up some recent history, some facts about former times, and details of qat growing and use, but this is a very existential travel book, not given to long-winded explanations. Rushby makes no bones about it. He wandered the Yemeni "outback" looking for good highs. He found plenty. Chewing qat with the locals was an excellent way to integrate himself in Yemeni society, where large numbers of people chew qat every afternoon. Rushby records all sorts of bizarre or culturally fascinating incidents. Some of the bizarre ones have to do with his own behavior and qat-induced dreams. When I finished the book, if someone had offered me a ticket to Yemen, I would have flown out that very evening. Sadly, this colorful, fascinating book is as close as I'll ever get. Two other books on Yemen that make a great trio with Rushby's book are "Motoring with Mohammed" by Eric Hansen, and Steven Caton's "Peaks of Yemen I Summon".

Kevin is a good artist. He vividly describes his travels, and you feel that you are there. For those places in Yemen where I have been, I felt like I was there again. He is accurate in his descriptions, as well as poetic- a rare art. His book is focused on a destination- traveling the old qat route, and this helps give more cohesiveness than you find in most travelogues. There is a rare vivid description of demonic manifestation and folk Islamic exorcism, in great detail. As an added bonus, the ubiquitousÂ Tim Mackintosh-SmithÂ shows up again, as he seems to do in every book about Yemen. We can see some of the same journeys Tim reports in Yemen, but from the perspective of his fellow traveler. And there is even an oblique reference to the boat of Eric Hansen fromÂ Motoring with Mohammed. I value this book for the same reason I find it wanting. I wanted to learn more about qat- what I couldn't find anywhere else: how it effects you, to what extent it is addictive, what the side effects are. There is too much contradictory material in the literature, and so you almost have to go to an addict to discover these questions. And now having read Kevin, I am fairly sure that I will not do qat again. Kevin is also a drug addict. He denies it, pointing out the difference between a true addict and the average qat user like himself. But what he describes has all the earmarks of addiction. Certainly, there appear to be no withdrawal pains- and again, information I had been unable to verify elsewhere. But also he describes a constant desire to have

the leaf, and a feeling of incompleteness without it. It has become the center of his life, and the life of many Yemeni, to hear Kevin tell it. They become quite cantankerous without their daily qat chew. This also is addiction. He also describes the side effects, depending on the variety of leaf, such as horrifying dreams and even an inability to fully comprehend life around you. Some of the dreams Kevin describes I'd frankly describe as demonic. He doesn't mention the increase in mouth cancer caused by the use of DDT on the leaves. Most significantly, it has a profound effect on the user, as told by Kevin. We learn that it changes your personality and emotional state, making you babble as if you were on marijuana, unable to remember the immediate past but to focus with great clarity on the distant past. It keeps you up for two days at a time, depressing appetite and sex drive significantly, which is helpful, as qat production leaves less arable land to grow crops in the poorest Arab country in the world. After stimulating you for hours, it leaves you slightly depressed. It seems to have the visions of LSD, the relaxation of marijuana, the depression of alcohol, and the addiction of caffeine and tobacco combined. It seems to be the perfect Soma- except that it tastes like hard, dried tea leaves without sugar. But I don't want my mind altered, not even by Soma. It doesn't matter that there are no withdrawal effects- I don't want to experience demonic dreams and have my mood altered by a substance. I'd rather experience being drunk on God than a leaf. So I am quite thankful to Kevin for so vividly describing qat and how it works. Unfortunately, he is all praise of the plant, and does not realize what it does to him and many Yemeni.

I found this book very interesting to read as I know little about the region he visited. I bought the book at a thrift shop mainly because of the area he traveled in. I had no idea that the book was about the drug Qat, which I confess to knowing absolutely nothing about. I know much more about it now! But the appeal of the book to me was in the cultural descriptions he offers. I really felt like he got into the customs and habits of the locals as he was often roughing it in the literal sense of the word. No 5 star hotels for this man! He definitely has a true explorers curiosity and his adventure reminded me of some of the travels of Sir Richard Burton (who is referred to in the book). He isn't afraid to take chances and the people he meets and the situations he gets himself in make for a good read.

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