



Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape

Predrag Matvejevic

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Predrag Matvejevic's writing glints and eddies as if subject to the same winds and currents that stir his Mediterranean. "Crickets often crop up in accounts of Mediterranean moods," we read. "The sound or possibly song of the cricket does not disturb insomnia—I know from experience—on summer nights when waking is easier than sleeping and the spirits keep watch and almost seem to merge over the Mediterranean." In the space of a few pages we encounter knots, ballast, voyages, swimming, diving, shipwrecks, burial at sea, sponge and coral gathering, rivers, and the distribution of olive, fig, and agave. The author has stories to tell about each topic and freely mingles the observations and discoveries of fellow travelers, ancient and contemporary, with his own, creating a powerful narrative tide.

The book is divided into three sections: "Breviary," "Maps," and "Glossary." "Breviary" catalogs the sights, smells, sounds, and features common to the many peoples who share the Mediterranean—Jews, Arabs, Copts, Berbers, Turks, Syrians, Greeks, Romans (and Italians), Spaniards (and Catalonians), the French, Dalmatians, Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, even Russians. "Maps" retraces the same itinerary through documents up to the seventeenth century that represent the Mediterranean; "Glossary" deals with linguistic diversity and history. The brilliant variety of details and the verve with which they are conveyed will appeal to active and armchair travelers alike.

With this portrait of a place and its civilizations, Matvejevic joins a cohort of writers that includes Claudio Magris (*Danube*), Angelo Maria Ripellino (*Magic Prague*), and Neal Ascherson (*Black Sea*)—authors who have created a literary genre all their own, at once personal and objective, imaginative and erudite. Although, as Matvejevic says, "we do not discover the sea ourselves, nor do we view it exclusively through our own eyes," this Mediterranean is joyously his, and it becomes ours as well.

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