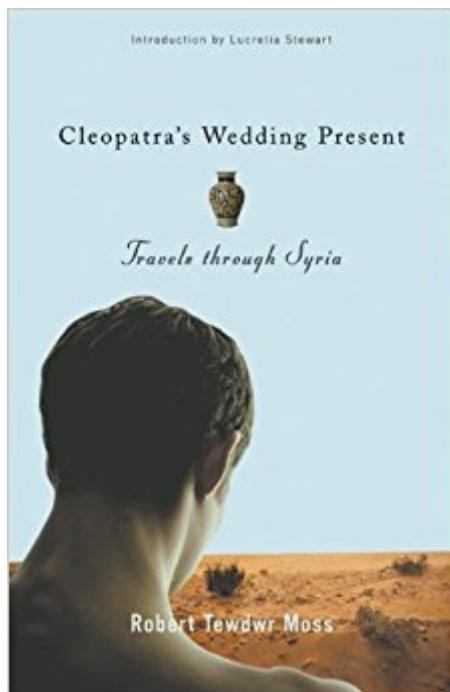


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# Cleopatra's Wedding Present: Travels Through Syria (Living Out: Gay And Lesbian Autobiographies)



## Synopsis

“Cleopatra’s Wedding Present” is the rare book that captivates its reader from the first page. Like the best travel books, Robert Tewdwr Moss’s memoir of his travels through Syria resonates on many levels: as a profoundly telling vivisection of Middle Eastern society, a chilling history of ethnic crimes, a picaresque adventure story, a purely entertaining travelogue, and a poignant romance. Tewdwr Moss, a brilliant young writer who was murdered in London the day after he finished this book, left this lyrical gem as his legacy. He adeptly captures an essence of the Middle East that is foreign to most of us, but which becomes real with his astute observations of the region’s culture and explosive politics. He conveys what so many westerners find both fascinating and frightening in the Middle East, making no attempt to mask circumstances that are appalling and dangerous while also exotic, beautiful, and sometimes very funny. Mesopotamia, now present-day Syria, was part of Mark Anthony’s love gift to Cleopatra. Then and now, it is a land of mystery and love. The Wisconsin edition is only for sale in the United States and its dependencies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“This is not a dutiful . . . examination of a country, but it is a well-informed guide to a larger interior landscape.” James Owen, Literary Review

Living Out, Gay and Lesbian Autobiographies Joan Larkin and David Bergman, Series Editors New

Introduction by Lucretia Stewart Wisconsin edition for sale only in North America & U.S.  
dependencies

Tewdwr Moss's wanderings around Syria were so much more interesting than my own recent trip to Syria that I can only wish I had been there with him, tagging along on one adventure after another. It made me understand how much easier it is to get to know a place by wandering-traveling without an agenda and without time constraints, opening up to whatever adventures come your way, recognizing that serendipity can lead to far richer experience than well considered plans. Moss was open to what came along and made the most of the opportunity to meet interesting people and see interesting things. His chance encounter and engagement with a Palestinian commando is one of the highlights of this delightful travelogue. It's beautiful written, witty, and so thoroughly satisfying that I can only wish I had been there, too.

I found this to be a very interesting read about cities in Syria and social attitudes before the present conflict.

thanks

One of the most beautiful travel books and memoirs ever written; one of my favourite books ever.

The title of the book has been taken from the fact that Syria was once part of Marc Anthony's wedding present to Cleopatra. Today, the population is still only a pawn in the power games of the mighty. One member of our group had recently returned from a trip which took in Syria and he thought it was an accurate description that captured the feel of the place. Many of us recognise his description of souks where one corridor looks like another and the smell of offal and meat and piles of guts can make one sick. Pall Mall cigarettes are sold singly on streets. Squat loos and back gardens with toilet paper all around, flyovers, Victorian-like barber shops open in the evening, shaving with cut-throat razors, the mournful sound of the water wheel as 'agonised lament', a washbasin plumbed in to the hall, developers who destroy the most beautiful parts of a building first and then ask why anything should be preserved, power cuts and it is hot without a fan and you cannot open a window because of dust storm, aping European architecture whereas Arab houses have courtyards in the middle, the constant blare of car horns and the loop of CNN news - just like almost everywhere else in the Middle East. That feeds in to fantasies about the greenness of

England - mild, ordered and urbane. We get a description of the "hot winds," "the blinding heat," the "fine brown dust" from the dust storms, the "chaos of the streets and the air "clotted with diesel fumes hanging like a cloak around us." The dirty collapsing towns had a "great past and no present" full of "the old merchants you see here - sly, and leathery, survivors." Then there's the con-artists: Hisham/James speaks with a gay cockney accent and said he used to work at Heaven yet had never set foot outside Syria. There is a Jewish area yet most Jews have moved away. It is forbidden to teach Hebrew. The rabbi turned business man keeps an eye on the synagogue: claiming to be the place where Elijah anointed Elisha, the synagogue had recently been restored. The guide book was banned for containing anti-government information. There had been a massacre of anyone suspected of holding anti-Baath sentiments. It was an inhuman system yet the police who took passports on the bus came back with ice creams. Eastern men share their bed with friends and it is said that an English boy in bed is ten times better than woman, yet it's the other way round. Israelis, especially soldiers seek Palestinian lovers in Independence Park. A Hotel won't allow friends upstairs so someone paid for three beds yet would only use one. That would keep the police at bay. There were, however, majlis, rooms for entertaining guests. An Arab would rather stand you up than say no to your face. The night after completing the book, the author was murdered and the final revisions of his book lost on the stolen laptop. For that reason alone, you owe it to him to read this book.

Cleopatra's Wedding Present is an account of the solitary wandering of a Briton through the back roads and alleyways of Syria. What draws this urbane, openly gay man to a country like Syria is a question that draws the reader immediately into the book. Fittingly, Moss begins his book not in Damascus, but in culturally and geographically isolated northern city of Aleppo. He makes his way through a maze of noisy, cluttered streets to the Baron Hotel, an establishment of fading glory, where notables such as Lawrence of Arabia and Theodore Roosevelt once stayed. In the hotel bar, he quickly meets a fellow Briton, Rupert, and becomes entangled with the comings and goings, and affections, of a few young Syrian men. Through Rupert, like himself, an outsider, a loner, and also attracted to Syrian men, Moss realizes that it is only natural for such strangers in a strange land to find in Syria a place to come to terms with one's strangeness. Moss forays from Aleppo to other locations in Syria in chapters that begin abruptly, with Moss on the road to a new destination. In other locations, his experiences are similar in tone to that of Aleppo: A lonely man, part tourist, part journalist, and partly a man in quest of some ineffable longing, meets a few people in the new locale, and strikes up brief friendships before moving to the next destination. These vignettes of

ordinary people, though, mainly young men, such as the ex-commando named Jihad, but also a variety of people, such as Gladys, the Christian florist recently repatriated from New York, are the highlights of the book. In these vignettes, Moss illustrates how everyday life in Syria is shaped by history, culture, and an oppressive political regime. Nonetheless, the characters Moss encounters are truly individual, never simple products of their environment. Insightful, too, are the author's mediations on the longing that draws us to travel, and its counterpart heartache at leaving a place. "To travel is to always be to some extent in a state of bereavement, always to have somebody die on you a little," he writes. The fact that Moss was murdered on the day he finished the book, shortly after returning from Syria to London, is oft cited as reason to read this book. This would be a poor reason to read the book; however, his thought that "partir, c'est toujours mourir un peu," does take on added poignancy as a result of his death. To illustrate this theme of love and loss, Moss relates Rupert's doomed pursuit of Syrian boys, culminating in a letter to Rupert the Moss intercepts and steams open. He also relates the more successful, yet also more tragic, love affairs of the Victorian Mary Digby, whose final love, a sheik, brought her to Syria, where she would die. However, it is frustrating that Moss himself initiates a narrative that is personal, not only journalistic, and focused on desire, only to direct the reader's gaze away from himself. Moss speaks of the pain of parting, yet himself takes leave of all he meets in a cool and aloof fashion. The letter we wish he would open is his own, but this letter, scarce begun, remains sealed. I highly recommend this book for anyone wanting an up close and personal look at life in Syria. From a literary aspect, Moss proves a talented writer, who intertwines elegy, elegance, and wit, in a style reminiscent of Evelyn Waugh. However, because of the disjointed narrative, and the frustration with this fascinating persona who begins his own tale several times, only to turn away from it, I found myself wanting to skim the best parts of the book and leave the rest, wondering how Moss might have rewritten it.

The West gets to see so little of what life is really like in the Middle East, much less how gay men live. I didn't want this book to end and wish that there could be a sequel. It's like an old-style tavelogue with a big gay twist, and honor, tragedy, opportunism and harsh reality. These are real people (photos included).

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