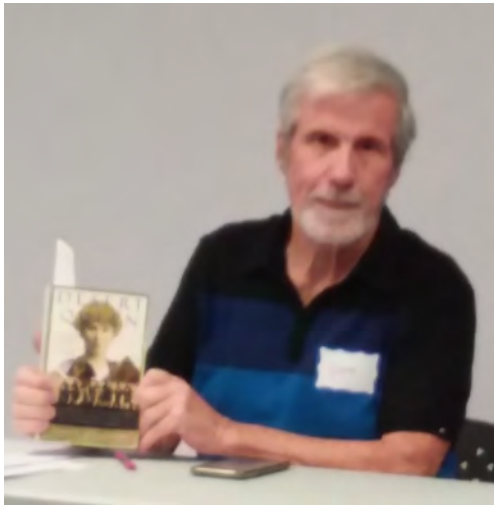




# FRIENDS OF THE PALM SPRINGS LIBRARY BOOK CLUB



September 20, 2019

## **Desert Queen** presented by DON MARKLEY

In September, our first meeting of the new season, Don Markley presented *Desert Queen* (2005) by Janet Wallach. She and her husband John Wallach shared a writing career concerning non-fiction events and people in the Middle East.

Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), a British author, archeologist and diplomat, is the subject of *Desert Queen*. Several book club members were also familiar with another book about Bell by Georgina Howell, titled *Queen of the Desert* (2008). You can find a movie-length documentary about Bell on YouTube called *Letters from Baghdad*. There's also a 2015 feature film about Bell called *Queen of the Desert*, starring Nicole Kidman.

There is no spoiler alert required since we started our discussion with the death of Gertrude Bell. She died unwed and at the nadir of her power in the country

whose borders she is largely credited with drawing -- Iraq. Author Janet Wallach seems to leave the cause of Bell's death open to speculation. Whether it was an accident or suicide is up to the reader and the group was divided on the issue.



Bell's status as a highly-educated and independent woman during the turn of the 20th century revealed many obstacles. Not finding freedom in her native England, she discovered her mastery of several languages, including Arabic, and her ability to absorb an astounding amount of information gave her access to sheiks and kings throughout the Levant. She began her mastery of the cultures as an archeologist and later as a diplomat working among such notables as Lawrence of Arabia.

Some in the club agreed Miss Bell lacked empathy as evidenced by her wielding of colonial privilege and difficulty with intimate relationships. To fit in with the world dominated by men, she acted defiantly--smoking cigarettes, for example. On the other hand, she did embrace tradition by favoring anti-suffrage supporters and wearing expensive feminine designer clothes despite desert environments. Our team of amateur doctors were ready to diagnose depression, bi-polarity and perhaps even a condition called testicular feminization which, given her physical strength, may explain her masculine traits. Clearly, the next biographer has some new territory to explore.

***The Indigo Girl***

***The Garden of Evening Mists***

**October 18**

**November 15**

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Photos by Ginger Semple