



Girl on a Plane

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

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I'm just old enough to remember the hijack in September 1970 of four planes by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The planes were forced to land in a remote desert airstrip in Jordan, and four tense days followed as the hijackers threatened to kill the hostages if their demands were not met. Miriam Moss was a passenger on one of those planes. Aged just fifteen, she was flying alone from Bahrain to London to return to boarding school. Forty-five years on, she has written a novel based on her experiences, and very fine it is.

Two opening chapters describe the busy preparations for school, and indeed a new home ? Anna (Moss's fictional alter ego) is a Forces child, and her father has a new posting ? we quickly get a sense of Anna's warm family life, and particularly her mother, whom she calls Marni. By chapter three, Anna is on the plane and the hijack is underway, the suddenness as shocking for the reader as it is for her. The description of the days that follow makes for extremely tense reading as Anna and her fellow hostages are held prisoner in the unbearable heat of the desert with hardly any food or water, surrounded by men with guns and explosives. Anna thinks often of her parents, and occasionally the action cuts away to them and the agony they are going through, but mainly our attention is with Anna, in the plane. It's riveting, unputdownable reading and yet, despite the tension, there's humour too: Moss gives Anna two companions, a boy called David who is her own age, and nine-year-old Tim, travelling with his terrapin Fred, and more concerned with Fred's well-being than his own predicament. As Moss explains in a postscript, it is a work of fiction, though grounded in her own experiences ? there was a boy with a terrapin, though she never spoke to him. Some of the other episodes ? completely truthful - seem almost surreal: the arrival of a group of journalists allowed on board to take photos and keen for close ups of the hostages? suffering; a group photo organised by the hijackers of them lined up under the plane's wing with the female passengers, which reminds Anna exactly of her school photo. This event makes her see the men as humans, somebody's brother, father, uncle, men with a cause. Moss is careful throughout to explain the PFLP's motives, though readers are in no doubt either as to the very real threat to the hostages: in another terrifying incident, also based on a real event, Anna's buckle catches on one of the gunmen's belts, crammed with bullets and grenades, and he grabs her, pushing the muzzle of his gun into her neck.

It's a unique and extraordinary story, exceptionally well told. Miriam Moss enables her readers to share her own ?life-defining? experience; we can only admire the courage and resilience shown by her and the other human beings caught

up in it.

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