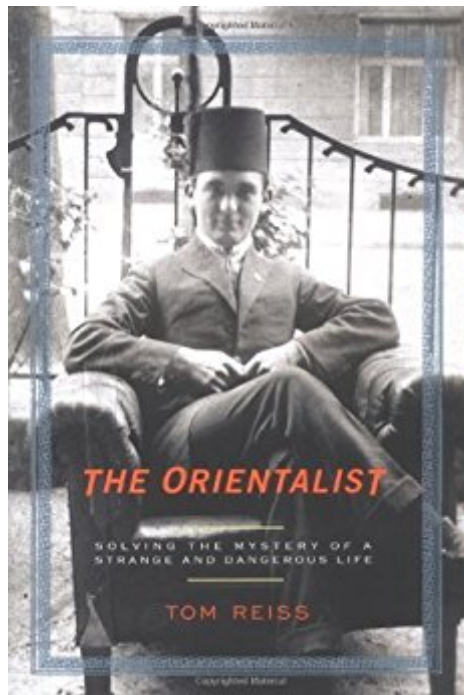


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# The Orientalist: Solving The Mystery Of A Strange And Dangerous Life



## Synopsis

Part history, part cultural biography, and part literary mystery, *The Orientalist* traces the life of Lev Nussimbaum, a Jew who transformed himself into a Muslim prince and became a best-selling author in Nazi Germany. Born in 1905 to a wealthy family in the oil-boom city of Baku, at the edge of the czarist empire, Lev escaped the Russian Revolution in a camel caravan. He found refuge in Germany, where, writing under the names Essad Bey and Kurban Said, his remarkable books about Islam, desert adventures, and global revolution, became celebrated across fascist Europe. His enduring masterpiece, *Ali and Nino*—a story of love across ethnic and religious boundaries, published on the eve of the Holocaust—is still in print today. But Lev's life grew wilder than his wildest stories. He married an international heiress who had no idea of his true identity until she divorced him in a tabloid scandal. His closest friend in New York, George Sylvester Viereck—also a friend of both Freud's and Einstein's—was arrested as the leading Nazi agent in the United States. Lev was invited to be Mussolini's official biographer until the Fascists discovered his "true" identity. Under house arrest in the Amalfi cliff town of Positano, Lev wrote his last book—discovered in a half a dozen notebooks never before read by anyone—helped by a mysterious half-German salon hostess, an Algerian weapons-smuggler, and the poet Ezra Pound. Tom Reiss spent five years tracking down secret police records, love letters, diaries, and the deathbed notebooks. Beginning with a yearlong investigation for *The New Yorker*, he pursued Lev's story across ten countries and found himself caught up in encounters as dramatic and surreal, and sometimes as heartbreaking, as his subject's life. Reiss's quest for the truth buffets him from one weird character to the next: from the last heir of the Ottoman throne to a rock opera-composing baroness in an Austrian castle, to an aging starlet in a Hollywood bungalow full of cats and turtles. As he tracks down the pieces of Lev Nussimbaum's deliberately obscured life, Reiss discovers a series of shadowy worlds of European pan-Islamists, nihilist assassins, anti-Nazi book smugglers, Baku oil barons, Jewish Orientalists that have also been forgotten. The result is a thoroughly unexpected picture of the twentieth century of the origins of our ideas about race and religious self-definition, and of the roots of modern fanaticism and terrorism. Written with grace and infused with wonder, *The Orientalist* is an astonishing book.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Tom Reiss's book, "The Orientalist: Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life", is the very strange story of author Lev Nussimbaum and his identity, which has been obscured through the 20th century. It is also the story of Tom Reiss's search for that story and is, at times, as much about the "hunter" as the "hunted". Lev Nussimbaum was, at various times in his life, a Jew, a Muslim, and a hybrid. It seemed to depend on where he was living at the time and what he wanted to write. Born to Jewish parents in the oil capitol of Baku, he changed identities as often, it seems, as he changed clothing. Certainly the political exigencies of the times - the Russian Revolution, Nazism, Bolshevism - that Lev lived through, called for a somewhat "flexible" identity. Tom Reiss began searching for Lev Nussimbaum when he began searching for the author of "Ali and Nino", reputed to be one Kurban Said. Long years of searching and interviewing led to Lev Nussimbaum, who had died in 1942. Reiss's book is a long, sometimes repetitive, but always interesting look at foreign places and wars and how they led to Lev Nussimbaum.

Do you know about Baku and their thriving oil industry more than one hundred years ago? Do you

know the terrible struggles that area suffered after the Bolshevik revolution and how the "White Russians," the lucky ones, escaped to Europe? Read about Lev, known also as Essad Bey, writer of best sellers in German and Russian, who warned of the Soviet threat, and then the Nazi threat to humanity. Stick with this true story and find a forgotten world. Very relevant in today's clashes of east and west, moderation and hatred.

This story opened up a new aspect of Jewish history of which I was previously unaware. Lev Nussimbaum's involvement in so many of the tumult that took place in Russia and Europe during the years it covers is extraordinary. Sadly, the book also reveals how deeply seated anti-Semitism was everywhere this unusual person went. Bolsheviks blamed the world's ills on Jewish capitalists. Pre-Nazi fascists blamed Bolshevism on the Jews. Capitalists simply turned their backs on Jews. And he felt it all, no matter how hard he tried to reinvent himself. Lev Nussimbaum is not particularly likable, but I have to respect his intelligence; and I can't imagine how I would have dealt with the challenging circumstances within which he found himself. He is flawed, like all of us. He was bright yet naive. He was hopeful at the wrong times. His fears lead him to be blind to the dangers of certain ideologies. My one criticism of the book was that the author could have found a better way to help the reader keep track of some of the many characters who come in and out of Lev's life, and then resurface later.

I really loved this book. It mixed history with a character study of a brilliant but troubled individual with precision and humor. I knew little about the Soviet's take over of this region. The Orientalist dealt with little problems, and big problems brought about by the displacement of a people. The range of time and place was wonderful in such a short book. One of the best books I read this year.

This book is about a very interesting character, who lived during a very interesting time. You are interested in history, lots of that. The main character was clearly brilliant and bipolar. A combination that generally leads to self destruction as it does here, but he is so interesting you just have to follow him to that end. It was a different kind of story, but one I really enjoyed.

A fascinating story about a strange and wonderful person, who followed his own, true self, despite the insanity of those around him. Essad Bey, Lev Nussimbaum, or whatever he was calling himself at any given moment, was a unique person and thinker. Zelig-like, he managed to be in all the hotspots during the times they were hot. One of the things I love about Tom Reiss is his dedication

to putting things in context. The context here, though sometimes horrifying and sad, also makes you mourn for what might have been. It also begs the question for the millionth time: why are we humans so stupid?

Enjoyed Tom Reiss personally, enjoyed reading his book thoroughly

Very interesting and true story of a Jew from Baku who changed his identity - and himself - to interact with some of the key figures of the early 20th century. Good writing, well researched. Recommended.

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