

liance and intensity. Disjunctions between the ethereal world of the spiritualist and the data-bound world of the scientist seem not to have troubled Curie. Or perhaps her brain simply fractionated them.

What did plague and sometimes hinder her were relentless prejudices—against women in the world of science, against women generally in the wider society, against immigrants,

against people battling depression. Goldsmith's account of the persistent injustices Curie encountered has a contemporary ring. Today as then, social and political factors block women from fully participating in certain areas of science. How sad that these senseless barriers to human betterment and equity seem as enduring as the sun.

—RUTH LEVY GUYER

## CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

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### *THE HEART OF THE WORLD:*

#### *A Journey to the Last Secret Place.*

By Ian Baker. Penguin. 511 pp. \$27.95

When I was in Tibet in 1993, there were rumors of an expedition to the Tsangpo Gorge in the southeastern part of the country—the deepest gorge on earth, and a place that had been closed to Westerners since the 19th century. It seemed unlikely that the expedition would succeed, given the restrictions on travel and the rumored dangers of the area. How thrilling, then, to read, in Ian Baker's *The Heart of the World*, a vividly rendered account of that expedition and the several that followed.

Baker, a longtime resident of Kathmandu and a student of Tibetan Buddhism, first became interested in the Tsangpo Gorge through inquiries into *beyul*, sacred hidden lands whose full meaning can be grasped only through spiritual preparedness. The Tsangpo Gorge lies in the heart of an area known as *beyul Pemako*, or “Hidden-Land Arrayed like a Lotus.” Unlike most of arid Tibet, Pemako's terrain ranges from snow-covered peaks to steamy, orchid-filled forests. Tibetans, Baker writes, consider it “the most dangerous as well as the greatest of all the hidden lands.”

Early in his quest, Baker is told by a Tibetan lama, “In Pemako, don't try to avoid suffering, but accept whatever comes.” And suffering does seem to be the norm. In the course of his eight journeys to Pemako, Baker encounters local women rumored to have a penchant for poisoning travelers, Chinese authorities ordering several-day detours for no clear reason, and porters demanding higher and higher wages. But none

of these hardships compares to the weather—“a veritable hell of nearly incessant rain”—which itself pales in comparison with the leeches: “They burrowed through our gaiters and the strips of green canvas that the porters had wrapped around their calves and ankles in an attempt to seal them out. It wasn't until the end of the day, when we took off our sodden and blood-filled boots, that we could see their handiwork.”

Baker's book, though, is neither a catalog of suffering nor a simple travelogue. More than anything, it is an introduction to the precepts of Tibetan Buddhism, especially Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism—the path through which enlightenment can be attained in a single lifetime. And while Baker focuses more on his own spiritual journey than on the characters he encounters, some of them prove memorable. A Tibetan lama, good natured to the point of absurdity, accompanies Baker's group for part of the journey and seems to bring with him the only breaks from the rain. Baker's close friend Hamid is a kind of spiritual Lothario who manages to encounter attractive and willing partners in even the most dire and unlikely circumstances.

But ultimately it is the landscape that emerges as the strongest character. Baker's treks to the Tsangpo Gorge are for him both physical quests and spiritual quests, and his descriptions of the landscape are charged with meaning on both the physical and spiritual levels. In the artfully rendered, detailed descriptions of a leech-infested, rain-drenched, breathtakingly beautiful world, the book comes most to life.

—JOHANNA STOBEROCK