

DESTINATION SHANGHAI

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His recent book *Midnight in Peking* was a *New York Times* Bestseller, a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week, a Mystery Writers of America Edgar award winner for Best Fact Crime and a Crime Writers' Association (UK) Dagger award for non-fiction. His most recent work, *City of Devils: A Shanghai Noir* focuses on the dance-halls, casinos and cabarets of wartime Shanghai. Both *Midnight in Peking* and *City of Devils* have been optioned by Kudos.

French is also a regular contributor and book reviewer for various publications including *The Literary Hub*, the *Financial Times Weekend*, *Crime Reads* and *Real Crime*. He also occasionally works in radio drama with productions including *Death at the Airport: The Plot Against Kim Jong-nam* for BBC Radio 4.

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by

Paul French

BLACKSMITH BOOKS

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Introduction

The eighteen pieces contained in this collection cover the true experiences of a range of foreigners who, for one reason or another, came to Shanghai in the twentieth century. The earliest story is set in 1906 and the latest in 1977. Together their stories reflect the multitude of experiences and interactions foreigners had with the city. For most to hear the cry 'Destination Shanghai' was an exciting adventure, but for others it heralded the start of a life in exile, for some an attempt to escape their past.

They include the then famous and still well known such as the playwright Eugene O'Neill, the movie stars Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, and the poet Langston Hughes. Others were famous once but have since fallen from the public eye – the 'Charlie Chan' actor Warner Oland, the Broadway comic actress Lyda Roberti, the American vaudeville star Irene West. Others were known only to those living in the city at the time – the thief and swindler Elly Widler, or the cabaret dancer Terese Rudolph.

For most foreigners Shanghai was a place of escape or distraction of one sort or another – Eugene O'Neill sought refuge from the pressures of fame, the author Penelope Fitzgerald the sadness of widowhood, Lyda Roberti's family the Bolsheviks, Berlin silent movie star Lily Flohr the Nazis. O'Neill and Fitzgerald stayed only briefly; Roberti and Flohr longer but all eventually moved on – O'Neill and Fitzgerald to reawakened creativity; Roberti to stardom in Hollywood; Flohr to a safe retirement in Australia.

But these are not all stories with a happy ending. Eliza Shapera was trafficked to Shanghai from her home in Europe, forced into prostitution and murdered in her slum lodgings in 1907. The American conman C.C. Julian ended his Shanghai adventure overdosing in the Astor House Hotel.

All these stories show us various aspects of life in Shanghai. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford came to sell American

talking-picture technology to Asia's most advanced and largest movie making city; the young Australian singer and dancer Bobby Broadhurst to see the Far East's most lavish nightlife capital. The city's politics attracted others – the left-wing journalist Arthur Ransome, the writer André Malraux and an assortment of foreign communists who saw China as the next revolutionary centre. Some just washed up by chance – the future bestselling author Louis L'Amour as a merchant seaman; others, like the occultist Aleister Crowley, on a last-minute whim.

Whatever forces or reason brought these men and women to Shanghai they encountered an incredible city – modern, challenging, full of opportunities and pitfalls, a place to conquer or submit to. They came from different countries, at different moments to encounter very different Shanghais. But they all at some point heard the call 'Destination Shanghai'.

Paul French – September 2018