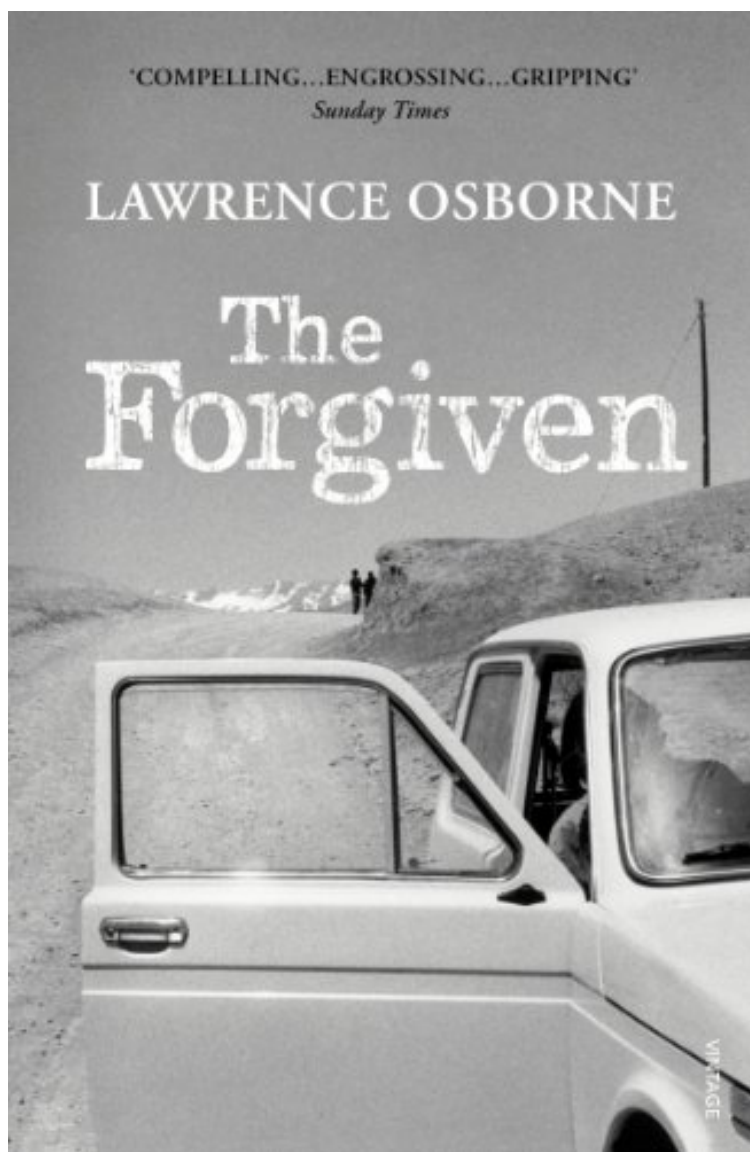


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The Forgiven



Par Lawrence Osborne
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'A modern Graham Greene' - Sunday TimesDavid and Jo Henniger are on their way to a party at their old friends home, deep in the Moroccan desert. But as a groggy David navigates the dark desert roads, two young men spring from the roadside, the car swerves and collides with one of the boys...Meanwhile, festivities at the house are in full flow. Under the watchful eyes of their Moroccan staff, the extravagant hosts attend to the whims of their glittering, insatiable guests as the party rages on into a new day. The stage is set for a weekend in which David and Jo must come to terms with their fateful act and its shattering consequences.ExtraitOneThey didnt see Africa until half past eleven. The mists broke apart and motorboats with European millionaires came swooping out of the blue with Sotogrande flags and a flash of

tumblers. The migrants on the top deck began to shoulder their bags, revived by the idea of home, and the look of anxiety that hovered in their faces began to dispel. Perhaps it was just the sun. Their secondhand cars stored in the hull revved as their children scattered about with oranges in their hands, and an energy seemed to reach out from the edge of Africa to the Algeiras ferry, polarizing it. The Europeans stiffened. Sunbathing in their deck chairs, the British couple were surprised by the height of the land. On the tops of the mountains stood white antenna masts like lighthouses made of wire, and the mountains had a feltlike greenness that made you want to reach out and touch them. The Pillars of Hercules had stood near here, where the Atlantic rushes into the Mediterranean. There are places that are destined to seem like gates. One cant avoid the sensation of being sucked through a portal. The Englishman, a doctor of a certain age, shaded his eyes with a hand bristling with ginger hairs. Even with the naked eye, they could make out the snaking outlines of roads that might have been there since Roman times. David Henniger thought, Perhaps itll be easier than we think, this drive. Perhaps itll be a pleasure after all. From a boom box near the flagpole came a few bars of rai, of Paris hip-hop. He watched his wife reading a Spanish paper, flicking the pages back and forth indifferently, then glanced down at his watch. People were waving from the approaching city, raising handkerchiefs and fingers, and Jo took off her shades for a moment to see where she was. He admired the frank confusion written all over her face. LAfrique. They went for a beer at the Hotel dAngleterre. It was not hot. The air was wet with recently broken mist. Con men and pretty guides danced around them while the sun drenched the terrace with a smell of varnish and peppercorns and stale beer. A laughing mood dominated the seedy expats and their hangers-on nursing their plates of unshelled nuts and their cooled gins. We were once the most formidable bohemians, their faces said to the newcomers, and now we are delightful, playful shits because we have no choice. The Hennigers had arranged for an agent to deal with the car rental, a man who would run back and forth with keys and contracts, and while they waited for him, they had a few beers with grenadine and some fried goat cheese cigares. He waited to form an impression. The streets seemed massively solid with their French facades, and there was a gritty shade at their bottom. The girls were swift and insolent, with adultery in their eyes. It wasnt bad. Im glad we arent staying, she said, biting her lip. Well stay on the way back. Itll be interesting. He took off his tie. His eyes felt intensely alive somehow and he wondered if she ever noticed these slight alterations of mood, of intention. I like it, he thought. I like it better than she does. Maybe well stay a little after the weekend. On the road to Chefchaouen, they didnt speak. The car rented from Avis Tangier was an old Camry, its brakes soft and its red leather torn. He drove it nervously in his perforated driving gloves, warily avoiding the women in ribboned straw hats who infested the hard shoulder, pushing mules ahead of them with sticks. The sun grew fierce; it was a long road bordered by stones and orange trees, and above it rose the hillside slums, the gimcrack apartment blocks, the antennas that decorate every middle-income city. One couldnt see the beginning or the end of it. There was just the taste of sea. All was dust. He drove on doggedly, determined to get out of the city as fast as possible. The light all day had finally worn his eyes down; the road was reduced to a geometric glare alive with hostile movements: animals, children, trucks, broken-down thirty-year-old Mercedes. The suburbs of Tangier were ruined, but the gardens were still there. And so were the crippled lemon trees and olives, the dogged disillusion and empty factories, the smell of seething young men. The Hotel Salam in Chefchaouen looked over a river called the Oued el Kebir and a gorge; the road on which it stood, avenue Hassan II, was a steep lane of hotels, for the Marrakech and the Madrid were just next door, and along it the city walls loomed up, white and monkish. The tour buses were already there; the salon was full of Dutch couples feeding upon mountains of turmeric eggs. The Hennigers were not sure whether to enter the hotel lounge and participate in this buffet orgy or to stay aloof. The Dutch looked frantic and disturbed, as if they hadnt eaten in days. David wondered if they were given sandwiches on their immense buses. They were faintly disgusting, with their big red faces and their beefy adolescent ruminants grazing around the buffet tables. He was hungry himself. Lets eat straightaway, he said excitedly, but not here. Perhaps outside, away from the Continental wildebeest? I wonder if one can get a drink that isnt Pellegrino Citrus? Fortunately the Salam had its own terrace and it was not too crowded. They took a table with views and ate their tagine citron with a bottle of cold Boullebemme. It was wine, at least, and he said a silent thank-you to it. Should you be drinking? she asked quietly. Oh, its just a glass. A glass of fly pee. This stuff is fly pee. Look at it. Its not fly pee. Its fourteen percent. You have to drive another five hours. She began to devour the salted olives at their table. David always took these sorts of remarks in his stride, and he settled down. Itll make it easier. I know its the lame excuse of every alcoholic. But it will. I shouldnt let you, Stumblebum. I would anyway. The roads are empty. What about the trees? There had been eleven years of this sort of contest; the exact, fastidious Jo

crossing lances with the bad-tempered David, who always felt that women were out to suppress the peccadilloes that made life half worth living. Why did they do this? Were they envious of life shimmering away with improvised masculine curiosities and pleasures without their consent? One had to ask the question. You could smile or not--it was up to you. Jo was ten years younger than him, a mere forty-one, but she acted like an ancient nanny. She enjoyed reproving him, pulling him back from tiny adventures that would have no consequences even if they were allowed to degenerate to their natural conclusions. Id never hit a tree anyway, he thought. Never in a thousand years. Not even in my sleep. She swallowed half a glass of the raw Moroccan wine and he raised an arch eyebrow. She wiped her mouth defiantly. The blood rushed into her brow, into the corners of her mouth. You always get what you want, David. Its our schema, isnt it?

You always do what you bloody want. Im not putting your life in danger. His voice was a little pleading. Thats absurd. Well see if its absurd, she thought. Also, he went on coolly, its patently not true. I very rarely, as you put it, get to do what I want. Most of the time, I am following orders. At the bottom of the gorge stood white houses with jars of salted lemons on their roofs. Around them, dogs barked in the palm groves, and the waiters at the Salam seemed subtly ashamed of them. One of the Dutch beauties floated in the little terrace pool, rotating slowly under the first stars while gazing at her own toes. He watched her with meticulous curiosity. Her breasts nicely rounded, parting the waters. The dinner was short and efficient, because their minds were racing ahead to the journey instead of enjoying the present moment. Afterward, he finished the remains of the Boulebbemme and cleaned his teeth with a pick from the center of the table. Something in his voice was not quite right. I feel like going for a walk. Lets get coffee up at the kasbah, no? The waiters here are making me feel gloomy. Avenue Hassan II led straight into the Bab El Hammar and the kasbah by way of the lovely place El Makhzen. In the first hour of dimming, the menfolk were out in force on the long square filled with trees, eager for debate in crisply laundered djellabas; they stood around in circular groups holding hands, fingering rosaries behind their backs. There was something shrill but paradoxically quiet about the masculine cleanliness, the speed of the children whistling about with shopping bags and peaches. The whitewash, the angular shadows. She gripped his hand, the marriage ring biting into his palm, and she held on to it as if it would provide long, consecutive moments of stability inside this flux. Did she need him more for a little while, just enough to get through this town? The petty disputes of the last few weeks melted away and in the end it was all just words and words, she thought, words that melt away easily as soon as you are in a strong enough sun and you are moving. They found a lopsided square with a fig tree where there was a Cafe du Miel with tables that all leaned to one side on the slope on cedarwood legs. It offered no drinks, but strong coffee with grains and a good smoke, and he felt at home at once. There was a saucer of cardamom seeds for the coffee and a plate of almond pastries. Small acts of delicacy. The streets were patriarchal, if you liked, but they possessed intimacy. The trees made delicate shadows on the underfoot stones. He stretched and dropped a cardamom pod into his coffee. I feel less tired now. I think this afternoon was the worst stretch. If we leave at seven, we can be there by midnight or so. Do you think theyll wait up? Theyll wait up. Were a large percentage of their weekend emotionally speaking. Theyll be boozing long past midnight. Or all night, she thought hopefully. Its not a military timetable, he said with more conciliation. If you want to stay here a night, I dont mind. I was thinking...two nights of party might well be more than enough. She shook her head. I dont want to, I want to get to Richards place. In a moment, her eyes brimmed over, and she felt an irrational hatred of the whole situation. It was the usual things. The heat and the thick coffee and the stickiness in the air and the tone in his voice. That clipped and impatient twang seemed to go so perfectly with the way the men in the cafes stared at them with their eyes held back in some way, yet sharpened by their provincial curiosity and used like pointed sticks to pry. She had thought a trip through the desert would give her ideas for a new book, but such calculations rarely pan out. What kind of new book after all? Instead, she was beginning to feel boxed in by the schedule to which they had to stick, and the men in the street stared and stared and their hands played with rosaries on the surfaces of the tables. They stared so hard she felt her center of gravity giving way. They stared with a blank hatred, but it was equally possible that it was not hatred but a sense of unconscious superiority that did not even need to be conscious in order to put the other in her place. Itll be all right, he said tersely. We know theyre repressed and enraged. They treat their woman like donkeys. For them, you are an escaped donkey. She looked away, and she was gripping her napkin. I hate it when you say that. Why? Its true, isnt it? It doesnt matter if it is. I would say it mattered, he countered. I would say it mattered if they disliked your presence because of your sex. Im sure it isnt that. And you have no idea how they treat their women--none. He laughed and picked up a cardamom with two fingers. She was being sophistic. Well, have it your way, Miss Feminist. Wanting to show off his

French, he asked the owner of the Cafe du Miel seated at the next table how hot it was in the desert. The Moroccans went into the usual exaggerations. Vous allez souffrir, vous allez voir. Mais ci beau, ci tres beau. On the walk back to the Salam, he took her hand. The dogs were so loud in the gorge that he couldnt relax; his mind began to turn with a pitiless inertia all its own. Had it been a good idea, he wondered, this extravagance, this sudden departing, this rush to amusement? All for the sake of fun and friendship and three days under a fiercer sun. He knew she hadnt wanted to come. But something in him enjoyed the coercion he was imposing upon her. He liked pissing people off when he thought their irritations sprang from their rigidity and hypocrisy, and hers certainly did. He thought of himself as a cleansing agent, a purifier of other peoples prejudice. She would be better off for it in the long run, he was certain, and as he thought this, a delicious pity crept into his calculations, a grim tenderness that had no actual purpose relative to his wife. It was like tending a pasture, clipping the edges with a sharp pair of shears. Keeping order with love and keeping the monsters at bay. The Spanish Mosque was lit up, the water on the terrace pool flashing as the wind hit it. Two men walked arm in arm down Hassan II, whispering intently. No women on the streets now; it was the hour of men. Their eyes were upon the tall blonde in her worn cotton dress and red sandals, her jewelry and freckles. There was evidently a pleasure simply in tracking such a gazelle (that was the word they liked). Her gait that hoped to conceal itself from sexual curiosity, not quite a womans sassy walk. They could easily guess that she was a writer, an intellectual, just as they could guess that he was a doctor and a bore. David and Jo got into the car. He opened the Michelin map and struggled to find the fine red line that was the route they had to follow without fail. She kissed his cheek, and there was sand between her lips, just as there was sand on his face. It was already everywhere, and it irritated him. The granules itched inside his ears. Revue de presse "Compelling. Engrossing. Gripping" (Sunday Times) "Surprising and dark and excellent" (New York Times) "A sinister story about guilt, atonement and restitution, fashioned from lean, prowling prose" (Herald) "More than a stylish thriller. The central plot has parallels with The Bonfire of the Vanities, while the socialites could be straight out of The Great Gatsby" (Stylist) "A gripping read" (Kirkus)