

## Jean-Marie Blas de Roblès

# Midnight Mountain

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**BIOGRAPHY** Born in 1954 in Sidi-Bel-Abbès, Algeria, Jean-Marie Blas de Roblès spent his adolescence in the department of Var, in southern France. He studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, history at the Collège de France, and sailed in long-distance regattas on the Mediterranean. Appointed director of the *Maison de la culture française* at the University of Fortaleza in Brazil, he also taught there before being transferred to the People's Republic of China. He gave the University of Tianjin's first courses ever on Sartre and Roland Barthes at the end of the Cultural Revolution. His first novel, *L'Impudeur des choses*, was published in 1987. After a stay in Tibet he took the Trans-Siberian Railroad to his new appointment at the University of Palermo in Italy. His third novel was begun in Taiwan, where he gave up teaching to devote himself to writing. He traveled to Peru, Yemen and Indonesia. In 1990 he began to publish essays and poetic texts in journals. A member of the French Archaeological Mission in Libya since 1986, he has participated every summer in underwater excavations of Apollonia in Cyrenaica, and of Leptis Magna and Sabratha in Tripolitania. He created and currently directs Edisud's "Archéologies" series in which he has published several works on archaeology for the general public. He also edits the journal *Aouras*, devoted to archaeological research in the Aurès region of Algeria.

**PUBLICATIONS** *Là où les tigres sont chez eux*, Zulma, 2008 (Prix Médicis 2008) (republished *J'ai lu*, 2010); *Le Rituel des dunes*, Seuil, 1989; *L'Impudeur des choses*, Seuil, 1987.



At the center of this novel is an extraordinary character: Bastien, caretaker of a Jesuit secondary school, who has a secret passion for everything concerning Tibet and Lamaism. Kept out of things in his neighborhood for some obscure reason, the old man lives a life more solitary than a Buddhist monk. The adventure begins in Lyon, with an encounter between the old sage and Rose, who has just moved in together with her little Paul. Attracted by the man's strangeness, Rose becomes

so attached to him that she makes it possible for him to accomplish the journey of his life ...

Truths and lies, wrongs and redemption interweave and incite in this novel that, with calculated casualness, examines the "nonsense machines" of contemporary History. A novel with a message, perhaps, *Midnight Mountain*, under the joys of pure romance, reads like an intrepid exploration of knowledge and illusion.

My little Paul ... I feel a bit silly still calling you that—and the young man that you are must think the same thing about his "old" mother—but, well, that's the way it is.

Thank you, first of all, for showing me the first pages of your novel. It's a token of your trust that touches me deeply, believe me. But after that, what can I say? I'm not a good reader, and in any case, as you know, we don't have the same taste. So you won't hold it against me if I don't express an opinion on your text. It's not that I'm refusing to do it, but I'm just plain incapable. This story is mine, and I can't glance at even one line of it without reviving the feeling of guilt associated with it in my memory. There is even, I'll admit, a bit of shame—almost obscenity, even if the word is a bit strong—at seeing my own life spread out like this, a bit of resentment too at feeling myself dispossessed of it.

I'm trying to be sincere, you can see that, but I want you to know that I don't hold it against you for a single second. By telling you this part of our past, I myself gave it to fiction: that of my memories, no doubt subjective and incomplete, and that which you are fabricating now for people who will appropriate without realizing it an intimate part of what I am.

Bastien was very close to the picture you give of him: naturally, since I'm the one who over the years painted this portrait in your mind, but it's too vague to really do him justice. I alone am responsible for this lack of precision. You won't be annoyed, I hope, if I touch it up a bit today.

When Monsieur Lhermine came to see us, for instance, he had put on his Sunday best. A threadbare black suit, a shoestring tie dangling from a big

rumpled collar, a bag of chocolates in his hand, you would have thought he was an immigrant from eastern Europe. For over an hour he sat paralyzed on a corner of the sofa without touching his fruit juice. I could hardly get him to say a word, and when he asked if I was spending Christmas with my family, my parents, I was the one at a loss. I told him my father had passed away years ago, but I lied about *maman*. I don't know what got into me, I invented a story that she was on a pilgrimage to Auschwitz. To Auschwitz, what an idiot! I felt so stupid that I then talked about her past in the Resistance in Lyon, to explain her desire to visit the camp. A truth for a falsehood, that gives a semblance of truth anyway ... I still wonder if he believed me, but he certainly seemed to and started to reminisce about Fort Montluc, the Franc-Garde militiamen headquartered at the Jesuit Fathers' school on Rue Sainte-Hélène, right next door to us, so much so that he gave me the impression that he had been a Resistance fighter himself. I didn't have a chance to ask him, because you came in with the present prepared for him: a post card representing the Dalai Lama that you had chosen yourself during our last vacation. And what a shock that was! His face was transformed; it was suddenly filled with light. The photo trembled in his hands, his gaze passed from you to me, seeking an explanation. His whole being showed that you had come as close as possible to touching what he lived for. Words almost flowed out of him: though he had never gone there, Tibet had always been his sole passion, he had devoted his existence to it; did we know what a mandala was?—and he was addressing you as well as me when he said that—Lamaism, you understand, more than a philosophy, more than a religion, how can I put it ... And it's a child who is giving me this picture! Incredible, I can't believe it, he kept repeating, in two failed attempts to develop his thought.

His agitation was so great that he stopped talking for a moment to drink his fruit juice down in one gulp and ask my permission to pour himself some more.

So, the more time goes by, the more I'm convinced that everything was set in motion at that instant. Then, I felt obliged to admit to my own fascination with that country. At my level, of course, not like him—and there I said under what circumstances I had caught sight of him in the library of the Maison de l'Orient—for me it was mainly because of Alexandra David-Neél, of those adventure-filled journeys that I would undoubtedly never be able to undertake. Which led us to the Digne museum during our vacation, and this post card that had just lit a very big spark.

"It is still a sign," he said, taking you by the hand, "something very important for me. If you're a bit interested in Tibet, you know that coincidences don't exist, there are only necessary encounters."

Something that I never told you either: a few days after he came to our house, I had to keep an important appointment for my work; a specialist of

Pompeian painting was passing through Lyon, she had only two hours to give me, in the middle of the afternoon; you were napping and I couldn't get hold of your baby-sitter ... In desperation, I went up to Bastien's and asked him if he couldn't come keep an eye on you. He seemed surprised for a moment, but accepted right away. Before leaving, I warned him that you might wake up screaming because of your noise phobia: "Maman, there's an animal in the ceiling ..." I don't think you remember, but the slightest creaking above your bed threw you into immeasurable terror. Wolves, monsters, witches? I never managed to get a single word out of you about what was haunting you, which made it seem all the more frightening to me. At that time, I had even begun thinking seriously of taking you to see a child psychologist. You know my doubts about the effectiveness of this practice—that shows how worried I was about those inexplicable frights.

I was not happy about leaving you in his company, and to tell the truth, during my whole interview I kept thinking about what that awful woman had hinted to me on the staircase. I took a taxi to get home more quickly, but when I came in and heard your childish giggle, I realized I'd been wrong to worry so: you were both at the kitchen table, and he had used my extra butter to help you model all kinds of figurines! Rams' heads, flames, skulls, dragons that you were daubing with the splashy colors of your poster paints ... I was staggered.

"I'll reimburse you for the butter, of course," he said sheepishly.

I'm still annoyed for getting all muddled in my denials, unable to show I didn't give a damn about the butter because I was so relieved, delirious with joy at finding you unharmed and so happy in his company! Before leaving, he took me aside: I shouldn't worry anymore about your ceiling phobia, the two of you had discussed it when you'd started bawling at the noise of the upstairs neighbor's vacuum cleaner ... At the time, I remember finding him a wee bit presumptuous. The fact remains that from that day on you were never again frightened by noise, whether it came from the ceiling or elsewhere. My maternal pride took a knock, I'll admit, but only the result counted, even if I still wonder today what Bastien could have invented to restore your confidence so durably.

Three weeks later, in any case, we left together for Tibet.