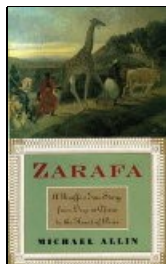


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**Book Review**

**Zarafa**

*A Giraffe's True Story, from Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris*

by [Michael Allin](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer  
Posted: June 6, 2006

In 1827, the viceroy of Egypt, a former Albanian soldier named Muhammad Ali, decided to send a giraffe as a present to King Charles X of France.

The present was intended to win French support, or at least apathy, when Muhammad Ali carried out an attack that he was planning. In the end the present didn't have the intended effect, but it did make possible a gentle spectacle for thousands of people in France who had never seen, or even imagined, such a creature.

The chosen present, a female giraffe who was small at about twelve feet high, never seems to have been given a real name. Michael Allin calls her Zarafa, the Arabic word from which giraffe is derived. The word means "lovely." In graceful and well-researched prose, he recounts how Zarafa was transported down the Nile and carried across the Mediterranean in a ship. A hole cut in the maindeck allowed her head and neck to enjoy the fresh air while she was actually standing below.

Once Zarafa reached Marseilles, her handlers faced a problem they don't seem to have fully considered. How would she get from there to Paris, a lengthy journey by sea and a slow one by land at a time when France had no railroads? In the end, Zarafa *walked* to Paris, and people living along the 550-mile route from Marseilles to the capital gathered in crowds to watch her pass through villages and fields of crops. She allowed herself to be tamely led and even seemed to enjoy her journey, gaining strength and liveliness on her way to Paris, where she lived for many years.

Though it publishes a wide variety of titles, including the excellent New Orleans mysteries of [James Sallis](#), Walker Books may be best known for elegant small-scale works of nonfiction focused on specific corners of the world: books like [Cod](#) and [Brunelleschi's Dome](#). *Zarafa* is a welcome addition to these books.

**About the Reviewer**

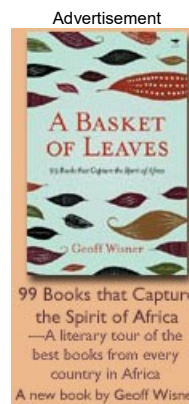
[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at [www.geoffwisner.com](http://www.geoffwisner.com).

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—Mahatma Gandhi

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