



Abu Jmeel's Daughter and Other Stories: Arab Folk Tales from Palestine and Lebanon

Jamal Sleem Nuweihed

Salma K. Jayyusi

Salma K. Jayyusi, Editor

C. Tingley, Translator

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Abu Jmeel's daughter, Rida, [was] utterly lacking in beauty. She was very short and disfigured by the marks of smallpox, her eyes were as small as beads, and she had crinkly short hair, while her mouth was large and her teeth quite uneven. Still, she was clever and had an instinctive understanding of the world.

So begins the title story in this exquisite collection. Although Rida isn't beautiful, she triumphs in the tale because she is obedient and honorable—persistent themes in this anthology. The author, a Lebanese-Turkish woman, wrote down these stories from her own repertoire in 1990, at her niece's request. Nuweihed had first heard the tales from female relatives and storytellers during her childhood in Lebanon and Palestine in the early 1900s.

Although Nuweihed possessed a keen intellect, and wrote novels and poetry, she was seldom allowed to leave her home, and so she remained isolated from the literary community. These tales reflect her circumstances. While the female protagonists are intelligent and capable, their worlds are circumscribed; they know little of the universe outside their garden walls. The male protagonists travel far and wide, their only boundaries imposed by bad luck. Too, women are punished for not being submissive. In "The Tailor's Daughter," Nisreen insults the king's son after he makes an insolent comment to her. In retaliation, he marries her and then banishes her to the cellar for seven years, saying, "I can never forget those words she used to me." Through ingenuity and patience, Nisreen finally bests the prince and he forgives her.

Each of the stories has been chosen and translated by the author's daughters, son, nephew, niece, and grandchildren. Magical birds, beautiful genies, clever sons, and beautiful daughters populate these pages. Readers of all ages will enjoy the delightful and timeless narratives in this family heirloom.

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