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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ GENERAL FICTION

Light of the Desert

Lucette Walters
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Walters's poignant novel puts a human face on "honor killings" while tapping into the universal quandaries surrounding faith, hope, guilt, and familial love.

The moral consequences of religiously motivated killings are but one theme explored in Lucette Walters's compelling debut novel, *Light of the Desert*.

In early 1990s Jordan, Noora Fendil is the favorite child of her father, Farid, a rich Islamic businessman whose ideals straddle East and West. Jealous of Noora, her younger sister, Zaffeera, embarks on a deadly plan to discredit her older sister so that she can literally take her place.

In some Islamic countries, in some circumstances, it is considered just to kill a woman who dishonors the family name; such acts are known as "honor killings." Zaffeera sets in motion a plot that she hopes will result in her sister's death. She plans to lead Noora astray and catch the dishonorable actions on film, so that Farid will kill Noora to reclaim the Fendil honor. Left for dead, Noora escapes to safety with the help of her brother, where she finds refuge with a nomadic tribe, then in France, then in California. She never loses hope that she may one day return to Jordan.

Walters's poignant novel puts a human face on a shocking practice unknown to many Westerners while tapping into the universal quandaries surrounding faith, hope, guilt, and familial love. Noora, Zaffeera, and Farid all are well-rounded, dynamic characters who change and grow throughout the story. While remaining sweet and loving, Noora acquires courage throughout the novel. Her quiet fortitude proves bravery takes many forms; her force of will inspires those who feel helpless. While depicted as envious, one understands Zaffeera's motivations without agreeing with them because the author excels at showing how Zaffeera always chafes at being in Noora's shadow. Additionally, Walters effortlessly captures the hybrid worlds of East and West, of tradition and modernity, that the Fendil family inhabits.

In the following exchange, Zaffeera overhears her father talking to a sheik at his mosque before she and Noora are scheduled to leave Jordan for college: "'sending your daughters to a foreign country alone. It is not done…Your daughters must have a bodyguard.'" Farid reluctantly agrees, believing his daughters to be responsible enough to fend for themselves. The author makes liberal use of Arabic and French phrases, translating them into English. The use of these phrases makes the locales Noora travels to seem vivid and real. Also, the author adds descriptions to her natural settings, with the "calm Red Sea shimmering like glass," for example.

Zaffeera goes from understandably jealous to downright vile. As the story alternates between the family Noora is forced to leave behind and her flight from place to place, the book becomes a page-turner as we race to see how the stories will reconnect. Zaffeera's slip into increasing depravity, coupled with Farid's conflicting feelings over condemning Noora to death, also ups the suspense.

Anyone who likes human dramas of epic proportions with a window into Eastern cultures should enjoy this novel.

JILL ALLEN (May 8, 2014)

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