

Mecca Pimp: A Novel of Love and Human Trafficking

Bernard Radfar

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Crime, mania, violence, and revenge spin together in this whirlwind of a thriller.

Everyone knows at least one couple for whom jealousy and possessiveness outweigh the benefits of affection or security, yet the unhealthy fixation keeps them locked together. What if such a couple were two super-smart, super-rich criminals utterly, insanely obsessed with each other? Hate indistinguishable from love swirls at the center of the vicious world of Bernard Radfar's novel *Mecca Pimp: A Novel of Love and Human Trafficking*.

The thriller focuses on Mark and Mary Black, an estranged couple with a history of domestic abuse. Mark runs a worldwide network of alcohol smuggling and human trafficking into Saudi Arabia. As the novel begins, Mark is in Riyadh and Mary is in New York. Mark keeps tabs on Mary through private investigators and shady friends. Mary seeks, unsuccessfully, to escape Mark. Her picaresque voyage makes up the majority of the book, with frequent asides in the form of courtroom documents, articles, and Mark's correspondence with various detectives and criminals.

When Mary meets a massive blind Japanese man, Aki, in a cave in New York, even though the two are not sexually involved at first, a full-blown love affair develops. Later, an older Indian woman with peculiar fetishes joins them as they travel across the world. Mark, meanwhile, continues to keep an eye on his globe-trotting wife and her companions, trying at times to get his people to infiltrate the close-knit trio, and at other times to kill them outright. Mary has rather dark plans of her own.

While ostensibly "a novel of love and human trafficking," *Mecca Pimp* is only tangentially about the sex trade, and whatever love is involved is completely consumed by Mark and Mary's hatred for each other. At no point does the love they so frequently profess and agonize over ever feel like more than the word of the mentally ill. The reader never truly gets to understand them as lovers, only ever as enemies. They are both extraordinarily violent people. As for the secondary characters, seldom do they matter much except as potential collateral damage.

The epistolary structure of the novel takes some getting used to. The beginning is jumpy and difficult to penetrate, but the more the story focuses on Mary, the more coherent it is. Radfar uses a storytelling structure he does not fully control, with information of no particular moment or consequence flung regularly at the reader. The novel suffers for this, feeling haphazard. From the very beginning, there's a lot going on, but the story lacks a solid narrative momentum.

Perhaps this is just what Radfar intended with *Mecca Pimp*. Perhaps while luring the reader in with the sensationalistic title, erotic cover art, and premise of an obsessive love story, what he's really done is shown the reader that a love/hate relationship is in fact a relationship of hatred and madness.

JASON HENNINGER (February 28, 2014)

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