Now and Then: Two Stories and Two Essays

Salah el Moncef
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Made up of four profound pieces, this literary collection reimagines identity beyond one’s nation-state; it observes the discordance of the diaspora.

Salah el Moncef's literary collection Now and Then includes elements of social and literary criticism, as well as stories of loyalty, betrayal, acceptance, antipathy, nationalism, and transnationalism.

“Benghazi” and “The Night Visitor,” the fiction pieces in the book, are narrated by women whose selfhood is challenged in the multicultural worlds they occupy. In “Benghazi,” Mariam is a stymied memoir writer who works to commit to paper her memories of growing up in Italian fascist-ruled Libya during the 1930s and 1940s. Her manuscript makes up the bulk of “Benghazi” and recalls her family’s commitment to loyalty and political freedom.

Mariam’s father is a businessman and an antifascist who resents the Bedouin opportunists who capitulated to Italy’s colonization; her mother, a Turkish aristocrat, insists that Mariam and her sister attend the “Mussolini school,” which they do to preserve their family’s unity. When Mussolini visits the school, the sisters are chosen to welcome him; their father repudiates their participation, leading to angst. It’s an evocative, layered tale that draws both parallels and contradictions between the disciplinarian family patriarch and the tyrannical rule of a colonizing despot.

In “The Night Visitor,” Nausicaa, a schoolteacher in Paris, goes on holiday with friends and meets Madani, a Berber calligrapher whose presence, appearance, and conversation irritate her. She’s a self-proclaimed “post-racial woman” and is adamant that her criticisms of Madani aren’t biased, even though she calls out his African origins, dreadlocks, and incongruity. Instead, Nausicaa claims, it’s her friends’ beatific attitude toward Madani and his misogyny that vexes her. But then Nausicaa experiences a bewildering event that rattles her self-assurance.

The book’s two essays are “A Bridge Too Near” and “The Voice of the Exile.” The former envisions a borderless world in which the citizen-versus-alien dichotomy is nullified and in which human beings live in integrated, transnational spaces. It draws on an anecdote for this: In Paris, el Moncef notices a banner attached to Pont des Arts that declares “No human being is an alien on this earth.” The bridge, onto which lovers also affix padlocks to display their commitment, is redefined by these two acts of détournement; in el Moncef’s view, its meaning shifts to represent a “collective declaration vowing to bind all human beings.” With its utopian ideology that reconceptualizes “multiethnic coexistence,” the essay is rousing in its explorations of possibilities.

Lastly, “The Voice of the Exile” is the author’s response to a review of his novel The Offering, in which a displaced Tunisian national lives in France as an “embodiment of the manifold symptoms of shock and dislocation experienced by the Maghrebi [Arab] diaspora.” El Moncef’s hero is called a victim of “social in-betweenness,” which depersonalizes his existence in both his native country and in France. The essay continues el Moncef’s exploration of multiculturalism and the concepts of transnationalism. To appreciate the work’s scope and intent, however, familiarity with The Offering is recommended.

Source: https://www.forewordreviews.com/reviews/now-and-then/
Now and Then is a fascinating literary collection whose stories are lustrous and lush and whose essays are erudite and theoretical.

AMY O'LOUGHLIN (October 4, 2022)

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