



Santa Claus in Baghdad and Other Stories about Teens in the Arab World

Elsa Marston

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Westerners are bombarded with disturbing pictures of Muslims in news and popular culture. Depictions of slayings, bombings, and disruptions to the Middle East peace process are a daily occurrence. Rarer, but just as unsettling, are reports of “honor crimes”: when a highly traditional Muslim family feels that a female family member has behaved inappropriately with a member of the opposite sex, the family, usually the father, will kill her or have her killed to wipe out her shame.

Though few examples of popular culture depict Arabs in a positive light, Marston’s collection is one of the exceptions. Eight Muslim teen narrators are hopeful in the face of poverty, grief, and despair. The author, who worked and traveled extensively to the Middle East, has an uncanny ability to understand the Muslim culture and relay her characters’ innermost thoughts to Western audiences.

The short story’s most important function is to transport readers to another time and place, a feat which Marston achieves admirably. Her collection translates pertinent yet dispiriting facts about Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and Tunisia into short story format. Few readers, for instance, are familiar with the fact that in the case of divorce a Muslim woman automatically loses rights to her children but may keep her gold. Marston’s “Hand of Fatima” includes a father who bestows a golden trinket on his daughter. Many of the author’s stories demonstrate the Arab people’s great generosity. The titular story has an O. Henry “Gift of the Magi,” quality to it. A little Iraqi boy wants Santa Claus to visit his hometown so badly that he envisages his rich uncle from America is the jolly commercial icon. Amal, who inadvertently encouraged this connection, worries that she will be blamed for Bilaal’s delusion. All Uncle Omar has brought for the children in this time of shortage—during the 2000 embargo against Iraq—are medical supplies.

In near heroic acts, a father sells his last prized possession to buy his aggrieved son a single, miniature toy; and the main narrator, Amal, sacrifices all she owns to give a departing literature teacher a proper send-off. These lively stories, with their open-ended questions, will provoke spirited book discussions for teens and adults.

The most wrenching of the stories has to do with the plight of girls in the Middle East. Girls like Aneesi in “Fatima’s Hand,” must give up their only chance of betterment—an education—for opportunities for their brothers. In Aneesi’s case she takes a chance and hires herself as a maid in Lebanon. Fortunately, the family she finds is somewhat merciful, though still disdainful of her lower socioeconomic status. To make matters even worse for Aneesi, her father wants to arrange a marriage for her. While this is a common situation in many Middle Eastern households, it once again places Aneesi in danger. Left unended, “Fatima’s Hand” leaves readers to wonder whether Aneesi chooses a traditional filial role or a more precarious fate.

The story “Honor,” disturbing even in light of the somewhat happy ending, juxtaposes two Jordanian teenagers with differing religious views. Wafa, who has a more traditional upbringing, opens Jasmine’s eyes to the problem of honor crimes—a situation that, according to the endnotes, is on the resurgence. According to Marston, an average of twenty-five honor crimes occur in Jordan each year. These horrific crimes, which the story shines a spotlight on, have also

occurred recently in Germany, among its Turkish population, in Muslim communities. One can only hope that the women's rescue groups mentioned in this story proliferate.

When Americans hear of honor crimes or terrorist bombings, it is easy to forget that those actions do not reflect the views of everyone in the Muslim community. Marston's stories, while withholding nothing of the brutality of some of the more controversial aspects of Muslim life, present characters that are three-dimensional and easy to empathize with. Her stories are filled with characters who are heroic, generous, and eager to improve their world.

CHANTAL WALVOORD (June 16, 2008)

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