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Foreword Review RELIGION

The Book of Rumi: 105 Stories and Fables that Illumine, Delight, and Inform

Rumi
Maryam Mafi, Translator
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Maryam Mafi's luminous translation brings the Persian poet Rumi's distinctive and timeless Sufi lessons to a new audience, transforming the original verses into prose that conveys the vibrancy of the medieval setting while also sounding fresh.

Populated with fools and wise men, the regal and enslaved, prophets and unbelievers, these homilies, parables, and portraits explore faith in God and human relationships with unusual insight. Their simplicity, rather than seeming diluted, reveals a talent for cutting to the essence of high and low subjects. Elements of Aesop's bestiary mingle with tales inspired by the Quran and everyday life. Jesus of Nazareth appears alongside unnamed dervishes. From the plausible to the allegorical, Rumi's encounters provide morals that are sometimes clearly stated and sometimes cloaked in mystery, but often connected to the war between the flesh and the spirit.

Whether considering chickpeas alongside humans who question their place, or misguided pity and impudence in a man who assumes that a firewood gatherer needs his charity, Rumi reveals his characters' pride in their own worth. No matter how familiar his themes are—the power of words to harm and heal, the folly in getting a fool to change his ways—they are reworked into memorable scenarios. Narguess Farzad, in a useful foreword that provides historical background, makes a convincing argument for Rumi's continuing value in modern society.

It's no accident that several stories repeat ideas, though in different, colorful guises. Time and again Rumi urges his readers to find wisdom by looking beyond the superficial details of business dealings, romance, and neighborly encounters. When a dervish declares that "the signs of the Beloved … are imprinted on one's heart," it is as pertinent to the entire collection as it is to the particular moment that inspires it. This beautifully produced volume is a welcome introduction to a classic poet's work.

KAREN RIGBY (November/December 2018)

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