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Literary

The Dark Side of Love
Rafik Schami
Anthea Bell, translator
Interlink Books
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Farid Mushtak and Rana Shahin share the best and the worst kind of love: the star-crossed variety riddled with secret meetings, love letters written in code, constant uncertainty, blissful afternoons spent hidden together in the dark of the cinema, and fraught separations during which they cannot even be sure of the other's survival. Theirs is not a new story—Romeo and Juliet are well known, even to the characters in *The Dark Side of Love*—but Rafik Schami has forged a new way of telling it. The resulting novel is extraordinary, exquisite, and entirely its own creature.

Schami's novel isn't just about Farid and Rana and their struggle to be together. Set against the tumultuous backdrop of the dusty village of Mala and the teeming town of Damascus—"Once you start talking about Damascus you must be careful not to founder, for Damascus is a sea of stories." *The Dark Side of Love* departs often from the main, compelling story to explore the multi-generational history of hate that festers between the Mushtak and Shahin clans. Neighbors, friends, acquaintances, the man selling flowers in a little shop—all of these characters and more unfold under the exacting gaze of this Syrian-born novelist. Readers will not be disappointed by his expert pen.

Schami writes in the last section of the book, "Mosaic is the form for a story like this, I thought, a story with a thousand and one pieces in it, doing justice to life in Arabia with all its flaws." Using mosaic as a model, Schami shapes his stories first into numbered sections which are fit into books with labels such as "Book of Love I," "Book of Laughter IV," and "Book of Hell." Readers follow a path that doubles back over the deserts of time so that the characters we meet are more fully rendered and knowable.

Romance, mystery, family saga, political exploration—*The Dark Side of Love* takes on many shapes. This is an enthralling page-turner that will invite readers to find out how the

pieces fit together; it also offers prose as succulent as sweetmeats that begs to be savored. (July)
Andi Diehn