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General

The Gardens of Light
Amin Maalouf
Amin Maalouf Translated by Dorothy S. Blair
Dorothy S. Blair, translator
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In his fifth highly acclaimed novel, The Gardens of Light, Amin Maalouf graces his readers with beauty and mysticism. Winner of the 1993 Prix Goncourt for his novel The Rock of Tanios, Maalouf is known for taking a historical figure of whom little save the bare bones is known and fleshing out a living man with such vivacity as to produce a hauntingly present tale.

In the Gardens of Light, Maalouf unravels the story of Mani, a prophet born in the land of Babel (present day Iran) in the third century. Taken as a small child by a severely ascetic cult, Mani is brought up beneath the doctrine that pleasure equals sin. Slowly, he develops his own ideas about the divine through the cultivation of his talents as a painter and the discovery of a powerful inner voice. This “twin” as he calls him, leads Mani to renounce the White Clad Brethren and set out on a mission to spread his divine message.

A mixture of Persian Zoroastrianism, Christian Gnosticism and Buddhism, among other beliefs, Mani’s message emphasizes the divinity of beauty, light, humility, nonviolence and above all, the acceptance of all peoples and faiths which seek truth through the nature of the divine. Facing tremendous opposition from religious leaders who crave political domination, Mani speaks thus, “Two-legged wolves are those who consider others as their prey; those who constantly seek to subdue, overpower, punish, humiliate…A man may happen to believe himself the guardian of a message whereas he is nothing but the coffin in which it lies buried.”

The Gardens of Light follows Mani’s ascent to chief counselor to the King of Kings of the Sassanian Dynasty through to his eventual imprisonment and treacherous assassination. The historical information Maalouf lends to the story adds realism as well as excitement as the reader witnesses the struggle for power between the Roman and the Sassanian Empires amidst a people who worship fire and gluttony. Maalouf’s stark, easy-to-follow prose reflects Mani’s

own teachings; at the heart of its simplicity is a richly illuminating and thought provoking garden of light. Highly recommended for anyone who has an interest in Middle Eastern history, truth seeking, adventure or travel to far off places.

Jennifer Sperry