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Historical

The House that War Minister Built
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The House that War Minister Built is a novel that may shake the neat structure and quaint romance of typical historical fiction with its authentic raw voices and its breadth of historic sweep.

It is 1929 in a sequestered palace in Tehran, at the foot of the Alborz Mountains. The voice is that of the aging but pious Nargess, second wife to the Qajar Dynasty's War Minister, Nahdeer. So begins a story that spans over one hundred years of her extended family's witness to the paradigm shift from the Qajar (est. 1794) to the Pahlavi Dynasty (est. 1925).

Nargess (a variant of "Narcissia"), is the first of five voices that spin stories of intricate familial escapades; emotional and political; scandalous and amusing. Upon the arrival of the first Ford motorcar from Belgium, Nargess's well-intended horseman Hashem's efforts to start the machine blow up the engine and, "…with smoke and backfires the automobile burst into the orchards, terrifying the congregated peasants … and a rumor spread … that the fire and smoke heralded the arrival of Satan himself–the return of the absent Imam at the end of the world!" The book's humorous anecdotes, while entertaining, are the vehicle for darker themes.

The dual themes of belonging and decay emerge. The emotional voices of the characters are carefully twisted into culturally accurate motivations guiding the actions of each: "…was there no place on Earth for them," thought Nargess's daughter Pari, "no place not polluted by oil and power and death?" The authenticity and beauty of the Persian poetry and the intensity of description combines in a whipsawing tandem. For example, while chiding War Minister's son Vali for his dallying with a mistress, Nargess recites a line from Rumi, "Love of gold is dross, love of beauty sin," and in the next scene, War Minister deflowers his son Vali's beloved Rakshandeh, "His Father said nothing, but stood beside the vomiting Vali (high on opium), threatening him with his dangling genitals." With such excesses, it is no surprise that Nargess's

“journey of her heart” follows the slow and sometimes violent decay of War Minister’s power and his eventual assassination at the hands of General Z, the “vile and fawning weasel of Reza Khan Shah” and extends into the post 9/11 U.S./Iraq conflict.

Complex in its approach; there are five interwoven storylines that include several main characters and a sky full of dimmer stars. Readers will navigate the galaxy through the character list provided. Those unfamiliar with Iranian history and culture will appreciate the glossary at the end. Begun as an impulse to record the family’s amazing history in Iran, the novel, while character driven, evokes a rich landscape of both the human heart and the Persian heartland.

Thoroughly educational, entertaining, and at times bluntly grotesque, *The House That War Minister Built* may take an investment in time, but its intrigues will have the reader surfing over to the Dayton’s website, where the Harvard post doctorates may leave some clues about their next book.

Kai White