

The Quince Seed Potion

Morteza Baharloo

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An unlikely hero sold into indentured servitude, a country in social turmoil, a dash of sexual intrigue, and a pinch of murder—the perfect remedy for reader lethargy—are all found in this epic tale flavored with the exoticism of Persia.

The story begins with the birth of Sarveali Jokar, who is orphaned and turned over to the care of his uncle, who sexually abuses him before selling him into the service of a great dynastic Iranian family, the Khans. The book then follows the lives and changing fortunes of Sarveali and his masters, from the relatively peaceful times of 1928 to the more turbulent era of change ending with the Islamic revolution in 1979.

The author was born in Iran and immigrated to the U.S. in 1978. He now lives in Houston, where he is chairman and co-founder of Healix, Ltd., a Texas-based international provider of pharmaceutical and health-care services. This is his first novel.

A central motif of the book is Sarveali's devotion to his master Teimour Khan. Homoerotic suggestion runs throughout the story. To his shame, a mere whiff of Teimour Khan's after-shave while he lifts "his master's shirt, scented with cologne, to his face" is enough to excite Sarveali; meanwhile, he finds consummating his marriage to his beautiful wife, Yazgulu, an impossible feat. He even derives a perverse pleasure and pride from knowing that his master is sleeping with Yazgulu.

The story recounts Sarveali's symbolic quest for a remedy to his human and social condition as a member of Iran's uneducated peasant class. Without a deep understanding of his environment or of himself, yet with an acute awareness of his suffering, he naively seeks a magic potion to transform his life. He wonders whether the quince seed potion, which the mistress of the house claims is a cure-all, will banish his homosexual urges so that he can father a child with Yazgulu. Instead of seeking education and enlightenment as an antidote to his powerlessness, he finds freedom and fearlessness in alcohol or "God's cocktail" and opium.

Baharloo's writing finely balances cynicism, humor, and seriousness. Teimour Khan taunts his servant by holding a spoonful of delicious dessert to Sarveali's mouth, then dropping it. Catching it in mid-air, Sarveali "gobbled the delicacy like a frog catching a fly." The episode takes on a serious tone when Teimour Khan realizes that he no longer needs to beat Sarveali as "he had discovered the joy of inflicting psychological misery and humiliation."

This compelling novel offers fascinating insight into the social history of Iranian society over the last century, as it traces one man's life and his country's path to modern times.

LARA WILLIAMS (August 18, 2009)

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