

Whatever Gets You Through the Night: A Story of Sheherazade and the Arabian Entertainments

Andrei Codrescu

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Bedtime stories (for both children and adults) are often survivors from thousands of years ago, from before the time that science, logic, and reason tried their hardest to explain away magic. Fairy tales transform, evolve, teach, and warn; modern readers and listeners might survive better by listening.

Andrei Codrescu, with his trademark mixture of wit and wonder, explores the story of the *Arabian Nights*, how Sheherazade came to spin her nightly tales, and what they might mean to today's population, infiltrated as we are with access and explanation.

King Sharyar, grievously betrayed by his wife and harem, decides that the best way to keep his heart and pride from being broken again is to marry a new virgin every night and have her strangled in the morning. That way, his wives will die having known only his bed. Families mourn their daughters; businessmen mourn the slowing of commerce; the lovely and smart Sheherazade has an idea. She marries the king and brings her sister, Dinarzad, along to the marital bed. An hour before dawn Dinarzad asks for a story and Sheherazade begins a tale that climaxes with a cliffhanger; to hear the ending the king must let her live. The same thing occurs the next night, and the next, and for 1001 total, until finally the king relents and cancels the strangulation rule: the stories are just too good.

Codrescu—poet, novelist, NPR commentator, professor—examines this ancient tale with his own twenty-first century filter, adding copious footnotes that refer to translators and critics, ranging from the well-respected to an iPhone app. Under his scrutiny, *Arabian Nights* becomes larger than its sum of stories and stretches to encompass the future of humanity, the future of storytelling. Codrescu isn't retelling the *Arabian Nights* as much as he is reveling in their existence and sharing them with the contagious glee of a boy and his can of worms. He writes in the last section, "This book I have written is the prayer of an addict who tried, in his addictive way, to ease Sheherazade's burden. I asked myself if taking another look at storytelling might not accomplish just that."

An homage to the power of stories, Codrescu's book of Arabian tales will well serve those who have studied the text before and those readers new to it. He is a funny and commanding guide, and his obvious love for the written and spoken word tints every line with a vital hue.

ANDI DIEHN (May / June 2011)

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