ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

White Masks
Elias Khoury
Maia Tabet, translator
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In *White Masks*, Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury takes up the gauntlet laid down by José Saramago in the last great novel of the twentieth century, Blindness. As a character in Saramago's novel notes, the world has not exactly gone blind; instead, everyone can see nothing but white. The characters in *White Masks* long to see a unifying white as well, a purity that can give them hope during the mid-1980s in Beirut, where the apartment buildings are bombed and the streets are wrecked by war.

Acting as a classic MacGuffin, the central figure of *White Masks*, Khalil Ahmad Jaber, a man whose son is killed in battle and who subsequently loses his sanity, figures strongly in the first chapter. As the novel progresses, Jaber, whom we know from the outset will meet a mysterious and gruesome end, becomes less of a person and more of a symbol for the collective soul of Beirut's citizens. *White Masks*'s narrator, after outlining the nature of his interest in Jaber's story, proceeds to interview people who are in some way connected to him in his final days. As these connections become increasingly tenuous, the witnesses' stories also become more compassionate and worthy of pathos; one gets the sense that the dead man, with his obsession with the color white, and his futile attempts to white out and whitewash his own family as well as the city of Beirut, could stand in for the other characters' desire for redemption.

Of course, any novel with sufficient intelligence to touch on eternal truths while painting a painfully accurate picture of a specific place in time cannot stand on such a simplistic parallel. The whitewashing could stand for the danger of forgetting as much as the quest for purification. Indeed, much of the conflict arises from generational differences; the older men remember what "real" battle was like and are appalled at the reckless bravado with which their sons pick up and brandish the newer models of guns.

In a city where everyone tries to be the same and to put their personal and communal horrors behind them, Khoury does a masterful job of illuminating their differences. The distinctly human trait of inhumanity is mixed and tempered with profound love and compassion

in this haunting and highly affecting novel about a time and a place that many of us only have glimpsed on news programs.

Dan Coffey