



My Thousand and One Nights: A Novel of Mecca (Middle East Literature In Translation)

By Raja Alem

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My Thousand and One Nights: A Novel of Mecca (Middle East Literature In Translation) By Raja Alem

The distinguished Middle Eastern author Raja Alem grew up in Mecca at a time when the holy city was on the cusp of changing from medieval to modern. In this vanished Mecca, vividly brought to life again in *My Thousand and One Nights*, women hold center stage - especially Jummo, the wildly passionate daughter of the Water Carriers' Sheik.

This faraway time and setting become compellingly real as we follow the intimate drama of Jummo's life, the tragic arc of her affair with her childhood sweetheart and her lifelong love for the mysterious Sidi Wadhana, a more-than-human emissary from the Netherworld.

Jummo's world, veiled and invisible to outsiders until this telling of her story, has the feel of the true center of an Arabia that has come to us in many exotic and threatening disguises. Jummo's Mecca is a different world, with different narrative strategies, but the dramatic problems are universal: how lethal is love, how dangerous are woman? And how sensual is the yearning for immortality?

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The most richly detailed character in this collaborative novel is the city of Mecca, with its bewitching winds and floods, animals and spirits casting shadows over the family whose trials provide the elusive narrative. The narrator is Zohr, an upper-class girl whose letters (79 in total) to a character in *The Thousand and One Nights* form a jumbled narrative that touches frequently on female sexuality and the spirit world. The sections follow no chronological order, nor do they build upon each other to develop the conflict promised early on, the "take-no-prisoners battles" between Zohr and her aunts, especially the wild Jummo, who as a child was possessed by an animal spirit. Instead, the book is a compilation of passionately written yet confusing vignettes that display the powers of geniis, spirits, and dervishes. The authors (who collaborated before on the novel *Fatma*) present a dizzying picture of Mecca's mysticism, but the scattershot structure and lack of direction are frustrating.

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About the Author

Raja Alem, one of the most highly regarded writers in contemporary Arabic literature, is the author of seven novels, as well as plays and poetry. She lives in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Tom McDonough is the author of the novel, *Virgin with Child*, and a story collection, *Light Years*. His cinematography won an Academy Award for the feature documentary, *Best Boy*. Raja and Tom's first collaborative work was *Fatma*, also published by Syracuse University Press.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Betty Borgen:

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