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Abdul Rahman Munif, ??? ?????? ????

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Issa Deerbany says

هناك من يقرأ هذا الكتاب فيقول "يا سيدي، أنت تعلم أنني لست من علماء الفقه، لكنني كنت أتساءل عن رأيك في هذه المسألة..." .

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Sura ❄️ says

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Ahmed says

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Jim Fonseca says

We are in the Saudi Arabian peninsula during the 1920's and 1930's in a kingdom called Moorman. But this book is a thinly-disguised historical novel about the creation of the Saudi State and the rise of the house of Saud. It's the final volume in the author's Cities of Salt trilogy, although I did not realize it was part of a trilogy as I read it and it stands on its own. The book is a roman à clef – the main character, the Sultan, is Ibn Saud (1875-1953); his son and hand-picked successor in the story is King Saud who reigned from 1953-64 until he was overthrown by his brother, Faisal; the British tutor to the Sultan's son is Foreign Service Officer Harry St. John Philby.

The House of Saud is expanding its empire with the help of British money and weapons. They fight against Bedouin tribes on horses and camels, mostly to expand their power and wealth. "...This is the day for men to march and grow rich..." is the battle rallying cry. But it is also as a holy war: it's hard to imagine that even in the 1920's these outlying desert clans and tribes had not yet been converted to Islam. But camels and horses are becoming passé — the new thing is machine guns mounted on trucks. How can horses and camels compete against that?

What struck me most in the book was not the battles, which are numerous although briefly described, but the bureaucracy, intrigue and chaos of the Sultan's court. There are 100 emirs; 100 of the Sultan's children to be educated because he has numerous wives from various clans. The women jockey for favoritism for themselves and their children with the Sultan, mainly by undercutting other wives through gossip and rumor, using servants and slaves as intermediaries. The chaos when the ruler is absent is such that after returning from one battle, he ordered 22 servants, slaves or eunuchs to be executed in the courtyard. Of course in everything these slaves and servants did, they were only acting on orders from their mistresses, so this was death by proxy!

Another intriguing theme is fake news. The Saud dynasty ruled by ambiguity. "The most important thing he [the Sultan] learned was never to answer yes or no." Do gifts from the Sultan mean you will be murdered? They have a pet phrase: "Beware your enemy once, but beware your friend a thousand times." No wonder chaos reigned in the palace. So we have passages like this:

"The Awali War was hard to record or describe, because its three battles were extremely complex and confusing, the interests at stake were murky and convoluted, and reports of the war were highly contradictory. There were the discrepancies and conflicts of the narrators ...the paucity of surviving witnesses....History had become a huge assemblage of lies and fabrications...rich in chicanery and irony...the accumulation of small lies and the illusions that, in the end, created the single illusion of absolute truth, or the one truthful telling of an illusory history!"

Another passage – I'm paraphrasing: The stories rumors and tidbits about their relationships and his money were so full of contradictions and conflicting versions due to the numerous narrators and their varying motives that it was impossible to establish the truth, or even a part of it.

It's fascinating that although men ruled the roost, in some cases women controlled the man, so the leaders went to her to influence him. Women often controlled the family wealth by hoarding gold plate. Taxation by the ruler was through a kind of "long-term loan" that everyone understood may or may not be paid back.

The Sultan picks a son to become his successor. He uses a British official [Philby] as a tutor for his son who takes him several times to England. The British man's aunt also becomes a tutor to the Sultan's son. The British officer eventually converts to Islam. The English, smelling oil on the desert wind at this point, give guns and money but never quite what was promised or when they were promised.

I loved the idioms! Here are some of my favorites:

You want meat, but you get broth.

A foolish friend is worse than a wise enemy.

Know when to offer a date and when to offer a bullet.

A horse without reins is like a man without teeth.

You can splint a dog's tail for forty days, but it will still come out crooked.

A man can stretch out his feet only as far as his carpet reaches.

There wasn't enough fire in the world to burn all his money.

He was so cheap that he would not piss to put out a fire.

There are no bones in the tongue, my friends, so be careful.

The eyes see far, but the hand is short.

A word spoken from the heart arrives in the heart; a word from the tongue is stopped by the ear.

Mostly it's a good historical novel about an area of the world I knew little about. But in trying to be a historical novel, the book too faithfully recounts every war and major event. It gets repetitive. There's a war; the Sultan returns to the palace where social chaos developed while he was away; he imposes order again; he takes a new bride or two from conquered tribes; there's an extravagant festival to celebrate a victory and the Sultan's new marriage(s) or those of his sons, followed by a drought, a famine, or maybe a plague. The Sultan constantly negotiates with Britain to get more money and arms; then another war... this cycle repeats eight or so times. Perhaps the earlier volumes of the trilogy were different?

A couple of interesting things about the trilogy. The author wrote it "backwards" in time, so the last volume, the one reviewed here, is the earliest in the history, so in a way I was fortunate to accidentally read it first. The trilogy runs to more than 2,000 pages, making it the longest work in modern Arab literature and it was (is?) banned in Saudi Arabia when it was published.

photo of King Saud and his army from flickr.com Middle East scenes

photo of the author from shortstoryproject.com

Huthaifa Alomari says

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Mohamed Shady says

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Batool says

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