

Recommended by Leila Golestaneh Austin

FICTION

Amin Maalouf, *Samarkand* (Interlink Publishing Group, 1998)

This work of historical fiction weaves a suspenseful tale of the search for the lost manuscript of Omar Khayyam's *Rubayyat*, an 11th-century selection of poems attributed to the Persian mystic poet, astronomer, and mathematician. In the process, the book takes the reader on a journey back in time to ancient Persia (which includes present-day Central Asia) at the height of the classical Islamic civilization, which was known for its science, philosophy, technology, and literature, yet was not immune to political and religious intrigue. Maalouf uses history as a backdrop for the universal tale of political struggles juxtaposed with the ever-present desire for social justice and a happy life. In so doing, he weaves the main plot of the tale through hundreds of years up to the twentieth century, showing the reader that humankind's search for justice and personal fulfillment remains constant throughout history, even as the context changes.

Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* (Vintage, 2002)

The Turkish Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk brings together the notions of Islam, beauty, and cultural and religious conflict in a murder mystery that is set around a workshop of miniaturist painters in sixteenth-century Istanbul. Writing before 9/11, Pamuk captures a historical moment of globalization illustrating the initial decline of the Ottoman Empire through the cultural shift precipitated by the rise of the Venetian art of portraiture, with its underlying theme of individuality, which eclipsed the more labor-intensive and decorative (and traditional) art of miniature painting. This novel of identity in a country situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia captures the anguished search for authenticity at a moment of cultural upheaval. Pamuk evokes the pain and alienation experienced by those caught between religion and culture, while doing justice to the integrity of each tradition.

Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building* (Harper Perennial, 2006)

Named for the wealthy Armenian businessman who built it in 1934, the Yacoubian Building, one of the most prestigious apartment blocks in Cairo at the time, is the subject of a novel that chronicles the dire state of contemporary Egyptian society through the diverse lives of the now-dilapidated building's residents. The stories of each of the characters, which are somehow intertwined with each other, tell the larger narrative of a society, beset by joblessness and political corruption, whose most talented youth are left with the choice of abandoning their country for promising careers abroad or remaining to join the bands of disenchanting and restless people whose disloyalty to the government leads them to view extremist political Islam as the only viable means of remedying the pervasive ills of Egyptian society. Indeed, after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, *The Yacoubian Building* was cited in a *New York Times* article as one of

the books that would have helped experts come closer to understanding the ominous situation in Egypt.

Rajaa al-Sanea, *Girls of Riyadh* (Penguin Books, 2008)

This work of popular fiction from Saudi Arabia chronicles the lives of four young Saudi women through the e-mail subscription list of their girlfriend narrator, a modern-day Scheherazade, whose identity remains unknown. Each week, through an e-mail she sends to her subscription list, she relates the story of one of her four friends as the friend confronts the tyranny of the highly traditional yet privileged Saudi society in which they live. These stories of the universal search for true love by young women who happen to live in the most restricted of Islamic societies breaks stereotypes of Saudi women while offering a critique of the social malaise in Saudi society, where free expression is rare.

Faiza Guene, *Kiffe, Kiffe Tomorrow* (Mariner Books, 2006)

This coming-of-age novel depicts a 15-year-old French girl, a Muslim of Algerian origin, growing up in a public housing project in suburban Paris. It offers a genuine portrayal of the marginalized Muslim population in France. The tension and disconnect between mainstream French society and the low-income Muslim community in which Guene herself grew up is persuasively presented through such vignettes as the main character's mother first visit to the Eiffel Tower after two decades of living just outside Paris. Guene tackles social issues within the Muslim immigrant community as well, dealing with sexism, abandonment, and drug addiction. The book breaks stereotypes of poor Muslim women by revealing their strength and perseverance in the face of racism and other adversities, such as the pitying, even judgmental attitudes of French teachers and social workers.

Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love* (Viking Adult, 2010)

Turkish novelist Elif Shafak has written a novel that weaves the story of Rumi's writing of the *Masnavi*, the most famous poetic treatise of Sufi Islam, with a modern-day American housewife's quest to find love through Rumi's discourse on the search for inner peace through friendship, as told by a range of characters that include the thirteenth-century poet's wife and sons. While elevating Rumi's teachings and their interweaving of Qur'anic analysis with poetry to best-seller status, Shafak offers an important middle place between fundamentalist Islamist rhetoric and the consumer culture of the West by proposing Sufism as a quest for spirituality that can fill the void at the heart of both tendencies.

POETRY

Rumi, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, ed. and trans. by Reynold A. Nicholson
(Oneworld Publications, 1995)

Rumi, the mystic Persian poet of the thirteenth century, is the most widely read poet in translation today. Passionate and profound, his poetry takes on many subjects that are still relevant today, including the indescribable and ineffable nature of God. Rumi is best known for creating a new language of love within the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism. His poetry celebrates a “joy of union” that expresses an arriving home in “God’s magnificence.” His tribute to the unending nature of love as a shared experience, and as an experience defined by a journey toward heaven whose exact nature is open to interpretation, gives this Muslim mystic’s poetry its universal appeal. Reprinted as *A Rumi Anthology* (Oneworld Spiritual Classics, 2000)

Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaikha* (Octagon Press, 1980)

This romantic tale of the love between Yusuf (the biblical Joseph) and Zulaikha (Prophitar’s wife, unnamed in the Bible but named in the Qur’an), written by the fifteenth-century Persian poet Jami, explores the intimate, complex relationship between love and beauty. This beloved story, described as “the most beautiful of stories” from the Qur’an, is embellished into an entertaining and moving tale that portrays love both in its erotic sense and as a divine concept. Jami proposes a continuum linking love in its human form with love of God, instead of treating these two forms as irreconcilable opposites. This Muslim Sufi understanding, the basis of worship in Sufi Islam, is a theme to which Muslim poets continually return. The story of Yusuf and Zulaikha shows how the Qur’an is made manifest in Muslim imaginations and how it serves as a source of revelation in Muslim lives.

OTHER LITERARY CLASSICS

Nizami, *The Story of Layla and Majnun* (Omega Publications, 1997)

This love story, which originated in pre-Islamic classical Arabic literature, was later popularized by the twelfth-century poet Nizami. In this version, Majnun (literally “mad-man”) falls deeply in love with Layla but is denied her hand in marriage. This unrequited love drives him to madness, and poetry becomes his only salvation as he withdraws to the wilderness to live in nature and recite verse about his love for Layla. The doomed love story is thought to be the inspiration for such Western tragedies as *Tristan and Isolde* and *Romeo and Juliet*. But unlike these Western adaptations, the story of Layla and Majnun presents a very Eastern view of love in which true love is never consummated, whether approved or not by the powers that be. This is because in the Muslim tradition, true love is a pure love that does not require sexual intimacy. Indeed, it is only when love remains pure and free from physical relations that it can reach divinity, as represented by Majnun’s insanity. It is indeed the forthrightly expressed and poetic nature of his love for Layla that

directs her family's rejection of him, in keeping with codes of marriage that characterize it as a family arrangement rather than the manifestation of poetic love.

Kalila and Dimna: Fables of Friendship and Betrayal, ed. Ramsay Wood, intro. Doris Lessing (Saqi Books, 2008)

This collection features Middle Eastern folktales, some with animals as the main characters, including the titular *Kalila and Dimna*. Even readers unfamiliar with Middle Eastern traditions will recognize some of the stories, which teach humorous lessons about the management of power, wise leadership, and the value of friendship.

Classical Arabic Stories, ed. Salma Jayyusi (Columbia University Press, 2010)

Long overlooked in favor of poetry, Arabic short stories finally receive their well-deserved global debut with this volume edited by Salma Jayyusi. The collected stories range from pre-Islamic tales of battle to expressions of the cultural voices of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, to romances from Islamized Persia. Readers may recognize this genre's influence on more familiar works of medieval literature.

Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis, intro. Azar Nafisi (Penguin Classics, 2007)

Persian epic poetry's most famous work is masterfully translated by Dick Davis. An epic tale of kings, heroes, and mythical figures, the poem addresses themes of father-son conflict and nobility of character. Written in the tenth century by a bard called Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh* is still recited in Iran and features in such expressions of Western popular culture as the novel and film *The Kite Runner*. This version also contains prints of Persian lithographs and an introduction by Azar Nafisi (author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*).

WEBSITES

Invitation to World Literature, www.learner.org/courses/worldlit

A presentation of the Annenberg Foundation on the Annenberg Learner website, this multimedia series covers thirteen works of literature from around the world. The series aims to introduce readers to timeless stories from diverse cultures and contexts. The links chosen here include *The Thousand and One Nights*—otherwise known as *The Arabian Nights*—and *My Name Is Red*, by the Turkish Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk. This video introduces *The Thousand and One Nights*, which presents a world of high Islamic culture, lowbrow comedy, and encounters with the spirit world, all through the stories of the brave Scheherazade, who saves her own life, her husband's sanity, the kingdom, and the happiness of all her readers from the evils of life with her stories.

My Name Is Red, www.learner.org/courses/worldlit/my-name-is-red/watch/

This video introduces *My Name Is Red*, Orhan Pamuk's evocative novel of miniaturists in sixteenth-century Istanbul. Then, as now, the city was on the edge of two worlds, responding to the demands of change and tradition.

The Ecstatic Faith of Rumi, www.onbeing.org/program/ecstatic-faith-rumi/189

Produced for *On Being*, a series from American Public Media, *The Ecstatic Faith of Rumi* is a multimedia production that draws out both the intellectual and spiritual substance of this Muslim Sufi religious scholar and poet who focused on the intellectual and spiritual content of Islam. Through an extended interview with Rumi scholar Fatemeh Keshavarz, a musical performance of Rumi's poetry, and a selection of his poems, this program familiarizes American viewers with the continuing relevance of the teachings of the revered Muslim mystic.

NONFICTION

André Clot, *Harun Al-Rashid and the World of the Thousand and One Nights*
(New Amsterdam Books, 1998)

This book brings to life the legendary Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid, who is portrayed in *The Arabian Nights* as a benevolent leader, living in his grand palace in Baghdad surrounded by his wives, concubines, musicians, and advisers. Clot presents the real Harun, the son of a Yemenite slave, through his rise to power and development as a ruler who did not hesitate to annihilate those who stood in his way. The book also presents an array of information on life in early Baghdad at the pinnacle of Islamic history. Best known in the West for the exotic presents he sent to Charlemagne, Harun contributed greatly to the cultural, economic, scientific, and religious supremacy of Baghdad during his rule in the ninth century.

Mohammed K. Fazel, "The Politics of Passions: Growing Up Shia,"
Iranian Studies 21, nos. 3/4 (1988): 37–51.

In this article, Fazel recounts his childhood growing up in his mother's Shia Muslim family in Bombay (now Mumbai), India. Through colorful descriptions of Shia festivals and rituals centered around the Shia saint Imam Hussein (the third Shia imam and grandson of the Prophet), Fazel traces the tensions between the two main branches of the Muslim faith: Shia Islam and the branch to which his father's family belongs, Sunni Islam. Using his family as an example, the author shows the passionate diversity that exists in a religion that is often viewed as a monolith in the West.

FILMS

Color of Paradise (Majid Majidi, director, 1999)

Color of Paradise, whose Persian title literally translates to “The Color of God,” is the story of the struggle of a blind Iranian boy and his father to coexist in contemporary Iran. Mohammad is the blind son of the widower Hashem, who is worried that his son’s condition will get in the way of his own plans to remarry into a prosperous family. Mohammad is a smart and gentle boy who loves his studies in Tehran’s school for the blind and is deeply loved by his grandmother and two sisters back in his native village. God is ever present in this explicitly religious film, from the opening scene, where the words “To the glory of God” appear on a black screen, to Mohammad’s intimate relationship with the nature around him, his full participation—along with his grandmother, Aziz—in the joys of life in this earthly world, and the moment of suffering experienced by Hashem at the end of the film that brings him closer to enlightenment.

Bombay (Mani Ratnam, director, 1995)

In January 1993, sectarian rioting erupted after Hindus destroyed an ancient mosque in northern India, leaving 2,000 Hindus and Muslims dead in Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Two years later, Mani Ratnam made the film *Bombay*, using these events as a backdrop to a love story between a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl. The film focuses on religious and ethnic conflict in Hindu-majority and Muslim-minority India and a passionate romance that tries to overcome it, but not without putting the mixed-faith couple and their children in danger from extremists on both sides of the religious divide. Even though it caused controversy in India, the film was very popular, and won several awards in international film festivals.