



A Palace in the Old Village, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Arcadia Books Limited, 2011, 1906413754, 9781906413750, . From 'Morocco's greatest living author' (The Guardian) comes a heartbreaking novel about parents and children, the powerful pull of home and the yearning for tradition and family. Mohammed has spent the past 40 years working in France. As he approaches retirement, he takes stock of his life - his devotion to Islam and to his assimilated children - and decides to return to Morocco, where he spends his life's savings building the biggest house in the village and waiting for his children and grandchildren to come and be with him..

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The Magic of Morocco , Tahar Ben Jelloun, Alain d'. Hooghe, Mohamed Sijelmassi, 2000, , 185 pages. The magic of Morocco has enticed many visitors by its people and places..

The Scar-Crow Men , Mark Chadbourn, 2012, Changelings, 554 pages. 1593 London. English spies are being murdered across the city. The killer's next target: Will Swyfte. With enemies on every side, the spy may find that even his vaunted skills

A Long Silence Memories of a German Refugee Child, 1941-1958, Sabina De Werth Neu, Feb 1, 2011, , 260 pages. After more than sixty years, the nightmarish sufferings of the many victims of Germany's Nazi regime have been documented extensively. Rarely, however, does one hear about the

To Mervas , Elisabeth Rynell, Mar 22, 2011, Fiction, 192 pages. To Mervas is a turbulent journey through the wilderness of memory, domestic violence, and the vast gulf between lost lovers. After years of insulating herself from humanity in

By Night in Chile , Roberto Bolaño, Dec 17, 2003, Fiction, 130 pages. In a deathbed confession, Father Urrutia, a Jesual priest and conservative literary critic, shares his memories of his work with agents of Opus Dei and his secret job of

Le racisme expliqu   ma fille , Tahar Ben Jelloun, 1999, , 92 pages. Un enfant est curieux. Il pose beaucoup de questions et il attend des r  ponses pr  cises et convaincantes. On ne triche pas avec les questions d'un enfant. C'est en m

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn , Mark Twain, Jan 1, 2006, Juvenile Fiction, 153 pages. An abridged version of the adventures of a nineteenth-century boy and a runaway slave as they float down the Mississippi River on a raft..

The Book of Words , Jenny Erpenbeck, 2007, Fiction, 93 pages. A young girl is raised by her parents in a South American village that is under the control of a totalitarian regime begins to notice the changes happening around her..

An Irish Country Village , Patrick Taylor, Feb 3, 2009, Fiction, 432 pages. Delighted to be offered a

permanent position with crusty Dr. O'Reilly, Dr. Barry Laverty confronts a crisis when his reputation is threatened by the unexpected death of one of

Old Goriot , Honore De Balzac, Jan 1, 2004, Fiction, . Considered to be one of Balzac's most important works, "Old Goriot", or "Père Goriot", is the story of its title character Goriot; a mysterious criminal-in-hiding named Vautrin

Award-winning, internationally bestselling author Tahar Ben Jelloun's new novel is the story of an immigrant named Mohammed who has spent forty years in France and is about to retire. Taking stock of his life- his devotion to Islam and to his assimilated children-he decides to return to Morocco, where he spends his life's savings building the biggest house in the village and waits for his children and grandchildren to come be with him. A heartbreaking novel about parents and children, *A Palace in the Old Village* captures the sometimes stark contrasts between old- and new-world values, and an immigrant's abiding pursuit of home.

Mohammed Ben Abdallah has lived a devout, quiet life in France, always longing for his home country, Morocco. Now facing mandatory retirement from the factory where he's worked all of his adult life, he contemplates going home to Morocco for good. His dream is to build a house large enough for his six children and their families to join him. Though he loathes the forced retirement, Mohammed is gripped by this dream and starts construction on his dream house, even though his rebellious, thoroughly Westernized children show no interest in joining him at his house or forming much of a relationship with their old-fashioned father. Esteemed Moroccan author Ben Jalloun explores Mohammed's complicated feelings of ennui and alienation from the country that has been his home for decades and from his own children, whom he neither knows nor understands. The story builds to an end that seems as inevitable as it is symbolic of Mohammed's isolation within his own family. Lovers of literary fiction should take note of this affecting novel. --Kristine Huntley

..."where they make music when my mind is tired but they stay inside me..." Mohammed, the hero of Tahar Ben Jelloun's elegiac and moving story of a simple man from a small village in Morocco, feels completely lost in the fast moving, modern world. Clad in his grey work overalls, all his life in France appears to him as nothing but grey. " I love colors and I keep that to myself. I can't make my children understand it, but I don't even try, don't feel like talking, explaining myself..."

Back in 1962, the young peasant was persuaded to leave his remote village and join the immigrant labour force in France. Mohammed had to change "from one time to another, one life to another". Now forty years later, he is about to start his retirement and this new situation preoccupies and worries him deeply. From one moment to the next, it will end the years of daily routines which have made him feel safe, secure and needed. They have protected him from reflecting on his life and its challenges : "Everything seemed difficult to him, complicated, and he knew he was not made for conflicts." In this gently and simply told story, Tahar Ben Jelloun explores themes of home, immigration, faith, the social and cultural discrepancies between immigrants and their French surroundings, and last, but not least, the resultant mounting estrangement between parents and their children. While concentrating on the specific, the author's messages can be applied to similar circumstances elsewhere.

Sometimes it doesn't take a lot of words to convey huge ideas, and this book does exactly that. In its short span, *A Palace in the Old Village* tackles big questions of identity, belonging, family, and religion. It is a fictionalized memoir of Mohammed, who emigrates from Morocco to find work in France, and who clings to his old culture, adapting to France as minimally as possible. His children are born and raised in Europe, and their ties to Moroccan culture are as tenuous as Mohammed's ties to French culture. Ostensibly the most important thing to Mohammed is his family, but he and his children find it difficult to relate and have completely divergent expectations of their relationship because of the cultural gulf that separates them. The memoir is set near the end of Mohammed's life, after he retires from an assembly line job and has to contemplate how to find meaning in the rest of his life and satisfaction from what has gone before.

It's not a new storyline, but it's told with exceptional skill and insight. This is one of the most gracefully written books I've ever read. I'm not given to doing this, but I read chapter four multiple times just for the sheer pleasure of the writing. It's so powerful that in places it's absolutely shattering, but it still manages not to be overwrought because it's in the voice of the main character, who is more or less impassive in his recollections. It's an affecting story that deserves wide readership.

Mohammed Thimmigrant is a Muslim from a small village in the south of Morocco who immigrated to France in his youth and worked for forty years in an auto plant. His life has been defined by his job and his children, but he has retired from the former and does not really understand the latter. This novel is an examination of Mohammed's life after retirement, with flashbacks to earlier periods and many recollections of things that have happened to himself and other immigrants as they learn to deal with life in France while still yearning for the village they left behind.

There are plenty of books on the immigrant experience, but this one is unusually felt and is very well told and is filled with heartbreak. Mohammed has essentially lost his children to Europe in general and France in particular, and they and their father do not really know each other any more. Tired of France and despairing of the empty life of retirement for a man who valued his role as a worker, Mohammed goes back to his home village and has a large house built where his children can come and visit him. Then, in a fit of stubbornness and unhappiness he sits down in a chair and refuses to get up again, waiting for his children to come and visit him. I won't give away the end of the story, but it's appropriate to what has come before, though it strains credulity a bit. You end the story feeling sorrow for this simple man and his fractured, emptied-out life, and you wish him well on the journey before him.

Other reviewers have been hard on this book, so I came to it with diminished expectations. However, I found it to be an excellent read. Ben Jelloun really gets you to care about Mohammed by giving you the high and low moments in his life and by showing you the issues which shape him. [Read more](#) ›

For me the main value of "A Palace in the Old Village" is the insight it gives into the Muslim expatriate life in Europe and into Moroccan village life. Other than that, this slight novel was, frankly, difficult to care about. The author's decision to use a removed narrator observing and reporting on the main character was off-putting; there is, for instance, very little dialogue. But the more significant problem is the character himself, a recently retired French autoworker who is a dull, perhaps simpleminded, man incapable of comprehending the world around him, both in Europe and Morocco. At times this strains credulity; he is shocked by a prostate examination (a staple of the annual physical exam for men over 40-50). More significantly, his alienation from his children seemed willful and narrow-minded, again making it hard to empathize as he sinks into delusional fantasy.

Mohammed, the hero of A Palace in the Old Village, is someone who might be called "a moderate Muslim." An immigrant from Morocco, he has spent the last forty years working in a French automobile plant and raising a family of five children. He fraternizes with non-Muslims and readily acknowledges the advantages of living in a secular Western country like France. Moreover, he openly criticizes the jihadist imams of the neighboring Parisian slums and the old world Berber practices of soothsaying and spiritual healing. And yet Mohammed has not successfully assimilated into French society; indeed, unlike his children, he stubbornly refuses to do so. The reasons for this, the novel suggests, have as much to do with the prejudices of French society as with the deliberate choices of this particular, possibly typical, Moroccan immigrant of two generations ago. While the novel offers glimpses of the economic and social fissures of contemporary France, with the specter of Le Pen and his far-right anti-immigration National Front party on one side and jihadist preachers and disaffected African youth on the other, A Palace in the Old Village is not a Zolaesque exposé of the failings of French society. Rather, it is an intimate and affecting portrait of an immigrant facing retirement and the concomitant problems of identity it brings with it.

Mohammed's retirement from the automobile plant, after forty years of dedicated service, triggers his crisis of identity. Without the secure routine of his day at the auto plant what, he asks, will become of him? He was "afraid of tumbling into the ravine of the absurd, of having to face each of his children, over whom he had lost every scrap of authority" (p. 18). Stripped of his identity as an autoworker, he now realizes he has been stripped of his identity as a father. Throughout the novel he continually probes this wounding realization. Growing ever more assimilated in France, his children have grown apart from him and his native Morocco. His son Rachid calls himself Richard; his other son Mourad has married a Spanish woman and his daughter Jamila an Italian. While they have become full citizens of France, he has not. To Mohammed and those of his generation France is to blame: "It's LaFrance keeping us from educating our children, LaFrance giving them too many rights, and then it's us in the shit" (23). France is, as an old shepherd expresses it at the end of the novel, the "devourer of children" (163).

Though blinded by self-pity and stubbornness, Mohammed does have a moment of deep reflection when he asks: "My children don't want to be like me… But do I want to be like me?" (52). It is a question he does not sufficiently answer. In fact, who or what that "me" is never understood by Mohammed. No longer a worker and seemingly no longer a father, he falls back to being simply a Muslim: "My religion is my identity. I am a Muslim before being a Moroccan, before becoming an immigrant" (135). His son Mourad wonders "what would my father be without Islam? … A lost man" (112). Mohammed convinces himself that returning to Morocco and building a house there with all the savings from his job will bring his family back to him, will restore him and his sense of identity.

The reader suspects that this is a fantasy that will end badly for Mohammed. Ineluctably and tragically it does. Only his dutiful wife and Nabile, the mentally handicapped child they adopted, come to visit him in Morocco. His own village there treats him more like a wealthy tourist than a returning son, mocking him as "Mohammed Thimmigrant." The house he builds is regarded as a monstrosity: "this strange, shapeless building" (132), which "mirrored the confusion of his thoughts" (150). Not only do his family and the villagers reject his plans but the land itself on which he builds rejects him and his house. It is inhabited by jinn, supernatural beings who are unforgiving to trespassers. Stubborn to the end, sinking ever deeper into his leather chair, haunted each night by the jinn, and withering away from the ravages of adult diabetes and prostate cancer, Mohammed, after forty days of passively awaiting his fate, dies alone. The novel portrays his demise with empathy but not without a rich sense of irony. After all, the palace built to reunite Mohammed's family becomes a tomb, and the occupier of this tomb, in death, becomes a marabout—an intercessor between the human and spirit realms—worshipped by the same superstitious villagers Mohammed showed such contempt for earlier in the novel.

Tahar Ben Jelloun was born in 1944 in Fez, Morocco, and immigrated to France in 1961. There he earned a doctorate in social psychiatry and began writing articles and reviews for *Le Monde*, as well as fiction and poetry. He is now an internationally recognized novelist, essayist, critic, and poet, and a regular contributor to *Le Monde*, *La Repubblica*, *El País*, and *Panorama*.

His novels include *The Sacred Night*, winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1987, *Corruption*, *The Last Friend*, *Leaving Tangier*, and *This Blinding Absence of Light*, winner of the 2004 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Among his other awards are the Prix Ulysse in 2005 for the entirety of his work and the Cross of Grand Officer of the Légion d'Honneur presented by French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008.

Q. *A Palace in the Old Village* is a fictional story that takes place between France and Morocco. This is not the first time I've written about France, but I have never used French characters in my novels. I write about Morocco, with Moroccan characters that live in Morocco or Europe. I think France has enough writers to write about France. I am happy to write about the country where I was born because it is a country of wonderful imagination.

As you know, American publishers translate very little of the literature they publish. I am very happy to have had a dozen of my books translated into English. This does not mean that I am known by

most American readers, but I am a little known and studied in American universities. There is a young Moroccan woman living in the United States who writes in English and is published in America, she is Laila Lalami.

A writer must not be nice (a good boy). He upsets, unveils, denounces, knocks down taboos, particularly sexual ones. Islam encourages young people to learn about sexuality. There is a saying: "No discretion in religion," or in other words, you have to say things without falling into vulgarity or voyeurism. I have always tackled these questions without shame or precaution; Islamists have had no need for this in order to criticize me. But a writer must continue on his path, especially if he faces criticism.

Q. Many readers will naturally wonder how much you identify with the protagonist in the novel. How would you characterize your relationship with Morocco? Are your children more assimilated in France than you? Has France "devoured" them? Is Mohammed's strained relationship with his children and with France typical of immigrants of his generation?

The story of Mohammed is characteristic of a generation that did not believe that one day its children would be more attached to France than to Morocco. This is the source of Mohammed's drama. He discovers his children are no longer his own. He does not realize that he cannot get them back, as he attempts to do in the novel. This rupture is very normal now. For children of immigrants, their parents' homeland is a place to spend a vacation, not their home.

Q. Many Americans watched with horror and a sense of familiarity at the rioting that erupted in immigrant sections of Paris and other French cities. Are these tensions growing worse in this difficult economic climate? Is Le Pen's anti-immigration platform gaining popularity? Is French society as deeply divided as it is portrayed in the international media?

The uprising of young people in 2005 was a rebellion of young French people of immigrant backgrounds; it was not the doing of immigrants. In general, immigrants are peaceful: they work, raise their children, pay taxes, do not protest. But their children, because they are ill-considered by the French government (unemployment in the suburbs where they live surpasses 45 percent), are not recognized; we fail to give them a proper education and do nothing to help them leave their impoverished neighborhoods where delinquency is easy. Le Pen's party takes advantage of this and groups immigrants and their children together. So France has not yet found serious solutions to this crisis, and it will break out again any day. France's international image is not good because there is no positive and constructive political position towards this generation of young French people who are victims of exclusion and racism.

Morocco is a country that inspires one to tell its stories. I consider myself a storyteller-writer, not an oral storyteller like those that exist in public spaces. There is something of the irrational in this country; truths are not always evident; there are mysteries, legends, myths. This is the material of a writer-storyteller. The story captures the reader's attention and serves as a guide through a labyrinth like J. L. Borges's. The more problems encountered, the more material the writer can exploit. There is no literature of happiness; there is only literature of the absence of happiness.

Michel Houellebecq is famous in France and abroad. But his literature is fairly flat and conventional (aside from his first two novels, which are good); there is no style; he himself believes that style is not important. For me, the thing I love most about an author is his style, his interior universe, that which is particular to him. Houellebecq's last novel is flabby, there are no strong moments; he has erased the aspects of his work that made it original. He has become "correct." That is why I didn't like his last book and I said so in August. But my friends in the Académie Goncourt loved the book; so because I am a disciplined democrat, I congratulated the winner the day he won the Goncourt Prize, which is the most prestigious distinction in France.

I am working at the moment on a particular novel about Morocco; it is called Morocco-Novels. I am trying to talk about Morocco using all literary genres. I finished a novel on mixed-race marriages called The Man That Loved Women Too Much. It is the story of an artist who has a stroke and

cannot paint anymore, of his life and why he suffered this attack. In the second part of the novel his wife responds; thus it is two versions of a novel.

Mohammed has very mixed feelings about his adopted country. On the one hand it is the "devourer of children" and on the other it provides him with a life relatively free from the corruption and superstition that plague his native Morocco. Does he ever resolve these mixed feelings? Are they resolvable?

It does not generally do to reveal the ending of a novel under review. But when the entire work concerns the ending to which we all come, then surely it is fair to reveal that here is a personal revelation of "the great unmentionable". Tahar Ben Jelloun's considerable body of work has followed the life-cycle in dealing with childhood, sexuality, industrial labour, unemployment, marriage and the family, all narrated in the informal vernacular of an immigrant from North Africa to either Spain or France. Here he deals with "coming home" in the dual sense of returning to "the old village" (in Morocco) and to the world before and after life on earth.

As Mohammed retires from a lifetime of employment, he decides: "I wouldn't like to leave my body in a French hole. It's foolish, what I'm saying, but if I could be certain that my children would often visit my grave... I'd give my body to Lalla LaFrance". It is his uncertainty that settles the matter. "Mohammed dreamed of bringing everyone back together and having a celebration, but since he was sure his children wouldn't come, he decided to fall ill, gravely ill." When this ruse fails, he determines to sink his life's savings into digging a hole in the Moroccan desert from which would grow "the palace" that would unite the family and serve as his memorial.

To him it becomes a folly on the scale of an Alhambra, forever unfinished and a monument to his unexpressed creativity. To the villagers, it is a testament to his sanctity. In returning to his roots, Mohammed is cutting down the tree of his life, shedding the branches of his family. The generation clash is also a culture clash, for the French-born children are grown and flown, marrying out and caring little for their father's traditional world-view. This has to be Mohammed's mausoleum, cursed by both his descendants and the Jinns of antiquity.

Finally, "All had become simple, limpid: whatever or whomever he was dying for had fallen down the well of his childhood; he no longer saw them... no longer heard the sound of their voices". The narrative voice fuses with that of the protagonist. Mohammed "another name for everyman" is drawn from the popular classes and so becomes their spokesman. Yet he understands less than ever before about where he has come from and returned to, while it all "himself included - slips into the desert sands.

"Someone cried out, Gone! Mohammed has gone to God! The village has its saint!... An old woman sitting on a stone spoke up: Wonderful! We haven't any water, we haven't any wheat, we haven't any electricity, but we have a saint!" Appropriately enough, a saint (or marabout) is described as both a holy man and as his shrine. In sacrificing his work, savings and life to his land and family, with whom his religion is so identified, Mohammed is seen as crazy and committed enough to qualify.

Linda Coverdale provides a translation that lives inside Mohammed's head and a connecting voice that is fully convincing. She also provides a useful glossary to elucidate the layering of foreign and domestic, Moroccan and French, Arab and European culture. It is a minor quibble that, as ever, occasional Americanisms jump out ("friends who've done zip" and "people who don't know spit"). Ben Jelloun completes the life cycle with an extended meditation on its final stage, part tragic and part farcical, altogether moving and profound.

From 'Morocco's greatest living author' (The Guardian) comes a heartbreaking novel about parents and children, the powerful pull of home and the yearning for tradition and family. Mohammed has spent the past 40 years working in France. As he approaches retirement, he takes stock of his life - his devotion to Islam and to his assimilated children - and decides to return to Morocco, where he spends his life's savings building the biggest house in the village and waiting for his children and

grandchildren to come and be with him.

This relatively slim novel by Tahar Ben Jelloun is a wonderful, if poignant read. At the heart of the story are several themes some of which resonate with the current instability across North Africa and the Middle East. The story is a reflection on one man's life, Mohammed, who migrated from his village in Morocco to spend forty years working in a French factory only to see his children grow up, become French citizens and be assimilated by French society and culture. They not only reject the Moroccan values that he holds dear but they are also dismissive of him as a father. His outlook on life is anchored in a cultural context that has no meaning to them. He struggles to understand why this has happened as he reflects on how his own father raised him and the pivotal role of family in Moroccan culture. The author writes sympathetically about Mohammed's alienation and as the novel unfolds you feel increasingly sorry for this man who believes his children would never abandon him. He is a man who fears death (retirement is described as an introduction to death); but in many respects this is also a metaphor for the loss of cultural identity and alienation that lies at the heart of the novel. Outstanding.

This is a wonderful little book but too short and therefore you are paying much per sentence. The main character is a Moroccan who emigrated to France to work in a factory. He has reached retirement age, which comes as a complete shock as he is at odds to know what to do with all that time in La France as he calls it- despite the fact that he believes in the small town in Morocco time flows so slowly as to nearly come to a halt.

The main direction of the story other than pondering on life and why it doesn't always take the path we want is that he wants to bring his family together - and to solve that problem dreams of building a fairytale house in his home town in Morocco. But the real pleasure of this book is its evocation of the life of an immigrant, much is written about multiculturalism from a European perspective but this shows the trials and tribulations from a man taken out of his land and overwhelmed at times by the life he has chosen.

In his musings, much of it conveyed in direct voice, Mohammed recalls images of different stages in his life: his childhood, his marriage, the first ever sighting of the sea... all memories that he cherishes and contrasts with his life in France. It is his firm grounding in Islam, however, that has always guided his thinking and behaviour: "His touchstone for everything was Islam: My religion is my identity..." Tahar Ben Jelloun delicately elucidates the intricate correlation between faith and reality in Mohammed's life and, interestingly, he links it to the concept of "time". When Mohammed was young, time was structured around the five daily prayers and the year around major festivals throughout the seasons. We, as readers, can easily perceive why, after decades of time-keeping through his work at an automobile plant, he feels completely lost in these early days of 'tirement, as he calls it. How can he fill time now and in France - "a place where he does not belong at all"? Time stretches without structure, unless - Mohammed realizes - he takes on a new project: he will build a house for the whole family in the old village... Surely, that will bring his children back to him and the traditional life, as it was before, can be rekindled...

A man like Mohammed, barely literate, who only speaks his local Berber language, has never felt motivated to learn French beyond the basics. He can cite the Koran in Arabic, but cannot express an independent thought in this holy language. He has come to France to work, get paid and to return home to his village every summer and eventually for good; his emotional centre is only there. His five children, on the other hand, are growing up in the French environment and speak only French to him. The author, while seeing the world primarily through Mohammed's eyes, such when he describes his hero's attitude towards his wife and inability or unwillingness to comprehend his children, nevertheless encourages us to see beyond Mohammed's narrow and naïve interpretation of his surroundings and place his perspective into a broader context. And we, in turn, feel some sympathy for Mohammed's efforts to rebuild his life and for his taciturn, acquiescent and submissive wife.

Tahar Ben Jelloun, who also emigrated as a young man to France in 1971, is intimately familiar with the issues that face North African immigrants in France. Son of a village shopkeeper, he did well in

school and was fortunate to pursue his studies in Paris after his release from prison in Morocco. He is a prolific and award winning author of many novels and other writings. He writes exclusively in French - a language he feels is better suited than Arabic for the social topics he wants to address in his fiction. Tahar Ben Jelloun's affection for the Moroccan landscape and life in the village is reflected in his use of rich and poetic imagery. The fine line between reality and mysticism becomes blurred whenever Mohammed reaches the village. For me, these passages add some of the most precious aspects in this touching account. "I tell a story in the hope that it will incite reflection, provoke thought." That indeed he does with this insightful novel. [Friederike Knabe]

Other reviewers have been hard on this book, so I came to it with diminished expectations. However, I found it to be an excellent read. Ben Jelloun really gets you to care about Mohammed by giving you the high and low moments in his life and by showing you the issues which shape him. I suspect other readers were disappointed by the sad ending and the difficult trials of the book in general; this is not an uplifting or cheerful story. It is a sad tale, about a man whose life has gotten away from him and now has nowhere to turn to get it back again. I like stories like this every once in a while. Not everything has to be happy-happy, and sometimes life is on the sad side. So be warned, and enjoy this book for what it is instead of cursing it for what it is not!

I am a sucker for a day in bed with a book, but many years of schooling killed any desire for non-academic reading. In the last couple of months I have finally begun to come out of my reading coma and my first real author crush is on Tahar Ben Jelloun. Ben Jelloun is considered Morocco's greatest living author and poet. I stumbled upon an English translation of his novel *A Palace in the Old Village* while living in Marrakech and fell in love. His descriptive story telling weaves humor and history...more I am a sucker for a day in bed with a book, but many years of schooling killed any desire for non-academic reading. In the last couple of months I have finally begun to come out of my reading coma and my first real author crush is on Tahar Ben Jelloun. Ben Jelloun is considered Morocco's greatest living author and poet. I stumbled upon an English translation of his novel *A Palace in the Old Village* while living in Marrakech and fell in love. His descriptive story telling weaves humor and history to provide a portal for the reader to make a physical connection. He places his intimate portrait of his characters within the push/pull of political context. *A Palace in the Old Village* is a story about an immigrant's dream to return home. The narrator, Mohammad, is an economic immigrant that leaves his village in western Morocco after being recruited to join the wave of North African labor that moved to post-WWII France. After living in France for more than 30 years, his compulsory retirement pushes him to consider returning to his home village. The story is a mixture of heartbreaking and comical insights into all the different components that define home and the complicated, and often unresolved, relationship of migration to a sense of place. (less)

The tone of the novel was depressing; I should have liked it, right? The novel was quite reflective; I should have like it, right? Not enough happened. The protagonist was admirable, a devout Muslim, a good father and husband, but a bit distanced from the modern world. As a result he was mortally, emotiona...more I was debating giving this novel a rating of 2. As I read it, I thought this is a reason Katie is not in a book club because she does not want to read or to continue to read books she dislikes.

Muhammad drifted peacefully through his life. He never questioned the ways of the village he grew up in, or the customs of his culture, even when he and his family were uprooted to France. He knew who he was and quietly went through life that way, secure in what he knew to be so. He locked himself away from the new reality of life in France, assuming that things would work out as he knew they would. It sounds pretty blissful, especially to me, who questions everything and worries endlessly about...more Muhammad drifted peacefully through his life. He never questioned the ways of the village he grew up in, or the customs of his culture, even when he and his family were uprooted to France. He knew who he was and quietly went through life that way, secure in what he knew to be so. He locked himself away from the new reality of life in France, assuming that things would work out as he knew they would. It sounds pretty blissful, especially to me, who questions everything and worries endlessly about the future. His dreams didn't play out as he envisioned. What does?

On another note, I discovered the existence of Harun al Rashid and his connection to the Thousand and One Nights, which delighted me because of the connection to Rushdie's wonderful book that I enjoyed so thoroughly, Haroun and the Sea of Stories. I love stumbling upon these paths weaving through quite separate works!(less)

When someone talks to me about Tahar Ben Jelloun, it's like preaching to the converted! His latest book is no exception. The writing style is faithful to itself, and the book is both touching - tough even, especially near the end - and also realistic. I easily felt friendship for the almost workman-like Mohamed, who later retires. The reader totally understands his feelings towards the confusing relationship he, as well as his whole generation of immigrants, have towards France, and the contrast...more When someone talks to me about Tahar Ben Jelloun, it's like preaching to the converted! His latest book is no exception. The writing style is faithful to itself, and the book is both touching - tough even, especially near the end - and also realistic. I easily felt friendship for the almost workman-like Mohamed, who later retires. The reader totally understands his feelings towards the confusing relationship he, as well as his whole generation of immigrants, have towards France, and the contrast between France and his country of origin, Morocco.

Emmajulia Hi, I actually just gave a 4th one. I was a bit indecisive because even though I really liked that book, I found it sometimes overly descriptive and w...more Hi, I actually just gave a 4th one. I was a bit indecisive because even though I really liked that book, I found it sometimes overly descriptive and wordy about the vision of France by Mohamed and his colleagues. But that didn't prevent me from finishing it pretty fast!(less)

Friederike Knabe Hi, yes, 4 stars would seem more appropriate from what you said. This is probably what I will give it. While I agree with you that it is a bit wordy.....more Hi, yes, 4 stars would seem more appropriate from what you said. This is probably what I will give it. While I agree with you that it is a bit wordy... but then Tahar Ben Jelloun is always that way, isn't he. One has to let it flow... Yes, I also read it pretty fast. I received it from the publishers via a website that I am reviewing for, so my review will come a bit later and somewhat changed.(less)

This book hits all of the right old man diaspora tropes--doesn't understand his children's infatuation with the West, keeps longing for things to go back to the way they were, except for things weren't all that great back then, either, the whole melancholy. Yet as it goes towards the end that you think you know, there are one or two detours that sweeten the book and set it apart from many others like it.

Mohammed leaves his native Morocco as a young man to move to France for work. Now he's reached retirement age and a time of crisis. His children are grown and have moved on - two of them marrying outside the Muslim faith. Mohammed longs for the routine of work and without it, is restless. Ultimately, he decides to return to Morocco to his village where he spends his savings building a huge house in order to be able to gather all his children back to him.

When I read about this as a suggestion on Amazon, it sounded like something I'd really enjoy. Unfortunately, I didn't. Much of the book is a rambling commentary on getting old and it's only the last quarter where much of anything happens. It was also difficult for me to follow. Sections where I thought there might be dialog lack the punctuation to make that obvious. I was left with a sense of feeling sorry for the guy who had neglected his family for years and then thinks that he can gather them all together to restore his idea of the ideal family.(less)

This small novel probably will not live on as a significant work of literature, but it is very timely and, like Ben Jelloun's other writings. highly enjoyable. The story concerns Mohammed, who came to France from Morocco in the 1960's to work at an automobile factory. He is a good man, who is not at all sympathetic to radical movements within Islam and who, in his own peculiar way, cares deeply about his family and friends. But he is also completely incapable of adapting to France and, indeed, t...more This small novel probably will not live on as a significant work of literature, but it is very timely and, like Ben Jelloun's other writings. highly enjoyable. The story concerns Mohammed, who came to France from Morocco in the 1960's to work at an automobile factory. He is a good man,

who is not at all sympathetic to radical movements within Islam and who, in his own peculiar way, cares deeply about his family and friends. But he is also completely incapable of adapting to France and, indeed, to the modern world, which alienates him from his children, who are more French than Moroccan. After many years as a devoted worker, Mohammed is retired and receives a generous pension--this itself a French custom he can't fully understand. He returns home to build a "palace" that he thinks will be a gathering place for his children . . . the patriarch's dream. His indulgent wife watches his folly as he waits in vain for his children to "come home" to Morocco, which of course is not their home! What happens then, which I will not disclose to avoid a "spoiler alert," is a piece of magical realism that will strike some readers as a beautiful vindication of a good man and others as a bizarre way of trying to redeem a character who is in large measure a victim of his own cultural stubbornness. I find myself in the latter camp but recommend this novel nevertheless as an important work on the problems of Muslims who live and work in Europe but either cannot or will not adapt.(less)

A very sad look at growing old and how difficult it is to accept change from generation to generation and culture to culture. Mohammed took his young family from Morocco to France to take a good paying job to support his family. As one would expect, his children grew up with Western ideas and started their own independent lives away from their parents. Mohammed is now retired and wants what many parents do in their later years...his family all together in his hometown where he grew up. He builds...more A very sad look at growing old and how difficult it is to accept change from generation to generation and culture to culture. Mohammed took his young family from Morocco to France to take a good paying job to support his family. As one would expect, his children grew up with Western ideas and started their own independent lives away from their parents. Mohammed is now retired and wants what many parents do in their later years...his family all together in his hometown where he grew up. He builds a big house in his hometown in Morocco to accommodate his children and their spouses and children and invites them all to come. Although I did feel sorry for Mohammed and was able to relate to his denial when he refused to listen and understand what his family was trying to tell him, I didn't find the book pulling me in and making me want to keep coming back to it.(less)

It tells the story of a Moroccan who has worked in France all his life. He has dream of moving back to his village and building a big house, big enough for his entire family to live in. He hopes to bring his children back to the family and to strengthen family ties. But he doesn't realize time amoces on and people must lead their own lives.

For me this is more of 3.5 star books more than a 3 or 4 star novel but based on how I've rated other books I went with 4 stars for this. This is a rather sad story about a Moroccan man and his family working in LaFrance for his entire working life and how he's struggling to deal with his retirement, his French born and raised children who he doesn't understand and his complete faith in Islam as his religion. He's clearly a caring and gentle man but one who is incapable of understanding how his...more For me this is more of 3.5 star books more than a 3 or 4 star novel but based on how I've rated other books I went with 4 stars for this. This is a rather sad story about a Moroccan man and his family working in LaFrance for his entire working life and how he's struggling to deal with his retirement, his French born and raised children who he doesn't understand and his complete faith in Islam as his religion. He's clearly a caring and gentle man but one who is incapable of understanding how his children do not think and live their lives as he does. A lovely quiet read.(less)

Tahar Ben Jelloun is considered “Morocco’s greatest living author”. Although his first language is Arabic, all his literary works are in French. This particular book of his is his latest and I read the translated version. “A palace in the old village” is the story of Mohammed. He is an immigrant in France. He has lived and worked in France for almost 40 years but never considers it home. Home, for him, will always be the village that he grew up in. However, as expected, this is not the case with his children. They consider France home and do not share their dad’s fascination for the old village in Morocco.

After leading a rather monotonous 40 odd years in France, Mohammad suddenly has to face his biggest fear – retirement. Work in the automobile factory has been the only constant thing in

his life. He hardly speaks to his wife and barely understands his children, their modern views and their irritation with his old-world values. Retirement, according to him, is almost synonymous with death. It is the point where life stops.

However, to win the battle against his retirement, Mohammed decides to focus on a goal – building a house in the old village and settling there with his entire family. He moves back to Morocco and, almost obsessively, starts construction on what will be the biggest and most opulent house in the village. And once the construction of the house is over, he begins to wait – wait for the day when all his children will return to the village to live in the palace he has built for them.

For me, the book is divided into two sections. The first section covers approximately the first eight chapters that takes place in a single evening. Mohammed sits down to pray and through his thoughts we learn everything about his life until now and his views on religion, work, family, etc. The second part is the rest of the book – which suddenly becomes very fast paced. This is the part where Mohammad decides to do something about his retirement and moves back to Morocco. Chronology is not the only factor separating the two sections. Retirement brings about a change in Mohammed as well and it almost feels like you are reading about two different people in the two different sections. The Mohammed before retirement is a confident and his thought process is clear. He is a devout Muslim and faith plays a big role in his life. He has made the trip to Mecca and follows the teachings of his religion. But, at the same time, his views are “moderate”. He criticizes the views of jihadist imams. He feels secure in his role as the provider for the family. He doesn’t interact too much with his children and though he knows that they don’t understand him and his values, this doesn’t perturb him.

However, with the arrival of his retirement, there is a sea change in Mohammed’s character. Without the security of his job, he suddenly begins to realize, and fret about, his relationship with his children. He sees that they have become citizens of France, while he hasn’t. And of course, they have no ties to his native land. The clarity in his thoughts and ideas begins to blur. His life, reflecting his thought process, becomes haphazard. He blindly convinces himself that building a house in his village is the magical solution to all his problems. His goal blinds him to everything going on around him. He doesn’t see that the villagers don’t accept him as one of them. He is an outsider to them – a wealthy tourist. He doesn’t realize that his children would never leave their lives and come to live with him in Morocco. And while it is clear to everyone around him (and to the reader) that he is only preparing for disappointment and failure, he refuses to acknowledge this.

The book is very well written (as expected by an author nominated for the Nobel Prize!). It appears to be a very quick read with just a 192 pages of very simple writing but only when you start reading it do you realize the depth of the book. You are drawn to Mohammed. You understand him, feel sorry for him and wish he’d see what everyone else around him is seeing..

I enjoyed reading this book. This is not a usual ‘me’ kinda book. I prefer the fast paced ones that you just can’t put down. But I liked reading this one and I’d definitely like to read more of Tahar Ben Jelloun’s books. I only wish I knew French well enough to read the original and not the translations..

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse, and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. - Ernest Hemingway

Mohammed has lived and worked in France for forty years. But the thought of his imminent retirement unnerves him. When “the crutches of his old routines”, working in an automobile factory, are taken away from him, Mohammed finds himself floundering, cut loose from everything he has ever known. Suddenly life without work has no meaning: “Nothing of France had found a place in his heart or his soul”. Illiterate, he understands French but has never used it.

Taher Ben Jelloun's award winning book, *This Blinding Absence of Light*, was a searing account of the desert camps in which King Hassan II of Morocco interned his political enemies. *A Palace in the Old Village* is a slighter novel, but no less powerful in its evocation of the Moroccan migrant experience.

With remarkable economy (lucidly translated by Linda Coverdale), Ben Jelloun traces the life of a god-fearing man, for whom Islam was more than a religion: it was a code of ethics, a culture, an identity. His anger and sadness stem from his lack of authority and inability to teach his assimilated children the value of Islam and his native country's traditions.

As well as describing the migrant experience; the racism and prejudices that have to be endured and the yearning for home; this is a poignant account of growing old. Mohammed's tolerant nature and weary resignation is also his undoing. His realisation that his life is almost over and he has nothing to show for it terrifies him. Mohammed's feelings of dislocation grow as he watches his friend Brahim die alone and unloved: so much loneliness, ingratitude and silence left him speechless.

This entry was posted on June 19, 2011 at 04:16 and is filed under Books. Tagged: *A Palace in the Old Village*, Arcadia Books, Linda Coverdale, Lucy Popescu, Tahar Ben Jelloun. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

Tangier. He studied philosophy at the University of Rabat, and in 1966 was arrested alongside 94 other protestors for taking part in student demonstrations in Casablanca. He spent the following eighteen months in internment camps, here composing his first poetry. He occupied his mind with James Joyce's *Ulysses* while in prison; a book smuggled in by his brother.

After his release, Ben Jalloun worked as a teacher of philosophy in Tetuan and Casablanca, before the government decreed that philosophy be taught only in classical Arabic. He sought exile in Paris in 1971, where he wrote for the magazine *Souffles* and studied for his doctorate in social psychology. His thesis on the sexual misery of North African immigrants in France was published in 1975 as *The Highest Solitude*. It was his first bestseller, though a prior novel, *Harounda* (1973) had already won him critical plaudits from Samuel Beckett and Roland Barthes.

Ben Jalloun has written for a range of high-profile European newspapers, including France's *Le Monde*, Italy's *La Repubblica* and Spain's *El País*. He is also the recipient of a number of literary accolades, including the Prix Goncourt for *The Sacred Night* (1987), and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2001).

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