

June 08 - SUMMARY – THE CALIPH’S HOUSE by Shah

The Travel Lover's Book Club is one-year old this month! We celebrated last night by reviewing the Caliph's House by Tahir Shah and eating birthday cupcakes! I brought 21 cupcakes and we were a group of 11. NOT FAIR GUYS! All those extra cupcakes are in my fridge, not to mention the batter that never even made it into the pans to be cooked. I know, it is a test of my will power. NOT FAIR!

We welcomed four new members - Jerome, Sharon M., Stacie and Leslie. Thanks for your input and lively discussions!

The Caliph's House - I picked this book because I have not yet been to Morocco and wanted to see what to expect. From the brief description, it sounded like the Moroccan version of "A Year in Provence" and "Under the Tuscan Sun", and in many ways it was - outsider buys/leases crumbling mansion and spends lots of time and money making it habitable! What this book had in abundance was quirky episodes during reconstruction. In addition to the usual problems with communication with local architects and contractors, Shah adds mystery, magic, superstitions and tons of Jinns! As I mentioned to the group last night, what I appreciated especially was his style of writing in short episodes. While they followed normal chronology, I really enjoyed the bit-sized pieces of his stories, almost as much as the stories themselves.

The group was generally in favor of this book and his story and yet at times, marveled at his patience at being stolen from by his first assistant, descended upon by uninvited guests, lied to by contractors, ignored and then scolded by servants who did not have the same understanding about personal boundaries such as bedrooms and bathrooms as we do. At times, we could not tell if his guardians liked him or not. There were those rare flashes where they use his money to buy him "credit" at the mosque unbeknownst to him, and bringing him the documents for the ownership of the house where I suspect they really did care for him. I felt that when he began to think more like a Moroccan and let go, that things went easier for him both in relationships and with the house project.

There was quite a bit of discussion on can a westerner truly understand a culture that is so involved with superstitions, bribes, corruption and a fluid sense of time and property rights? When all is said and done, we probably can't no matter how long we live in the country. Perhaps like Tahir, we would need to learn to think like a Moroccan. Curt's favorite part was after the worker had fallen from the ladder with an injury, the answer to his question about whether he was about to be sued was, "Of course not, this is Casablanca, not Colorado."

How fitting for our group!

Some people thought he might have exaggerated a bit and from his limited sharing about his wife, at times he came off as a macho man from a male dominated society. He appeared to have a long-suffering wife who put up with incredible privations with a young child and a new baby. I could hardly believe her turn around at the end of the book when she said she was up for remodeling another house.

Many of the stories about the challenges faced in such a foreign culture to Westerners brought up personal stories from around the circle about similar circumstances in other foreign lands. Jerome appreciated learning about this culture, even after his recent visit to Morocco. He shared that from the stories of the book, he has a deeper understanding of the significance of Ramadan and some of the more common names in the culture. Some of us found the glossary at the back was very helpful, especially if you found it prior to the end of the book.

Some of us felt he did not tie up all the loose ends and that there were several relationships that we wanted to know more about. Leslie mentioned that he had read several of Shah's books and he preferred "The Sorcerer's Apprentice". He mentioned that "In Arabian Nights" could be considered the sequel to the Caliph's House, but does not do any better of a job answering those nagging little questions.

All in all a fun romp. I look forward to the time when I am sitting in a cafe in Casablanca in the evening drinking coffee and watching the sky change. I will report back to the club after my experience.

Thanks for participating!

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