

## **Khaled Al-Berry, *An Oriental Dance***

The novel opens with a brief news report. Death in Venice: the body of an Egyptian man is found in the water on New Year's Eve in 2006. He has drowned, "possibly after losing his balance and falling off the edge of the boat in the heat of New Year celebrations," it is speculated. The story that ensues is narrated by one of three Egyptian men who form the novel's main characters, Yasser, Ibrahim, and Hussein.

The story opens in 1997, with three separate and seemingly trivial decisions on the part of the three Egyptian protagonists to purchase a new set of underwear. It is the same year that Gucci comes out with a new type of underwear called the G-string; the same year that Bill Clinton's underwear enters the spotlight with news of his affair with a young intern inside the Oval Office. From the land of material need, three Egyptians move westward to the land of plenty, Gucci glamour and political clout, each driven by different reasons.

Ibrahim, the apparent narrator, who grew up with an absent father who had left home before he was born, comes to England in a bid to escape poverty and shameful prospects. As a star-gazing child growing up on fantastical tales and sitting on the banks of the village canal to peer into the myth-rich waters, he had always dreamed of marrying one of the water-jinn who choose human lovers to drag into their world, repeating the fate of one of his fellow villagers whom people swore they regularly saw gliding with his bride in the moonlight in a convoy of sprites. Soon after starting work as an unofficial tourist guide in Cairo, Ibrahim meets Margaret, a British woman over twice his age, and it seems as if his dream is finally about to come true. He had been unlucky: the year he began his studies as a tourist guide was the very year of the Luxor massacre. And as if matters couldn't get worse, the very year he graduated happened to be the year of 9/11. Eager for another life and fresh opportunities, he decides to marry Margaret and moves with her to Britain.

Before travelling, he is handed an envelope to pass on to Yasser, another Egyptian who had moved to Britain at an earlier point in time. The envelope, given to Ibrahim by Yasser's grandmother, contains two letters from a "friend", and although Ibrahim opens and reads them, he fails to fathom their meaning, for they seem to contain nothing more than this simple pledge: to keep the baby at all costs.

The letters, however, are destined to have a longer life, and more far-reaching effects, than anything Ibrahim has imagined. Upon receiving these letters, Yasser is suddenly taken back to a past which he has striven hard to forget. Unlike Ibrahim, Yasser is an urbane and polished character, who seems worlds removed from the village Ibrahim comes from even though it was also the birthplace of Yasser's own father. Yasser's father, in fact, is a figure idolised by Ibrahim, despite the murky circumstances of his death which villagers never mention without taking the edge off them with a "God forbid"; and it is on Yasser that Ibrahim will now fix his sights as his new idol. The

story that is narrated after the incident of the 2006 New Year's Eve will take us into Yasser's mind as he reacts to the sudden appearance of those two letters, leaving it until later to reveal the sources of Ibrahim's intimate knowledge of these particulars.

For had Ibrahim known these particulars before 2006, he might have been able to avert his unfortunate fate. Had he known them, he would have mentioned nothing to Yasser about Maria, a girl of half-Egyptian descent he met in Venice. For the moment Yasser knew about Maria, he instantly realised that he had been right all along and everyone around him had been wrong – that Marianne, his childhood friend, had not been killed in the “incidents” of 1981 in Assiut as had been reported. With the privilege of “omniscient knowledge” acquired by Ibrahim after the 2006 incident, we hear him detail to us Yasser's experiences, and we watch him negotiate the need to apportion blame, which he sometimes turns against himself, but most times directs to the third protagonist, Hussein.

Hussein comes from a remote village in the north of Egypt, and he meets the other two in Britain, having no prior ties with them. On the face of it, he seems to be the image of the perfect immigrant, studying for a PhD in International Law with the hope of landing a prestigious governmental position which would spare him from the dirty games of politics. Struggling to make ends meet, and struggling to cope with the loneliness of immigrant life, he brings his wife and three children from Egypt to live with him in London. Hussein has only one defect: an unusual attraction to pregnant women.

Following his mother's death as a result of an accident when he was eight, his elderly father had married a girl only seven years older than Hussein, and had been advised to send the boy away to live with some of his relatives while he tried for a child with the young girl. In London, Hussein falls in love with Katia, an Egyptian who was raised in Lebanon, but whose Egyptian mother forbade her to let a single Egyptian word pass through her lips, or else her “stepfather would end up in jail.” Love, however, does not come for free, and this particular love needs its fair share of money to oil it. Yet the relationship flounders; and Hussein begins to suspect that Ibrahim may have a hand in this.

From this affair, Hussein moves on to yet another when he falls in love with a British woman, Heather, whose son, Mark, has apparently converted to Islam and joined a group of Mujahideen. Glossing these developments, the narrator remarks that Hussein's first love made him join MI5 to spy on fellow Muslims and his second love made him leave it to protect Heather's son. But leaving MI5 comes at a price; precisely in the way that, as we find out, leaving an Islamic group has come at a price for Yasser – and it does so despite the merely superficial connections which both may have imagined had bound them to these organisations.

It is only at the end of the story that we discover how all these factors combined to lead to the 2006 incident in Venice. Yasser, certain that Ibrahim has been killed at the hands of MI5 agents, claims to be haunted by the ghost of Ibrahim, who recounts to him

the detailed story of his own death. It is only then that the origins of the narrator's mysterious knowledge of events occurring at other places and times become clear, as do the reasons for the blame he administers to both himself and Hussein.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the account that emerges is a tangle of truth and lies, of the modern and the ancient, the urban and the rural, the real and the surreal. Is it fact or is it all fiction? Who is there to decide? Among the doctors examining Yasser, one of them rules in favour of its truth. But, questions of fact and fiction aside, we are finally given an insight into the elements in this tense mix between the rural and the urban in modern Egyptian life that combine to produce such contradictory results and patterns of action.

Yet just at the moment when the curtain falls, a second news report concerning the same New Year's Eve incident makes its appearance – making us doubt afresh everything we thought we knew.

The author, Khaled al-Berry, is an Egyptian doctor-turned-journalist. He has two other books: *Life is More Beautiful than Paradise*, the autobiography of an adolescent jihadist, and *Negative*, a novel. He has been living in London since 1999.