



The Journey of Ibn Fattouma

By Naguib Mahfouz

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In this provocative and dreamy parable, a young man disillusioned by the corruption of his homeland sets out on a quest to find Gebel, the land of perfection, from which no one has ever returned. On his way, Ibn Fattouma passes through a series of very different lands--realms where the moon is worshipped, where marriage does not exist, where kings are treated like gods, and where freedom, toleration, and justice are alternately held as the highest goods. All of these places, however, are inevitably marred by the specter of war, and Ibn Fattouma finds himself continually driven onward, ever seeking. Like the protagonists of *A Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gulliver's Travels*, Naguib Mahfouz's hero travels not through any recognizable historical landscape, but through timeless aspects of human possibility.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this short, intermittently provocative fable, first published in Arabic in 1983, the Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian author of the Cairo Trilogy ponders the question: What is the best way to organize a society? Betrayed by his sweetheart, young Ibn Fattouma of "the land of Islam" begins a journey in search of wisdom. In Mashriq, whose citizens go naked and worship the moon, he marries Arousa, a pagan woman. Thrown out of Mashriq for trying to bring up his son as a Muslim, he next stops in Haira, a land whose bloody king is worshiped as God. Ibn Fattouma escapes imprisonment for Halba, where all religions are welcomed and Muslim homosexuals peacefully demonstrate for gay rights. There he marries a Muslim female pediatrician who teaches him the value of an Islam "of independent judgment." Next the hero visits Aman, a communist state with full employment but no personal freedoms. He never reaches his ultimate goal, Gebel, land of perfection. Mahfouz's pithy parable mocks the hypocrisy of nations that wage war and maintain empire in the name of brotherhood and freedom.

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From Library Journal

Fattouma is disappointed in love, so he sets out seeking comfort in wisdom. His goal is the fabled land of Gebel, from which no one has ever returned. First, though, his caravan must pass through five other countries, each distinct in governance and religion, and each delaying Ibn for years. Mashriq is despotic, peopled by naked slaves, and here Ibn falls in love with Arousa and starts a family. War separates them, and he pursues her through Haira, a theocratic police state; Halba, the land of freedom; and Communist Aman. Finally, from Ghuroub, where only reason is worshipped, he leaves to enter Gebel, his journey toward perfection almost complete. This novel is Mahfouz's most purely polemical work, directly engaging the issues of religion and politics that have been the strong subtexts of his previous fiction. It is, however, as enchanting a tale as any he has written. Highly recommended. Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 5/1/92.

- Paul E. Hutchison, Bellefonte, Pa.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Nobelist Mahfouz offers here a slender, magical parable of idealism and compromise through a stylized Middle East odyssey, first published in Arabic in 1983. Thwarted in marriage when his fiance is claimed by the sultan's chamberlain, Qindil Muhammad al-Innabi, called Ibn Fattouma, resolves to go on a pilgrimage to the storied land of Gebel. The tale of his travels is a tale of detours. Passing through the moon-worshipping land of Mashriq, he stays for several years with lightsome Arousa, but is exiled for sharing his Muslim religion with their children. When Haira, a police state where Fattouma has been staying, conquers Mashriq, he purchases Arousa in a slave auction, but again his bride catches the eye of an influential advisor, and he is sentenced to life imprisonment for speaking out against the advisor. Released after 20 years by another war, he travels to Halba--a land of complete freedom that seems a sly portrait of America--and takes another wife; the reappearance of Arousa, though, reproaches him with his inconstancy to his pilgrimage, and he sets out for Aman, the land of perfect justice whose price is total conformity. Increasingly disillusioned in his nation's betrayal of Muslim beliefs, Fattouma follows Arousa to Ghuroub, where he attaches himself to a holy man who tries to prepare him for the journey to Gebel, but more fighting forces him to press on prematurely, and it is unclear from the ending of his journal whether he ever reaches his elusive goal. What is clear is the simple charm with which Mahfouz dramatizes fundamental questions about tolerance, love, and mortality while condensing a lifetime's worth of experience into 160 pages. Mahfouz is widely considered the most Western of contemporary Arab novelists, but the closest Western analogue here--Pilgrim's Progress starring

Sinbad the Sailor--only reinforces the distance between East and West. Still, an ideal introduction to Mahfouz for readers put off by the Cairo Trilogy's expansive length. -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

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