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A beautifully told, transcendent tale of truth, salvation, and the power of desire.

Saddlebag Details

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Author : Bahíyyih Nakhjavání

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James Barker says

In 'The Saddlebag' the Iranian writer Bahiyyih Nakhjavani concerns herself with the changes wrought on nine people as they navigate the treacherous desert paths, pilgrimage and trade routes between Mecca and Medina. Part Canterbury Tales, part Accordion Crimes, this intricately woven work intends to offer insights and advice like the finest fables of old.

It is, without a doubt, a brave undertaking. Wearing its heart on its sleeve it is unafraid to consider the great themes of life from universality to belief systems (with all their wonky distinctions), births to deaths, love to hate. With its intricate structure it considers the same characters from different viewpoints, thus multiplying the numbers involved as if the action takes place in a land of many (warped, fairground) mirrors. This is a world of mysticism, of messages, a world of fate etched out in trails that could just as well match the lines on the palm of hands.

It is so richly the sort of thing I thought I would like that I spent a long time during the read and after it wondering if I had failed the book, because I didn't enjoy much of it. It seemed to tread that no-man's-land between Paulo Coehlo in 'The Alchemist' and Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet' - that spiritual place that I would run from, a land where messages are stated rather than found and where readers aren't really necessary. I found it repetitive and overwritten; its intricacies bored me. Its mysticism was the sort filled with hot, desert air. Certain sentences sounded pretty enough but seemed to have bartered away their comprehension as a pay-off.

In time I came to the conclusion that I had not failed the book and the book had not failed me. It is simply not my (saddle) bag.

Fionnuala says

I read this beautifully written tale more than a decade ago but I still have many of the images from it in my mind, the caravan making its way across the sands, the leather satchel full of mysterious writing, but most of all, I remember the wonderful troupe of characters who display many facets of humanity from sublime innocence through to supreme wisdom.

I've since read the author's other novels, Paper, The Woman Who Read too Much and Us & Them; each is like a beautifully decorated leather satchel full of writing gems.

Rowena says

"Within seconds he was isolated in cones of whirling sand. And centuries ensued. The mute and muffled sun gave him no sense of passing time. The particles of sand surged and coalesced in tidal waves around him and beat upon him like a gong."

This book takes us on a journey across the desert along the Mecca-Medina pilgrimage route, and introduces us to a vast array of characters, such as a thief, chieftain, moneylender, and a bride. I loved the idea of the desert as a sort of character in all the stories, and the intertwining tales that showed me the secret thoughts of all kinds of people. The mixture of religions and cultures represented was also interesting in terms of the interactions the people had with each other. From the little I know about the Ba’hai faith, the philosophical content of the book seems to be in line with Ba’hai teachings.

I found the portrayal of women in this book very interesting, especially the Black slave from Abyssinia. I saw the fear men often have of women and it was intriguing and amusing at times.

I have a soft spot for fairytales and fables, and also stories told from different perspectives, so this was the perfect read for me. It was a wonderful read full of surprises, a fable with so many poetic insights and lessons learned. Highly recommended.

Débora Teixeira says

Uma narrativa com ritmo diferente do que estou acostumada, mas bastante envolvente. Traz reflexões belíssimas. A edição tá TAG está primorosa!

Julia Boechat says

Nesse livro, a mesma história é contada sobre diversos pontos de vistas, uma conexão com a fé Baháí da autora, que acredita que todas as religiões monoteístas são a mesma mensagem, interpretada de formas diversas.

Com isso, a travessia de uma caravana pelo deserto assume significados diferentes, passando de um rato de deserto a uma jovem noiva zoroastrista e propensa a visões, ao líder de um grupo de bandidos, a um trapaceiro indiano, a uma escrava judia, a um peregrino em busca de iluminação, a um sacerdote fanático, a um certo inglês disfarçado de dervixe sobre quem ela tem uma visão irônica (quem gosta de história vai reconhecer na hora. Para falar quem é sem dar spoiler no review vou colocar o nome de uma biografia dele O Colecionador de Mundos) até chegar em um cadáver de um homem que morreu durante uma peregrinação e por isso deve ser enterrado em um cemitério sagrado (e cujo cheiro ninguém consegue suportar).

Com o fundo da caravana, a autora nos lembra que lugares que hoje em dia são frequentemente descritos na imprensa como isolados sempre foram lugares de encontros de culturas. Muito bem escrito e uma ótima surpresa da TAG.

David says

What a glorious teller of tales is Ms Nakhjavani, with rich language, grand imagery, intricate machinations, and with the nine tales of this book each overlapping the last and the next to keep the reader entranced. The penultimate two stories are especially well crafted, reaching the very rewarding conclusion and solidifying the book as a metaphor of human life, from youth to the finale.

The last chapter of the Corpse gives oversight to the whole, starting as it ended. "Would that I had no name and no identity, he thought, since it is worth so little. We should live as if we would die forever. There's more of it. But this was already becoming too difficult. From 'I' to 'we' was further than he had been willing to extend himself." See the overlapping circle and the tales merge into one imaginative day in the Arabian desert? The penultimate page, as if to reflect on the totality truth and morality of these overlapping tales, speaks thus of "A story of trust, a story of change, a story of detachment and connection, like perfume in the desert which lingers in the memory of men saturated with themselves."

As one newspaper reviewer has stated, this book of fiction "challenges you to solve a mystery wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a dream." This is poetry of tales gathered and cast as a grand fable.

Alessandra Anyzewski says

Nos primeiros capítulos fiquei muito empolgada com os personagens desse livro! Cada personagem contando a mesma história sob um ponto de vista diferente, unidos em torno de um objeto (o alforje) é genial. E ainda o fato da história se passar no deserto, ambiente inóspito e rota de peregrinação religiosa, monta o ambiente mais provocativo possível em termos de misturar o místico/religioso com o ser humano bicho. A forma de ela escrever, apesar das muitas referências ao mundo árabe, é muito clara, fluida e ao mesmo tempo profunda. Com o passar da leitura fui perdendo ritmo. Não tenho certeza se é porque os últimos capítulos são de personagens mais secundários ou se é por uma ignorância minha mesmo em relação ao contexto em que a história se passa. O último capítulo em especial, fiquei imensamente decepcionada. Não entendi nada, justamente no grand finale! Apesar disso, é um livro que recomendo muitíssimo e queeria novamente com certeza.

Carolyn says

The book's premise is fairly simple and obvious: a day in the life of nine characters, from whose individual perspectives the story is told, is forever entwined in the mysterious contents of a saddlebag. Stolen by a Bedouin thief from a seemingly wealthy merchant while performing his ablutions before kneeling in prayer, the saddlebag passes through the hands and lives of the chieftan, bride, moneychanger, slave, pilgrim, priest, dervish, and the corpse, bestowing upon each some miracle of eternal wisdom and/or salvation.

Each chapter, which I think could stand alone and still contain a strong message and storyline, narrates the haunting background of one of the characters while explaining how each interprets the meaning of the event that moves the plot along. Not one of the characters is without the proverbial sin; each is flawed either physically or morally or both, which Nakhjavani balances, however, with a character's redeeming act, virtuous past or divine consciousness that blows in with the sandstorm – a life (or death)-defining moment for all of them.

Nakhjavani's imagery is really the main character in "The Saddlebag", which is full of breathtaking descriptions and cliche-less imagery.

It's been a long time since I've read a piece of literature whose beauty literally made me want to cry – no joke. I thank my good friend Kurt, an American neighbor from California with whom I've formed my own little, informal book club, for lending me this treasure, and I would recommend that you read it, too.

Nickolas the Kid says

Το συγκεκριμ?νο βιβλ?ο ε?ναι ?να ψηφιδωτ? απ? τις παραδ?σεις της Ανατολ?ς, ?νας συνδυασμ?ς των παραμυθι?ν της Χαλιμ?ς με την ?μορφη και σ?γχρονη αφ?γηση της Ιραν?ς συγγραφ?ως...

Οι ζω?ς και οι τ?χες 9 ανθρ?πων συνδ?ονται με ?να δισ?κι. ?να δισ?κι που κανε?ς δεν μπορε? ακριβ?ς να καταλ?βει πιο ακριβ?ς ε?ναι το περιεχ?μενο του και πως καθορ?ζει τις μο?ρες των ανθρ?πων...

4/5*

Adriana Scarpin says

Ao ler esse livro tive no pensamento uma constante ânsia de que se todos fossem leitores inveterados o mundo seria tão extraordinariamente melhor que nem sei, não que este seja um daqueles insuportáveis livros edificantes mal escritos que abarrotam as livrarias por aí, é a multiplicidade da narrativa de Bahiyyih Nakhjavani que sucitam tais questões, ela é tão feliz em alinhavar culturas, religiões e personalidades diferentes com suas falhas e seus desejos que é impossível você não enxergar o ser humano de uma forma mais humanizada que é o que a boa literatura traz de melhor. Somando a isso o estilo de sua prosa que parece ter sido extraída diretamente do século XIX, nós temos aqui uma obra deveras interessante.
Plus: Adorei o o "odorama" que veio como mimo da TAG, mais livros deveriam proporcionar tal experiência, só senti falta de alguma coisa que cheirasse a cadáver para incrementar a experiência. Rá!

Jhones Rocha says

Gostei muito da leitura dos capítulos individuais do livro. Uma história muito bem contada e com lições e bem costurado. Entretanto, não acho que eu compreendi muito bem o sentido do todo, principalmente após o capítulo final. Merece leituras posteriores.

Kalliope says

When I finished this novel for a moment I thought that, may be, it had been originally contained in the Saddlebag on which it was based, for its contents had been dispersed in the wide world. One of items could have ended up in my library.

But mulling over it, I realized that no, it could not have been. It is not written in Persian, its paper is not pale blue and the script is printed rather than handwritten in a spidery hand.

Instead I could understand the novel as another Saddlebag. For after all it is bundle of writings with wisdom written over them. I mean neither wisdom in the moral boring sense, nor the wisdom that remains sterile because it is not listened to. But literary wisdom: Nakhjavani's writing outshines.

The novel is loaded with imagery and it is always evocative and suggestive. It creates the landscapes and paints different vistas, it plays the sounds of the cacophony of the languages spoken, it prays to different religions, it conjures sensations and empathetic feelings of a wide specter, it evaluates various philosophical thoughts, and it makes you smile.

The imagery is so fertile that it invites the reader to conjure up her own trying to condense how it feels reading this novel. Several came to me. The structure of complementing episodes made me think of orange segments. All literary and exotically juicy. But the way the actual writing captivated me seemed as if the reading were like flying onto a web tissued by a an enchanting spider, because the lines stuck to my skin, or to my eyes. They had to continue reading and those lines or threads, all connected, captivated me irremediably more and more.

But the novel is better than that. The interconnection is more complex than an uniform web. Each episode changes not just the protagonist, but also the tone, and the viewpoint, and the story, and the outlook on life. And by the time one comes to the end and can see how all the parts integrate with each other one wonders how could Nakhjavani have done it so fittingly well considering the varying and complex shape of each and of the whole.

This Saddlebag of a novel induces pure delight as if it were a literary flower.

For if I was a seeker, there was not a single moment in which I was a doubter.

Juliana says

Layer I will find words to express how this book is a masterpiece, not only in form in aesthetics but as well as a masterpiece of a story that show life and death, and redemption and meaning. Amazing.

It has become instantly one of the best books I read in my life.

Jamila says

I loved the rich milieu and cultural tapestry of this novel . Nakhjavani truly has a gift for storytelling. Through her well-rendered voices, the author transports us to an unknown time, on the pilgrimage routes of Saudi Arabia. This is definitely a fable where meaning can be found beneath the surface of the tumultuous and sometimes violent events of the plot. There are bandits and swindlers on these routes after all! I did however feel that the novel tapered off as the structure of the novel was pretty much telling one single story from the vantage point of each significant character, beginning to end, over each chapter. Perhaps I was waiting for something else at the conclusion...

Alexandre Mano says

Gostei do formato que a autora escolheu para descrever uma história por várias perspectivas, adicionando ainda diversas religiões no deserto das arábias! Adorei a tradução, a apresentação de um vocabulário rebuscado mas ao mesmo tempo simples e ter me levado pro deserto, para as arábias e sua multi cultura!
