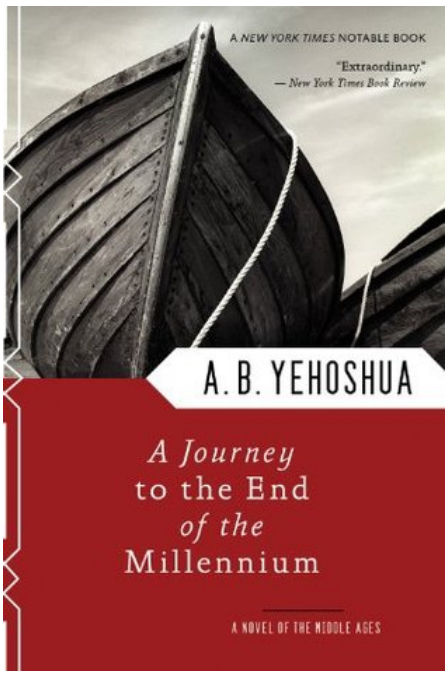

A Journey to the End of the Millennium

A.B. Yehoshua , André Bernard (Editor) , Nicholas de Lange (Translator)

A Journey to the End of the Millennium

A.B. Yehoshua , André Bernard (Editor) , Nicholas de Lange (Translator)

A Journey to the End of the Millennium A.B. Yehoshua , André Bernard (Editor) , Nicholas de Lange (Translator)
In the year 999, when Ben Attar, a Moroccan Jewish merchant, takes a second wife, he commits an act whose unforeseen consequences will forever alter his family, his relationships, his business-his life. In an attempt to forestall conflict and advance his business interests at the same time, Ben Attar undertakes his annual journey to Europe with both his first wife and his new wife. The trip is the beginning of a profound human drama whose moral conflicts of fidelity and desire resonate with those of our time. Yehoshua renders the medieval world of Jewish and Christian culture and trade with astonishing depth and sensuous detail. Through the trials of a medieval merchant, the renowned author explores the deepest questions about the nature of morality, character, codes of human conduct, and matters of the heart.

A Journey to the End of the Millennium Details

Date	:	Published May 1st 2000 by Mariner Books (first published 1996)
ISBN	:	9780156011167
Author	:	A.B. Yehoshua , André Bernard (Editor) , Nicholas de Lange (Translator)
Format	:	Paperback 352 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, Jewish, Cultural, France, Religion

From Reader Review A Journey to the End of the Millennium for online ebook

Amari says

The story revolves around a legal dispute, taking place just before the year 1000, between Sephardic and Ashkenazi in-laws. The issue: a North African merchant, a good man who travels each year by ship to Europe to sell spices, copper pots, and other valuables, has two wives. So, he argues, did the great Jewish kings; there are numerous references to polygamy in the Old Testament. And his Muslim colleagues and friends in Morocco and Spain live similarly. But the merchant's adoring nephew and astute partner, in the course of his travels in dark, primitive Europe (that is, relative to the lush and enlightened life led by the southern Sephardi Jews), meets and marries an enchanting older widow with blonde hair and eyes as blue as the azure sea of coastal Africa -- an Ashkenazi Jew. The southerners are shocked at the thought that there may in fact be Jews whose ancestors have never set foot in the land of Israel, who may even have Viking blood. The nephew's devout and learned wife, who comes from the marshy town of Worms (later famed as the setting of Luther's defense of his reforms before the court), insists that her new husband break his partnership with his sinful uncle. And from here it becomes clear that the book is not just about one difference of opinion. It is about duality in all its forms: freedom and slavery, religious and pagan, Jew and non-Jew, Muslim and non-Muslim, Christian and non-Christian, African and European, secret and public, enlightenment and muddled backwardness, female and male, single and double, guest and host, attraction and repulsion, reality and imagination, child and adult, black and white, blonde hair and dark curly hair, dead and alive, learned and intuitive, ribald and sophisticated, submission and command, caged and escaped, gift and sale, friend and foe, poetry and prose, lust and love, ability and inability to smell, lively and restrained, open and held back, confused and confident, leader and follower, clean and dirty, weak and strong, inside and outside, land and sea, ill and well, innocent and cunning, travel and home, respect and rudeness, sacred and everyday, Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge. Some of these latter, less obvious dualities (if you made it through the list) are perhaps the more salient ones, holding the key to a rich and meaningful life. I would say that the only duality that Yehoshua does not treat directly is good and bad in their various forms. Technically, he avoids doing so by using the third person omniscient point of view, but his more important tool here is his great wisdom. Set against the ominous backdrop of the approaching Christian millennium, the exploration of these many compatible and incompatible pairs (of ideas and of people, that is) takes on great import and deep urgency. As discussed below, a second and intimately related theme is that of what can be exchanged, what can be bought and sold.

Through arduous journeys, love in many forms, judgments, deaths, successes, optimism, and enmity, we follow an extended Mediterranean family at sea, in backwater Paris and in dingy, stiff-necked western Germany as they seek justice, revenge, recognition, and togetherness. They don't always find what they seek, and important decisions are made for many of the characters at some point regardless of their independence or goodness or wit. And who, for instance, determined that the second wife could not have a second husband? Her impetuous demand that this possible (or impossible) arrangement be considered throws everything into turmoil and changes the course of her life.

The book probably deserves five stars, but I'm giving it four for a few reasons:

1. Though there were Saramago-esque moments of revelation and cleverness, I didn't find the language consistently compelling. I felt that an author (or likely, rather, a translator) capable of creating such wondrous sentences and thoughts ought to hold himself to a higher general standard. Though the writing was never poor, I felt a certain disappointing laziness in the choice of words and the repetitive use of certain

structures at several points throughout. But maybe that's just the brainy, judgmental, European part of me nagging away rather than being swept up in the tale.

2. Because I didn't appreciate the amount of gratuitous sex. It's essential to the story in a film like "Blue is the Warmest Color" and it belongs in that context (you see, my feeling about this by no means reflects prudishness!) but doesn't have a place in this book, I find. It seemed tasteless and overdone. I wish that Yehoshua had left most of that to the imagination -- or, rather, left the imagination to ruminate on other matters.

3. I was offended by the fact that the young slave (who becomes a significant character) was referred to throughout the entire book as "black". He was mentioned hundreds of times and was the only character in the book who was a slave. It was of course significant that he had no name (or that it was never given or used by his owners; and the color of his skin as a novelty to the inhabitants of Paris, Verdun, and Worms is relevant, yes -- but I was disturbed that this descriptor was used needlessly so many times.

These are, admittedly, relatively minor points, and I can't recommend the book highly enough. If you can read it in the original Hebrew, don't delay. I'm guessing that the Spanish translation might be really good too, and I might well find out in the near future.

In short: when we examine everything, it eventually falls apart of its own accord. Excessive analysis can be irrevocably damaging if we lose sight of what we have, of pleasure and kindness and good sense. Troubling ourselves over the unintended or unavoidable breaking of minute religious laws is as well (this is treated brilliantly in the tale of the rabbi's son who at one point is very hungry and in danger; he must eat pork, and torments himself about it). It is the unexpected encounter, the first glimpse of another's soul, the smell of warm autumn rain in a new country that matters. So I see it, and I so I suspect Yehoshua intends us to interpret his work: just treat each other well and enjoy the ride.

The rest of this review contains spoilers, so you might want to stop here if you intend to read the book.

On the last page, Yehoshua implies that everyone on board the ship returning to Africa will die a terrifying and miserable death. It is here that I realized what it's all about -- not the dualities, not the legal struggle, not the return to the ship, not the sale of the goods. The whole trip, seen from the point of view of its intent, was pointless. The uncle received a positive judgment in France and the party traveled to Germany for a second trial based on blind hubris from both sides. (An aside: the insights of the Alexander Technique come into play here as well -- at this point, some of these characters lose their way because they are "end-gaining", focusing on the goal rather than the process.) What alone remains meaningful is the journey and the discoveries and changes it aroused in the travelers. That goes for us as well, dear readers. Sailing and wheeling and riding and trudging all over the world to ask yet another authority who should triumph in a dispute is an enormous and shameful waste of our time on Earth (even though life expectancy is twice what it was a millennium ago). Instead of enjoying their lives together, Ben Attar (the uncle) and his two wives suffer a very difficult journey and one of them loses her life on the way. Because the family wasted months in the pursuit of superfluous justice, the winds became strong and the sea became unfit for the return voyage. And so it appears that, of the original passengers, only the rabbi's son and the disappeared slave, both of whom were left behind in Paris, survive. This lengthy distraction and diversion from life's natural path costs much. In addition, Ben Attar loses his authority over his ship; the sailors lose patience with the long delay and threaten him; European slaves (non-believers) are brought on board without his permission to be sold at home (and he finds this horrifying and unconscionable). More than anything, this turn of events highlights the author's exploration of another primary theme: what can be sold, bought, bartered, and exchanged? The question crops up in many, many subtle instances throughout, and it reaches its height at the moment of Ben

Attar's discovery of this last occurrence on board his ship. Partners sleep in the beds of others; guests take control of others' kitchens and doorsteps; exchanges in marriages are considered and household exchanges of children actually take place. Our reactions to each of these events, in turn, reveal much about ourselves and much about Yehoshua's power to tie us to his characters.

Laurie says

Rather than reading a novel, my experience with the A Journey To The End Of The Millennium, felt more like I was listening to an epic tale of a master storyteller one trips over in the corner of a dusty marketplace thousands of miles from home. I was captivated by the strangeness of life in early medieval Europe, the emotions of the characters and the repetitive cadence of the language. From the beginning of the journey to the end; an engaging experience.

Jim Leffert says

The famed Israeli author here takes us on a journey through time—back to the Middle ages as the first Millennium of the Christian era approaches; and across continents, as Ben Attar, a North African Jewish merchant from Tangiers embarks on a long and potentially hazardous sea journey past Gibraltar, way up the Atlantic coast, and up the Seine to the Frankish town of Paris.

His purpose: to try to mend a breach that has developed between him and his nephew and business partner, Abulafia. The latter, who travels the length and breadth of France selling Ben Attar's and their Muslim partner's wares, has "gone native" in France and married an Ashkenazi woman, Esther Minna. When Esther Minna learned that Ben Attar has two wives, she insisted that her new husband break all ties with his uncle. As repugnant as this Sephardic practice, which is on the verge of being outlawed by the Ashkenazim, is to Esther Minna, perhaps another reason why she is so insistent is that she doesn't want her new husband to continue in a business arrangement that requires him to leave her for months at a time.

Ben Attar, meanwhile, is determined to prove that Abulafia's wife's opposition to this Sephardic practice is wrong-headed. For this reason, in addition to his Muslim partner and his choicest North African goods, Ben Attar has also brought into the close confines of the ship both of his wives, who have never been in such proximity to one another before. Ben Attar is bringing them, along with an Andalusian rabbi from Seville, as part of a campaign to convince the Ashkenazim that having more than one wife is a healthy practice that is supported by Biblical and Talmudic sources.

This is a rich, complex, multi-layered and at times salacious novel that stimulates the reader's imagination. Like other great novels such as Baudolino, it exists beyond time yet it is also grounded in and helps bring to life a historical period. It is about a clash of ideas and cultures but also about flesh and blood people in conflict. Our book discussion group tackled it and each member had some new point of illumination to bring to it!

Roger Brunyate says

Is there a sea between us?

One of the greatest and rarest pleasures in reading is when you realize that, whatever journey an author is taking you on, however many twists they may be in the road, you trust him absolutely. The Israeli author's Journey is, admittedly, a slow one, in which not much seems to happen. But you learn to trust his rhythms, as he leads you back a thousand years into a world where there is no separation between Ashkenazi and Sephardi, when Jews work side by side with Muslims, and both can coexist in mutual respect with the Christians.

There is a specific bone of contention: marriage to more than one wife. Abraham and several other figures from the Bible can be held up as precedents, and the Torah does not explicitly forbid it, but around 1000 CE, Rabbi Gershom of Mainz issued a decree against multiple marriages that was accepted throughout the Ashkenazic world, but not in the Sephardic one. It was a small but significant watershed in the distinction between the two groups. Yehoshua's protagonist is a Sephardic Jew, Ben Attar, a rich merchant from Tangiers, who sets off in a boat laden with exotic goods to sail up the Atlantic coast and then up the Seine to Paris. He is accompanied by his two wives, by his business partner Abu Lutfi, by a wise Rabbi from Seville with his young son, a Muslim captain and crew, a black slave boy, and two young camels. The ecumenical nature of the company, and the partnership between a Jew and a Mohammedan is typical of the relatively relaxed relations in Mediterranean lands at that time, and in strong contrast to the situation today. All parties are also aware that they are venturing into a Christian land stirred to a pitch of religious fervor by the approaching millennium. The year is 999.

The reason for Ben Attar's journey is to restore his connection with the third member of the partnership, his nephew Raphael Abulafia. For many years, Abu Lufti would search beyond the Atlas for trade goods that Ben Attar would ship to the Bay of Barcelona, for Abulafia to distribute them through southern France. But Abulafia has fallen in love with the widow of a scholar from Worms (the heart of Ashkenaz), married her, and moved to Paris. Horrified to hear that her husband is in business with a bigamist, she demands that he repudiate the partnership. With the aid of the Rabbi, Ben Attar makes his case at an informal trial near Paris, then travels to Worms to plead again in the much more rigid context of German Jewish scholarship. The miracle of Yehoshua's writing is that he can take matters of doctrine and make them personal. He can take issues that people have been fighting over for centuries and finesse them so beautifully that you wonder what anyone ever had to quarrel about. I kept thinking back to another historical novel about a voyage that begins in the Iberian peninsula: José Saramago's *The Elephant's Journey*. Yehoshua is a believer and Saramago an atheist, but both rise beyond the narrow limitations of creed to glory in the embrace of common humanity.

I drafted these notes in a glow of contentment two-thirds of the way through the book. But the last third made me realize that Yehoshua is a tougher writer than I gave him credit for. He is under no illusions that the relative Utopia of the first millennium would last, and gradually begins to sow the seeds for the discord we see now at the second. In this sense, it is a realistic book as well as a symbolic one. But above all, it is humane. Even when dealing with matters of Jewish Law, he is focusing on the fallible individuals who must interpret and obey it. As we enter the period between Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana, a lot of things suddenly begin to happen (including Yehoshua's trademark emphasis on sex-as-sacrament), and though we end with a more complex situation than the one with which we had begun, we feel that much closer to our fellow human beings.

Adina says

Astonishingly interesting and compelling

Stephen Durrant says

It is the year before the end of the First Millennium AD and Ben Attar, a Moroccan Jewish merchant, travels from his usual trading ground in southern Spain to the upstart town of Paris for the purpose of trying to convince his business partner and cousin not to break their longstanding, highly profitable partnership. The crisis with his partner and more specifically with his partner's new strongly opinionated wife is that Ben Attar is a polygamist. So, he brings along his own rabbi, convinced that he can win any disputation on whether or not polygamy can be a legitimate part of Jewish life. And, in fact, his position would have prevailed had he not been so enticed by the joy of argument itself that he pushed the dispute just one step too far. Yehoshua uses this circumstance to explore the question of polygamy with considerable intelligence and with some surprises. Yeshoshua is a good enough novelist that I want to read other of his novels, but I never felt that "A Journey to the End of the Millennium" really carries us into that distant time . . . as, for example, Hilary Mantel can carry us into the darkness and political treachery of 16th century England. Oh well, onto a Yehoshua novel set in contemporary times!

Susanna Bassano says

Un ricco mercante ebreo, con le due mogli e il socio in affari musulmano, parte con una piccola nave da Tangeri.
Costeggeranno le coste dell’Andalusia dove prenderanno a bordo un giovane rabbino e suo figlio, per poi dirigersi a nord alla ricerca di un fiume che li porterà fino allo sperduto borgo di Parigi.
Sono gli ultimi mesi dell’anno 999 e l’anno mille si prefigura burrascoso soprattutto per le selvagge genti del nord Europa che attendono il possibile ritorno di un Dio crocifisso.
Meglio dunque evitare di viaggiare per terra, soprattutto se carichi di ricche mercanzie da vendere in quelle terre lontane.
Il mercante Ben Atar ha deciso di intraprendere il viaggio per raggiungere il terzo socio, suo nipote Abulafia, trattenuto a Parigi dalla sua nuova moglie, una donna ebrea del nord che disapprova la pratica della bigamia e impedisce al marito di frequentare i suoi vecchi soci.
L’idea di Ben Atar è quella di convincere la donna con dotte e ragionate argomentazioni affinché il ricco commercio possa continuare ad avvalersi della sua base al Nord.
La storia viene raccontata quasi come una favola con una narrazione complessa e ricca di descrizioni dei luoghi e dei personaggi.
Molto felice tutta la prima parte in cui si narra dei luoghi visitati, sono descritte le variopinte mercanzie di stoffe, gemme e spezie e viene dispiegato tutto il ricco e sensuale bagaglio filosofico dei personaggi.
Poi le vicende si fanno drammatiche e anche il raccontare si fa cupo, introverso e malinconico, appesantito dalle molte riflessioni sulla complicata interpretazione della controversia dottrinale.
Interessante riflettere come a suo tempo il grande centro della cultura fosse distante e situato molto più a sud, in quella zona in cui la cultura araba e quella ebrea detenevano il primato scientifico, filosofico e artistico, mentre nel profondo nord una cristianesimo ancora semi pagano doveva lottare per emergere.
Come sempre Yehoshua scrive su più piani e molti sono i temi del romanzo che possono coinvolgere in diverso modo, tra questi ho molto amato quello a lui caro dell’importanza delle figure femminili, seppur

velate, dietro alle motivazioni delle azioni degli uomini.

Tintinnabula says

RECENSIONE DA ANOBII, FEBBRAIO 2015

Donne=dromedari?
Non so, sto attraversando un momento in cui i libri che scelgo si rivelano poi deludenti.
Questo aveva una trama coinvolgente, un autore conosciuto (e per me nuovo)... Peccato che poi la storia sia lenta e pedante. Mi rendo conto che nell'anno mille le donne non avevano grande libertà e istruzione, ma possibile che siano o degli animali da monta o delle rigide maniache religiose? Il problema teologico della bigamia mi ha annoiato e ho lasciato il libro a metà, senza rimpianti.

Gauss74 says

Ogni volta che prendo in mano un nuovo romanzo di Abraham Yehoshua, già so che è come se stessi per infilarmi sotto le coperte per ascoltare una bellissima favola. E in questo caso in modo particolare, perchè si sta parlando di un viaggio su un antico veliero arabo attraverso il mondo medioevale tra Andalusia e Impero, in quel bocciolo pronto a fiorire che è il mondo dell'anno mille.
Respiriamo qualcosa di fiabesco nell' aria mentre accompagnamo il mercante giudeo Ben-Atar in un pericoloso ma esaltante viaggio lungo le coste dell' Atlantico e poi risalendo la Senna, mentre cerca di ricucire la frattura all'interno della sua proficua associazione commerciale, che trasportava prodotti dal deserto alla Francia capetingia. La bigamia contratta da Ben-Atar nella sua nuova casa nel Maghreb, cosi naturale e scontata per la comunità islamica che lo ospita, suscita scandalo nelle terre cristiane dove il socio e nipote Abulafia vende i prodotti nordafricani. L'atmosfera culturale cristiana contagia Abulafia e la sua famiglia nonostante siano ebrei; ciò che in Andalusia è normale, in Europa porta turbamento, rancore e frattura tale frattura porta alla separazione volontaria dalla associazione commerciale, e solo l'autorità dottrinale di un Rabbino, al cospetto delle due mogli di Ben-Atar potrà decidere della legittimità di questa decisione, ricomponendo o meno famiglia e società.

Ma niente risulterà facile come sembra, e quella contro il terribile ed ancora invitto oceano sarà la più semplice delle battaglie: occorrerà vincere la difefrenza culturale tra religioni, tra nord e sud, la differente sensibilità femminile che se da una parte si sente onorata da un amore raddoppiato, dall'altra è terrorizzata dalla possibilità del vilipendio...si arriverà ai confini della Lotaringia e della grigia e fredda valle del Reno per avere una risposta definitiva.

Ecco dunque che la vela latina del mercante arabo Abu Lutfi, socio di Ben Atar ed Abulafia, si stende anche verso un incontro problematico e quasi irrisolvibile tra le tre grandi religioni monoteiste che cominciano proprio qui la loro millenaria storia di scontro ma anche di affannosa ricerca, come se non potessero vivere l'una senza l'altra.
Ma si stende anche verso l'appassionata femminilità delle meogli di Ben-Atar e di Abulafia, il cui incontro con il pensiero della bigamia sviluppa da un lato un sentire tanto più complesso e personale, dall'altro riempie tutto il romanzo di una vibrante sensualità senza che per questo si scada mai nel volgare.

E penso che in questa molteplicità di livelli di lettura del viaggio stia il bello di questo grande romanzo di

Abraham Yehoshua, che riproducendo la vividezza dell'immaginario che già avevo incontrato nel "signor Mani", passa attraverso l'affresco storico, l'intreccio del viaggio avventuroso, la digressione dottrinale, per arrivare alla letteratura erotica. Tutti questi aspetti riescono a fondersi insieme in un'unica rappresentazione, che è poi quella di sempre: dell'umanità nella storia. Ebraica in particolare ma che diventa subito universale.

Sia nello spazio che nel tempo. Se pensiamo infatti alle pagine nere del terrorismo islamico e delle "guerre preventive"; alla presa di coscienza del mondo femminile nei paesi arabi che corre parallela al dilagare degli omicidi di donne in Europa che ha fatto nascere la terribile parola "femminicidio"; si vede ancora una volta quanto l'uomo dell'anno mille sappia parlare anche dell'uomo dell'anno duemila; la grande letteratura sa essere sempre attuale e arrivare al punto in ogni momento in cui la si inquadra.

E questo libro, godibile a cosi tanti livelli diversi, secondo me è un ottimo pezzo di letteratura che può piacere e far bene a molti.

Cloudbuster says

La storia si svolge negli ultimi mesi del 999 in un’Europa agitata dai timori e le angosce della popolazione cristiana rispetto all’annunciata fine del mondo. I protagonisti sono un gruppo di mercanti ebrei e le loro famiglie.

Il ricco mercante ebreo Ben Attar salpa da Tangeri insieme al suo socio arabo, le due mogli ed il suo seguito per affrontare un complicato viaggio via mare fino a Parigi, nel cuore della selvaggia Europa, per ritrovare il nipote e vecchio socio d’affari Abulafia. Fino a pochi anni prima i tre avevano dato vita ad una fiorente società commerciale che, però, il nipote ha dovuto sciogliete per l’opposizione della famiglia della sua nuova moglie askhenazita,, non disposta ad accettare la bigamia dello zio.

Ben Attar ha affrontato un viaggio così lungo e pericoloso non solo per riallacciare i rapporti commerciali con il nipote ma, soprattutto, per conquistare il cuore della sua nuova famiglia mostrando loro l’assoluta liceità del suo rapporto di bigamia. Per questo motivo ha deciso di portare con lui le due mogli ed un rabbino andaluso che dovrà difendere le sue ragioni in un “processo” condotto in punta di citazioni bibliche. Il cuore del romanzo è rappresentato dalle dotte discussioni tra i vari saggi sull’interpretazione della Bibbia.

Il tema dominante del romanzo è il confronto tra le due anime dell’ebraismo, quella askhenazita e quella sefardita. In questa contrapposizione si confrontano tolleranza e rigidità, amore e sterilità, gioia di vivere e cupezza. Tra le righe sembra di percepire una simpatia da parte dello scrittore per la gioia di vivere e la tolleranza meridionale rispetto al dogmatismo ed alla rigidità ideologica settentrionale ed un certo rimpianto di quello che sarebbe potuto essere il rapporto tra le grandi religioni e non è stato.

Il romanzo non è di facile lettura perché la narrazione è molto lenta e densa di spunti di riflessioni e pensieri profondi. Nonostante ciò, Yehoshua riesce ad affabulare il lettore e a tenerlo avvinto ad una storia che, a volte, sembra avvilupparsi su se stessa.

L says

This one was hard to get into, hard to read, and impossible to put down. It was hard to get into primarily because it is written from the male, merchant perspective and hard to read because both because the time and place are so distant that it was hard for me to connect and because there is so much pain in this tale. It was impossible to put down because it is such a powerful tale and so beautifully written.

Carol Catinari says

A beautifully written book. The lyricism casts a spell that captures you and moves you on the voyage with the main characters. In that aspect, it reminds me somewhat of Bel Canto. The setting and the plot are interesting and new to me. The contrast between the southern and northern Jewish communities and customs intriguing. The author paints his tale and his setting with words.

However, reader, be warned. This is a SLOW read. The density of the language and imagery makes every paragraph chock full of detail, and not to be missed.

Deborah says

The other books I've read by this author are later works The Liberated Bride and A Woman in Jerusalem that have protagonists who are quintessential examples of the postmodern Israeli man. I was curious to see how this would translate into a medieval historical novel. The answer is, almost seamlessly.

Once again the protagonist, Ben Attar, is obsessed with the actions, and their consequences, of a the wife of a close relative. This time it's the Sephardic, Parisian wife of his beloved nephew and business partner. She has forced her husband to repudiate his uncle and withdraw from their lucrative trading business because her sensibilities are mortally offended by the fact that Attar has two wives, which is apparently acceptable in the Ashkenazi culture of his home in Tangiers.

The sensible thing would be for Attar to accept this and find a new partner in Europe to sell the wares of Attar and his other partner, an Ishmaelite (Muslim). Instead, he loads both wives, his Muslim partner, a learned rabbi from Seville, who brings along his young son, and a load of goods (including two young camels), on board a ship captained and crewed by Muslims and one young black pagan slave. The purpose of this journey to Paris is to prove to the new wife (by dint of example and the arguments of the rabbi) that two wives are perfectly acceptable and even preferable, even for the two wives. Meanwhile, it's the year 999 according to the Christian calendar, and predominately Christian Europe is anxiously awaiting the return of Christ at the end of the Millennium.

Yehoshua is not an easy read, but his books are definitely worthwhile. In this book (alternately amusing and heartbreaking) he turns his keen eye to the frisson between cultures, families and family business.

Patrizia says

Anno 999. L'Europa è in fermento per l'approssimarsi dell'Anno Mille. Ben Atar, ricco mercante ebreo parte da Tangeri alla volta di Parigi per ritrovare il nipote Abulafia. Compagni di viaggio di Ben-Atar sono il socio ismaelita Abu-Lufti, le due mogli e un rabbino andaluso, che ha il compito di convincere la devota moglie di Abulafia della legittimità della bigamia di Ben Atar.Tradizioni e culture diverse in un mondo che trattiene il respiro per l'approssimarsi dell'anno mille e della temuta "fine".

Edfnl says

Ci ho messo quasi un mese a finirlo, nonostante il volume non sia poi così consistente.
E' un libro... denso.

Il libro narra le vicende di una ricca società di mercanti, composta da due ebrei (zio e nipote) e un arabo originari di Tangeri. Il nipote è fuggito in Europa, e qui ha trovato un mercato fertile per gli oggetti e le spezie acquistate in giro per l'Africa dall'arabo e commercializzate dallo zio. La società va a gonfie vele, se non che il nipote sposa una donna lotaringia, che disapprova la bigamia dello zio.
La bigamia, che dagli ebrei magrebini invece è accettata come simbolo uno stato sociale molto elevato, diviene il pretesto per uno scioglimento di questa società. Lo zio decide quindi di imbarcarsi con le sue due mogli e sfidare i tribunali locali per ripristinare i suoi ricchi commerci.

Da questi due spunti prende via la bellissima descrizione di un viaggio via mare e poi via fiume fino a Parigi, e di qui via terra fino al Reno... Il tutto intrecciato alle storie personali dei protagonisti ebrei, alle vicende che li hanno portati fin lì e al loro modo di osservare un mondo cristiano in grande attesa per l'anno mille.
"Loro non vivranno", profetizza un medico convertito al cristianesimo, riferito alle comunità ebraiche del centro Europa: la venuta dell'anno mille senza discesa del cristo in terra darà il via a una serie di sommosse e ritorsioni che noi vediamo solo profetizzate e non realizzate. Ma l'incombere dello scadere del millennio è da una parte sempre presente, dall'altra visto con scetticismo scarso interesse e scarsa partecipazione. Del resto è solo il 4k e qualche cosa per gli ebrei - e il fosco futuro non pare così pesante né preso sul serio.
Il finale mi ha abbastanza deluso, si risolve in maniera frettolosa e indecisa. Questo ineluttabile anno mille sembra sparire dai pensieri dei mercanti... e tutte le vicende si strozzano, rimangono in qualche modo inconcluse.
E' bello che questa è proprio una critica che l'arabo fa agli ebrei, quella di non trovare mai una soluzione finale, di non saper mai prendere decisioni reali ma continuare a ripensarle e ridefinirle... Inoltre il medioevo, che nel titolo è il protagonista, la fine del millennio, è solo uno sfondo spesso pallido, molto meno pesante sulla terraferma che nei primi capitoli sul mare...
