

The Night Counter
Alia Yunis
Reviewed by Kim Jensen

A Thousand and One Ways to Be an Arab in America

A growing number of contemporary Arab-American novelists and poets are reaching a readership outside the niche of “ethnic writing,” among them, Suheir Hammad, Naomi Shihab Nye, Rabih Alameddine and Diana Abu-Jaber. These authors explore Arab political, social, and cultural topics, but have rendered their subject matter relevant and appealing to wider audiences. For example, Abu-Jaber’s 2003 novel *Arabian Jazz* was something of a breakthrough, because it situated the Arab immigrant experience as an integral—if heavily caricatured—part of the overall American landscape.

Now the Arab-American literary world can boast of a new kind of breakthrough, a further excursion into new territory. Alia Yunis’s debut novel *The Night Counter* is arguably the first Arab-American “summer read,” a genre often characterized by light but sturdy plots and serious but heartwarming themes, all undergirded by a chronic comic vibe. With an endearing cast of characters, plot gifts that keeps on giving, and touching portrayals of family relationships—*The Night Counter* offers an easygoing, coast-to-coast carpet ride through modern Arab-America.

The protagonist of this whimsical work of fiction is the long-suffering Fatima Abdullah—a feisty eighty-five year old Lebanese American great grandmother, who is now living out her final days in Los Angeles with her openly gay grandson, a struggling actor named Amir. Fatima has a habit of twisting her long mane of purple hair, griping about just about everything, and watching American football and baseball on TV. Over the course of her long eventful life, she has outlived one autoworker husband in Detroit, only to marry and divorce another. She has given birth to and raised ten children who in turn have produced numerous grandchildren—and one talkative great-grandchild named Decimal.

Fatima is desperately trying to put her affairs in order, because she is convinced that she only has nine days left to live. She has learned about her imminent mortality from Scheherazade, the immortal storyteller of the Arabian Nights. While Fatima’s grandson Amir believes that his grandmother is on the brink of senility—talking to herself out loud in her room—Fatima is actually communing nightly with the long-robed, omniscient Scheherazade, who has now become a free-floating, freelance muse, always hovering behind the scenes or perched in a fig tree. Each evening after her spirited discussions with Fatima, Scheherazade magically travels the North American continent, invisibly eavesdropping on the entire Abdullah clan, one by one. As in ancient days, Scheherazade is wise and wily as she weaves the various strands of the story together.

Though Scheherazade may seem like an overused motif in Arab-American literature, in fact the device works quite well. What could have devolved into a gimmick is used to great advantage. First, Scheherazade represents the ultimate omniscient narrator—an invisible traveler, immortal, all-seeing—a boon to any novelist. Second, Scheherazade gives the story a good grounding in Arabic and Middle Eastern culture, providing a reference point for authenticity. Third, the modernization of this ancient figure provides a wealth of comic possibilities.

In between her nocturnal journeys visiting Fatima's far flung children and grandchildren, Scheherazade makes pungent observations on a number of topics, smokes home-rolled joints with an unwitting Fatima, and helps the ever-irritable Fatima resolve the two pressing questions of her life: how to quickly marry off her gay grandson to a good Arab girl; and to whom, of her many descendants, she should bequeath her small house back in Deir Zeitoon, Lebanon.

While Fatima's days are spent mulling over these questions, attending various funerals, and cooking up a storm for her own funeral—she's not one to be outdone— her nights are spent telling Scheherazade about her sprawling dysfunctional family full of matchmakers, housewives, doctors, misfits, runaways, peace activists, drop-outs; shoplifters, taxi-drivers, war veterans, psychics, and affluent Arabs hiding their real identities in a post-9/11 America.

In the midst of detailing this tribe of troublesome, but lovable characters, Yunis bakes up her most amusing slapstick confection—a couple of blundering FBI agents have been sent to eavesdrop on the increasingly erratic Abdullah family antics. While the “War on Terror” is a subject worthy of serious discussion in other post-9/11 novels, it is cause for healthy laughter in Yunis's gentle lampoon. Mistaken identities, crossed signals, cross-cultural misunderstandings—all these lead the agents to see plots and conspiracies where there are none. Laughable suspicions come to a climax when the agents spy on Amir through a window as he is rehearsing—in full bearded costume—for a role as a terrorist in a B-movie.

Though *The Night Counter* pokes fun at the cultural incompetence of the American authorities, they are not the only victim of Yunis's sly humor. She also makes sport of the follies and foibles of all sorts of Arabs—the ones who have run away from their roots; the ones who wallow in backwards traditions; the ones who dabble in politics as a dating game. Yet, entertaining as it is, *The Night Counter* is not without its serious messages. Over the course of the telling, we learn of the immense sacrifices that first-generation immigrants make for their children, the elastic but durable bonds of family, and the notion that our roots do sustain us, whether we see them or not.

Scheherazade is the glue that binds these messages together. She reveals that the real allure of Eastern women is not their exotic sensuality, but rather their stubborn pragmatism, their determination to survive and rise. In these qualities, Scheherazade remains true to the original *Arabian Nights* character who cleverly spins cliffhanging stories every night, forever postponing her own assassination.

The Night Counter too can be thought of as a lifesaver— it is a celebration of female strength and resilience, the perfect antidote for the stereotypes of Arab and Muslim women that continue to proliferate. Alia Yunis lovingly introduces the reader to manifold possibilities within Arab-America. Though some of the revelations that arrive at the end of the story may not come as a complete surprise, Yunis's charming invention gives us a thousand and one reasons to smile.

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