

Book Review

Setton, Ruth Knafo. *The Road to Fez: a novel*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2001.

The Road To Fez, a first novel by Ruth Knafo Setton, tells the story of a taboo love within a Moroccan-Jewish family. Brit, who was born in Morocco but who, as a child, moved with her parents to Pennsylvania, has now returned to her ancestral homeland. She wishes to spend time with her late mother's family and to fulfil her mother's dying request: that Brit make a pilgrimage to Fez, to the tomb of a revered 19th century Jewish woman, Suleika. During her visit, Brit falls in love with Gaby, her uncle, a womanizing widower.

Early on, the novel's vibrant prose seduces the reader into the sensuality of Jewish Morocco, its colors, sounds, textures, scents, foods, faces and bodies: "He smells like Gaby: that wild mix of sardines and the orange-vanilla potters' soap and dark spices. His women mingling in it so that his smell is complex, layered." Or, the "trays of Pesach sweets: alcamonias, walnut and meringue cookies, candied grapefruit peels, dates stuffed with almond paste, sugared balls of crème de marron." Or, "Shy Tonton Elie, laughing behind his hand. A gnarled knuckle. Mamouche's pinched red nostril. Perla's chin, too pointed for her face—but through the crystal, attaining an eerie beauty."

Through varying points of view, the novel also draws readers into the intimacies of men's and women's lives. For example, we watch Brit drip her menstrual blood into a love-potion she has been concocting at the instruction of an aged member of the household. And we see how painful married life was for Gaby, who suffered for refusing to prove his love the way his wife demanded and other men advised: "I'd refused to beat her. She brought me my belt. Bent over my knees. I pushed her from me. She took one of my small clay jars and threw it at me. I didn't move. It thudded against my chest, fell to the floor, and shattered. I walked back and forth, barefoot, on clay shards all night."

The difficulties experienced by Morocco's Jewish population are depicted with clarity and sensitivity. Jews suffer resentment from Arab co-workers, fear pogrom-like attacks, bribe police in order to avoid arrest on fictitious charges, forever struggle to decide whether to stay or leave for Israel, recall, as a source of solace, the Golden Age of Spain before exile by the Inquisition centuries ago. Brit is warned not to "go alone to the medina or the port. Don't go anywhere at night, unless you're with Haim or Gaby. Remember, you have two things working against you: you're a Jew and a woman." Yet even in this repressive atmosphere, Jewish tradition continues: ceremonial foods are prepared, the Haggadah is read, Pesach is celebrated.

Perhaps the novel's greatest strength is its poetic treatment of theme. Interwoven with Brit's story are varying, even conflicting, legends of the martyr Suleika, who some say converted to Islam for love; who, say others, wished to return to Judaism; who, say still others, never converted at all. Depending on the historical source, Suleika is a hero, traitor, whore, or virgin saint. The varying viewpoints of the Suleika legend echo the varying points of view through which the Brit-Gaby love story is told.

The novel's comfort with varying perspectives, this constant shifting of truth, implicitly asks the reader to consider a range of interpretations of taboo love—love of the Jewish God in a country demanding that love be shown only to Allah, Suleika's alleged Jewish love for a Muslim, Brit's and Gaby's love between niece and uncle, Gaby's non-violent love of his wife, even Brit's youthful explorations with another girl. The novel seems to suggest that there is no single way of looking at love, certainly not by outsiders. Love is determined by context; all love truly felt is pure.

What one needs in order to understand the power and complexity of love is the sort of insight and compassion demonstrated here by Ruth Knafo Setton. *The Road to Fez* is a novel to savor.

Daniel M. Jaffe
Santa Barbara, CA