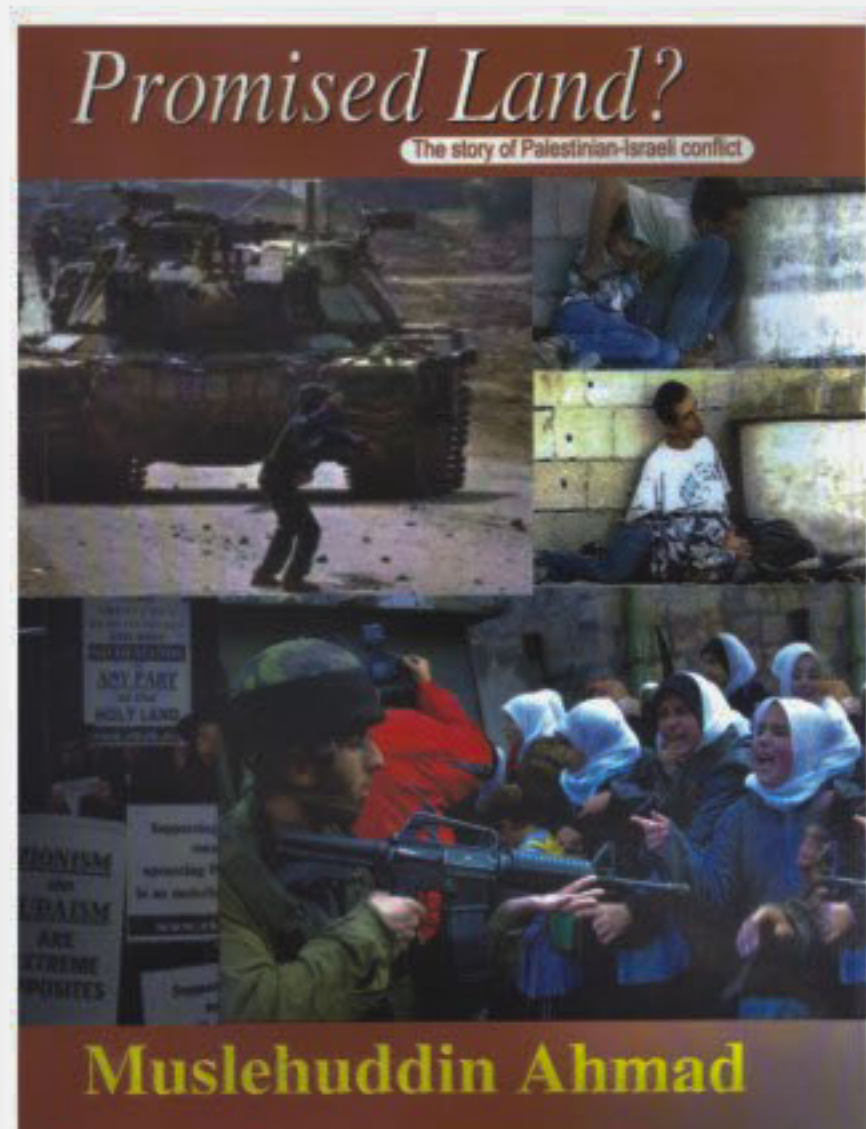


An arrogant state and a stateless people

Syed Badrul Ahsan appreciates a new study of an old conflict

HERE are some strong arguments Muslehuddin Ahmad puts across in this extraordinary analytical study of the Palestine issue. You would have thought the Middle East was an area where only its nation-states and the western powers would take interest. Ahmad puts holes through those thoughts, assuming of course that you had any such. As one who has served Bangladesh with distinction abroad in various diplomatic positions in various capitals, he brings to his work, indeed to his worldview, a degree of sophistication that ought always to be the underpinning of modern diplomacy. Just how involved Ahmad remains in foreign affairs comes reflected in this work, fundamentally his ruminations on the state of Israel and the extent to which it has gone in upsetting the normal order of things on the global scale.

The book is a composite collection of essays, largely published over a period of time in the Daily Star, aimed at drawing public attention to the myriad issues which have laid the Middle East waste, politically as also diplomatically, in the years since the Balfour Declaration came to pass in 1917. The writer gives you food for thought, through constant and insistent references to history as well as the religious background against which the Middle East has operated for aeons together. Take the matter of terrorism, which today most power players in the West are inclined to think is a particular invention of the Palestinians and by extension Islamic extremists. Ahmad takes you back, in no uncertain terms, to the terror that men like the young Menachem Begin unleashed in the late 1940s through bombing the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The group of fanatics that Begin led was the Irgun, a point noted by US President Harry Truman in his memoirs. 'Only a few days before,' says Truman, 'Jewish terrorists had blown up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem with considerable loss of lives.' Note that Truman is particular in his assess-



Promised Land?
The Story of Palestinian-Israeli Conflict
Muslehuddin Ahmad
EEC Research Organisation
Canada Inc

ment of the situation. He refers not to Zionism but describes the bombers as Jewish extremists in Palestine who 'were continuing their terrorist activities.'

Muslehuddin Ahmad builds up his case methodically. Religion, in that particular historical sense, naturally comes into the narrative. Refuting the Zionist argument of Palestine being the Promised Land for Jews as ordained by divinity, he remarks with decisiveness that never in the history of the world has there ever been any instance of God promising a piece of land exclusively to any religious or ethnic group. That is how he demolishes the argument that men like David Ben Gurion and Theodore Herzl, in the past, and

their acolytes after them, have peddled over the years. And those who have mattered in Israel since May 1948 have held on to that misleading notion, the repercussions of which one comes by in the continuing tussle over Jerusalem. The city, home to Judaism, Christianity and Islam for centuries, was occupied whole by the Israeli army in the June 1967 Six-Day War. For the past many years, the Israelis have regarded it as their capital and have been dismissive about any suggestion that it be restored to its pre-1967 status, namely, an Arab east Jerusalem and a Jewish west Jerusalem. Ahmad is appalled, as millions around the world are, by the systematic and focused way in which the state of Israel has gone about changing the demographic features of the city. This it has tried doing through encouraging increasing numbers of Jewish settlers to live in the city while at the same time stealthily pursuing a policy aimed at driving its Arab inhabitants out of it.

For all his documentation of facts, though, Ahmad remains a realist. Diplomacy is, in any case, a calling where a refusal to accept reality can only result in disaster. Ahmad agrees that there is no alternative to accepting Israel's existence as a state. But such an acceptance rests on the degree to which Israel and its leadership are willing to heed global opinion. In 1967, a few months after the Six-Day War, the United Nations passed Resolution 242 calling for Israel to step back to the frontiers existing before the outbreak of the conflict. Tel Aviv (and that was the Israeli capital at the time) paid no heed. Of course, over the years and beginning with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's ground-breaking trip to Israel in November 1977, Israel has moved away from such areas as the Sinai as part of bilateral deals with Egypt and Jordan. But the rapprochement was not enough to cause any positive change where the status of the Palestinians is concerned, despite the deal, eventually fractured, brokered by Bill Clinton in the 1990s. Ahmad makes the point that

while a two-state structure would be a feasible solution, it must come with some important points attached. And the most important one is a total withdrawal of the Israel state from the West Bank as also a giving up of the eastern half of Jerusalem it occupied in 1967.

Muslehuddin Ahmad goes on dismantling one Israeli argument after another. The Israeli point of view that Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the Jewish people is, he believes, bunkum for not till recently was this demand made by the Israeli leadership. Ahmad goes on to inform his readers that morality is not what the state of Israel can apply in its religious claim for all of Palestine. He serves the reminder that Palestine has been in existence, in both the literal and figurative sense, for thousands of years. But the writer makes it clear, through the modalities he employs in his presentation, that he is unwilling to link the Jewish people, who have suffered through the centuries, to the Zionism its founding fathers adopted as the guiding ideology behind the creation of the Israeli state. His forays into history make the point clear. There is a sweeping survey of history as Muslehuddin observes how men and women have embraced the Jewish faith in places as diverse as China, Ethiopia and the Caucasus.

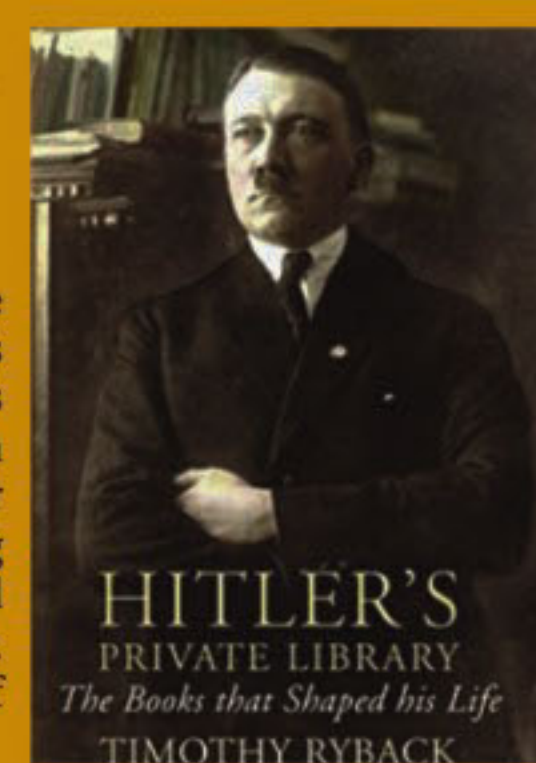
There is then the bottom line: Israel, for all the pomposity and arrogance of its successive streams of leadership, is in dire need of peace and within secure borders. The siege mentality it has lived through since its creation in 1948 can only lift if it returns, fully and unequivocally, to the borders existing before June 1967. For Ahmad, that is realpolitik, not Israel's defiance of the world.

The argument over Palestine goes on and will go on. Muslehuddin Ahmad knows it. Like so many others, he believes Israel's intransigence has rendered complex an issue that ought to have been resolved ages ago. The problem, therefore, remains intractable.

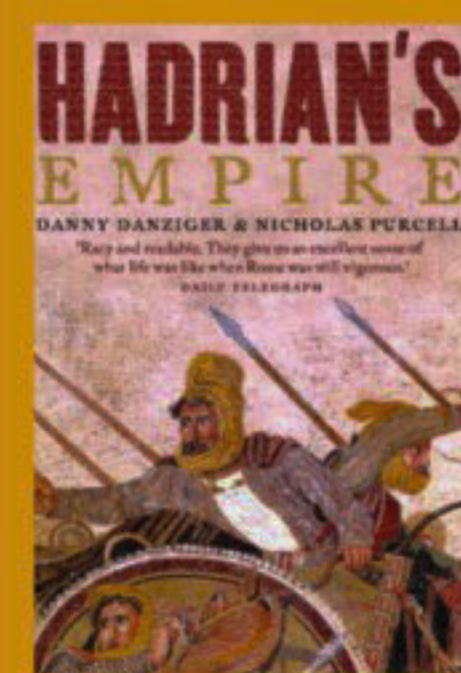
Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

AT A GLANCE

Hitler's Private Library
The Books that Shaped His Mind
Timothy W. Ryback
Vintage



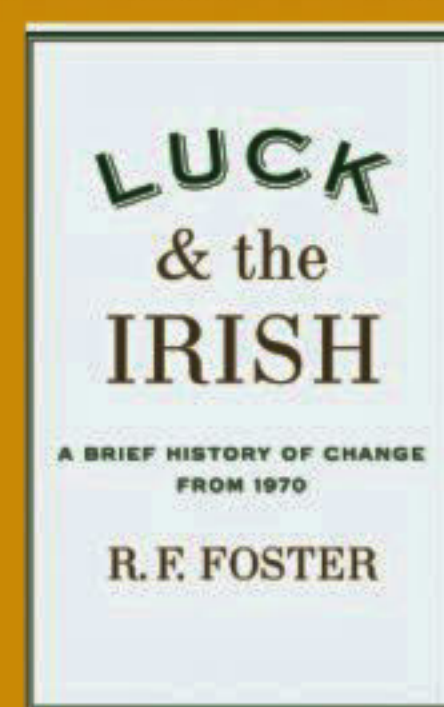
Does it surprise you that some of the more infamous characters in history were profound readers as well? Here you have a work on the thousands of books the Fuhrer collected in a lifetime of studying history, something that Stalin did too. Hitler was a voracious reader. This work shows what he made of that wide reading.



Hadrian's Empire
Danny Danziger, Nicholas Purcell
Hodder

Hadrian remains a figure of significance in Britain. How many of us went through school studying English history, with its particular tale of how Hadrian built his wall? Here now comes a composite study of the ruler and the extent of the empire he presided over, in the days when Rome ruled the world.

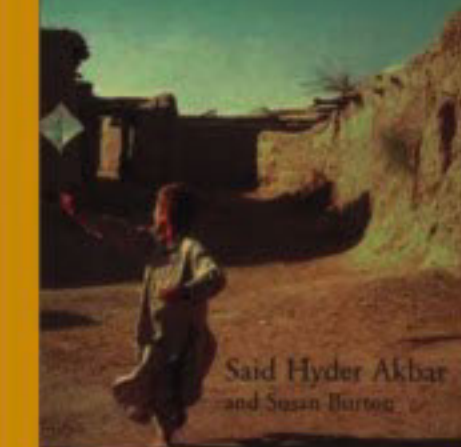
Luck and the Irish
R.F. Foster
Penguin Books



The Irish have been a lucky lot, as this work claims. More than that, they have also been a persevering nation, if you go back to such seminal events as Easter 1916. Here, though, Foster focuses on the political transformation Ireland went through between 1970 and 2000. He does his work with dexterity and with lots of humour.

Come Back to Afghanistan
Said Hyder Akbar
Bloomsbury

Come Back to Afghanistan
Said Hyder Akbar
Bloomsbury



This happens to be the story of a young man who finds his way to a country his parents left long ago in the aftermath of gathering turmoil. Post-Taliban, his father finds himself as governor of an Afghan province. The son discovers a beautiful country and knows that he belongs to the land he sees for the first time in his life.

Not every 'why' has an answer

Jackie Kabir finds pain and pathos in a hundred tales

I was mesmerized as I listened to a reading of Saleha Chowdhury's short stories. It was a regular meeting at Gantha, a literary platform for Bangladeshi writers to meet -- for individuals who write in English as well as for those who write in Bangla. The book that was discussed at this meeting was the author's collection of short stories, *Shotogolpo*. Saleha Chowdhury has been writing short stories since 1967, and all these stories have been collected in this compilation. There are but a few writers who have published a book with one hundred stories. If translated the title of the book would be 'A Hundred Stories.' It was published by Bidyapokash in 2008. It may be mentioned here that Saleha Chowdhury was awarded the Annanya Shahitya Puroshkar in 2009.

The writer points out in the introduction that she rewrote the stories with the maturity and experience she had gained over the years. Though the stories remain the same, the language, grammar and imagery have been reintroduced with the addition of contemporary elements.

Saleha Chowdhury is an expatriate Bangladeshi living in the UK for more than thirty years. But the background of the stories is set both at home and abroad. The special feature that one notices in her stories is that she mostly writes about the trivial matters of everyday life. Her choice of words while giving the stories their headings is also commendable. Even though it is a book of over eight hundred pages it finishes quickly as its contents are gripping. She gives pictorial descriptions of the surroundings of her characters which makes her stories very visual to the reader.

Ontohin, the first story, is about a dream that is too soon shattered. A family living in the village migrates to Dhaka. As soon as it



Shotogolpo
Saleha Chowdhury
Bidyapokash

reaches its destination, its dream city Dhaka turns into a nightmare. The family lives in a slum in Zindabaha, where even the sun is ashamed to shine, it is said. *Himalaye Jabar Aage* is about a couple who have grown old with each other and have become two different people rather than being a pair who complement each other. They have started liking different things and hence have been moving away from each other. It was Kahlil Gibran who said once: "The cypress and the cedar never grow in each other's shadow."

In *Tolstoyer Golper Moto Golpo*, the protagonist is a very old man who is the sole survivor in his village after a storm. Even though a lot of journalists interview him and a number of photographers take his snapshots and pub-

lish the pictures in the media, the absence of his only shelter and caretaker, his wife, leaves him in great peril. No one bothers about how he survived, if he has survived at all. So he is forced to take shelter at his daughter's house where he just lives as a beggar would, before finally being killed on a stormy night with the roof falling on him. *Turn Water Into Wine* is a simple story about a fan whom the writer admired, or the other way round, when they were young. When the writer is invited to his house at a much later stage in their lives he realizes that he is a mere visitor in her life and has no permanent place there. And then comes the truth: the pair have had a peaceful life which will not be affected by any external factor.

Je Jibon Dewal Foring-er Moto deals with a couple living in the United Kingdom who cherish their lives, Asma enjoying every little thing that comes her way and Ershad doing the same by sitting in a wheelchair. And more often than not Ershad dictates what should or shouldn't be done. One day when they go to a nearby park Asma comes across an old colleague and refreshes her memory about her past. They both agree that the time machine is the only machine that should be invented for a better life in the world. When she comes back to the place where she had left her husband she finds him cross. He has fallen off his wheelchair. In a split of a second Asma loses all her short-lived enthusiasms.

In *Devshisu*, a divine-looking shoeshine boy asks the protagonist to help him buy a polish kit as he has to give most of the money to the person who owns the kit he uses. Now this boy looks like an angel, incapable of doing anything wrong. So when the narrator hears his story of the boy being the eldest of four siblings who have no father, he feels as

though he needs to help him in some way. So he agrees to go to a place where he could buy a kit. And he gives the boy the money to buy it. A week later as he is going along the same street, he discovers the boy repeating his tale of woe to another of his clients. As the man is in a hurry, he hands some money to the boy before moving off.

Desdemona's Rumal is the story of a woman who is close to leaving her wheelchair-bound husband for an old friend. Finally she decides to come back to her husband who treats her just as he would an item of furniture in his house. The wondrous strength and courage in a woman's heart do not cease to amaze us.

All the 'whys' in the world do not have answers, says one of Saleha Chowdhury's characters in the story *Kanna*.

These are just a few glimpses into some of the stories among Saleha Chowdhury's collection. One can easily spot trivial events portrayed as very fine rhetoric by the writer with her skilled craftsmanship. There is a conflict of the real and the imaginary in most of the stories, a tussle between dream and reality. There is alienation, escapism, racism (this time from an Asian perspective), humour, pain and pathos drawn on the canvas of life. The stories relate to everybody, to all men and women, all expatriates and all Bangladeshis. We can almost feel the presence of the characters all around us. What Saleha Chowdhury does is present them in rather new and different colours. Hats off to a woman who has dedicated most of her life to writing these stories and still has not given up the struggle.

Jackie Kabir is an English Language teacher and member of Gantha, a writers' group.

The infinity of what life is

Tulip Chowdhury is cheered by a work of warm love

A mother's love can move mountains. The wonderful tales in *Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul* hold this truth for every reader. They are all about how a mother's love can create miracles. The tales are life experiences told with wit and compassion that touch the soul. The stories have the power to bring tears and smiles to readers. The characters are so vivid that they seem to live and breathe with the reader long after a story is read. The writers with their skills make us feel distinct yearnings for the characters. The stories offer the readers a rare combination of intimacy and transcendence. The book holds 101 stories, each a treasure mountain, waiting to be read and discovered. The stories open with beautiful sayings that throw light on their themes. They open the hearts and rekindle the spirit in mothers.

The book is divided into different parts, each with different headings. Among these are "On Becoming a Mother", "A Mother's Courage", "Special Moments" and "Mother's Guiding Hand". There is also a part that is dedicated to grandmothers with the heading, "A Grandmother's Love". Each and every part comes with stories that have compelling characters. The stories touch one's core and bring one tenderly back to the true meaning of motherhood.

In the story, "An Indescribable Gift", Anne Morrow Lindberg writes about becoming a mother, "She slips into this world, and into my arms, placed there by heaven. She is straight from God, an indescribable gift. Through joyful tears I whisper in her ear, 'We are glad you are here. We have waited so long to see you.' She opens her eyes, and I am transformed a timeless moment filled with the infinity of what life is. In her eyes I see total recognition, unconditional love and complete trust. I am a mother. In that instant I feel, and in my heart I know, everything I need to know to guide her."

Motherhood comes to a woman with blessings that are beyond words. In the sheltered simplicity of the first days after a baby is born, one sees again the magical closed circle, the miraculous sense of two people existing only for each other.

Motherhood often comes with a heavy price. Some women have to wait several years before they conceive. And there are mothers who lose babies before they even get a chance to come into the world. There are also women out there who have cried and begged for a chance to become mothers and yet fate did not bless them with motherhood.

There are sad tales of mothers losing their children. Barbara Bush writes about Robin, her daughter whom she lost when she was three. Robin had leukaemia and died very soon after her diagnosis. Barbara made up her mind that she would let her daughter go very peacefully. She did not allow anyone to shed tears in front of Robin. She writes of her little daughter, "Robin was wonderful. She never asked why this was happening to her. She lived each day as it came, sweet and loving and unquestioning and unselfish."

Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul holds stories about special moments for mothers. It holds tales of mothers pulling out their hair over the teenage craze of their children. There is deep insight and great humour existing between growing children and parents. Joan Rivers writes about her teenage daughter, "A daughter's teenage years can be a mother's attempts to make contact with UFO: Unintelligible Female Opponent."

The greatest feat of motherhood is the unconditional love that exists between a mother and a child. This book is a testament to this truth. The stories are powerful, heartwarming and full of life. Every story speaks of the depth of power and love between a mother and a child. *Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul* is a work coming out in a series of variations as well. There are *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the Teacher's Soul* and many others. A portion of the proceeds from the sales of every title in the *Chicken Soup* series is donated to charity. So when you buy one of the books, you are not only guaranteed some quality reading time but you also help enrich the lives of others.

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and poetry and is a teacher.

Extraordinary, like Zorba the Greek

Charles R. Larson is intrigued by a story of lust

IN Mehrdad Baladi's disturbing novel, *Houri*, there's a brief moment at the beginning that is emblematic of much of the subsequent story. As the narrator returns to his native Iran and the airplane enters Iranian airspace, "Flight attendants hurried to remove wine and whisky from trays. Men rushed to rinse the stink of alcohol from their breath. Women donned dark hejabs to hide their hair and curves, scrubbed makeup from their faces. Passengers were bracing for an inquisition, or something worse. Even from thousands of feet above, and an hour before the plane landed, I caught a sense of the intolerant terrain waiting below."

To a certain extent, that passage tells it all. It's just a few years after the beginning of the Iranian revolution, and Shahed, who has lived in the United States for many years, returns to Tehran for his father's funeral. It isn't long before we learn that his father, whom he calls Baba, spent his entire life skirting the harsher restrictions of Islam. He drank excessively, squandered his money, and lived a flashy life, cheating on his wife and chasing every woman he could find. Even his obsession with the American Buick, which he called "The Bride" became his excuse to pick up and seduce women. Among the negative memories Shahed has retained of him was his duty to wash his father's car almost every day in order to keep it looking like the perfect example of Western ostentation.

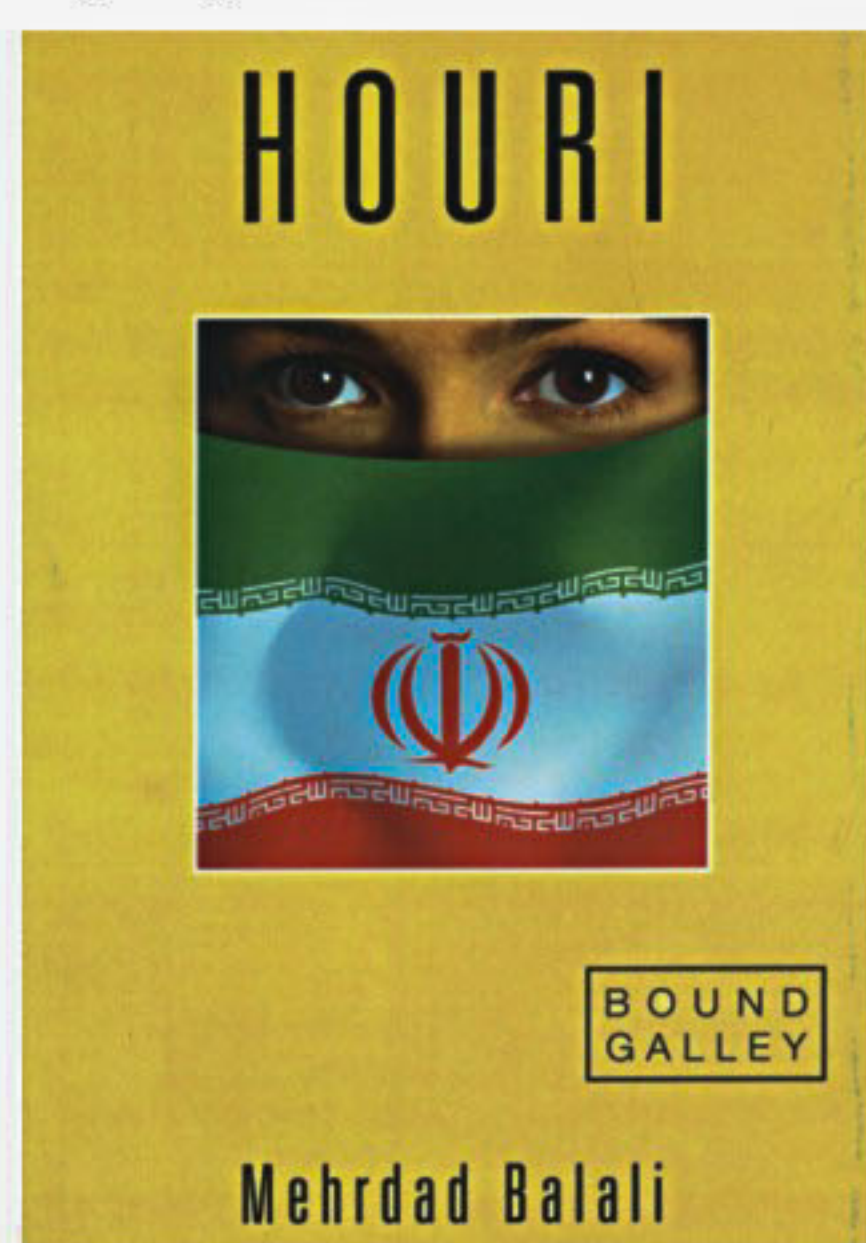
Baba was a scoundrel. He borrowed money from everyone and his creditors were always shadowing him. He had no job, but lived mostly by selling off parcels of land his father left him. Almost every day, Baba ran off to expensive restaurants, while leaving his wife and two children to fend for themselves. He's an extraordinary character, full of life, a

little like Zorba the Greek. But he's darker than Nikos Kazantzakis' memorable rogue, because Baba is also a con-man, a trickster, a shyster, who would even take the food from his children's plates if they ate too slowly. He flouted orthodox Islam and, because most of his life was lived before the Revolution, he was able to get by with his flamboyant and duplicitous lifestyle.

There's very little plot to Baladi's novel. Instead, the story is largely the tension between father and son--no equal playing field because Shahed was still a boy when he fled Iran. It was impossible for him to fight back. The anger that his father engendered in him resulted in part in his son's exile, with little or no intent of returning home and encountering his father again. It was Shahed's mother who gave him the money for his flight from Iran in order that he could escape his father's negative influence.

The plan didn't exactly work. In the United States, Shahed never completed the degree his mother hoped would restore the family name. He dropped out of the university, found it difficult to hold down jobs, and by the time his mother asks him to return for the funeral, Shahed is pumping gas. Worse, like his father, he has difficulty committing to one woman, though the attraction to all women is a constant reminder of his father's philandering.

The title juxtaposes the obsession both men had for beautiful women, the *houris* promised in heaven, "Nymphs of Paradise." There's an actual woman in Tehran whom Baba chases, and whom everyone calls Houris, though she is married. Before Shahed departs for America, he also lusts after the same woman. In the United States, the one woman Shahed has an on-going relationship



Houri
Mehrdad Baladi
The Permanent Press

with he treats shabbily making the "like father, like son" cliché accurate. Scoundrels both.

The scenes in the story that take place in the United States are rendered mostly as flashbacks, sometimes awkwardly placed in the narrative. Perhaps it is no surprise that both countries take a beating in Shahed's always lively account of his father's and his own shenanigans. As one of Shahed's Iranian friends observes of America, it's a "strange country. Everything costs money here except

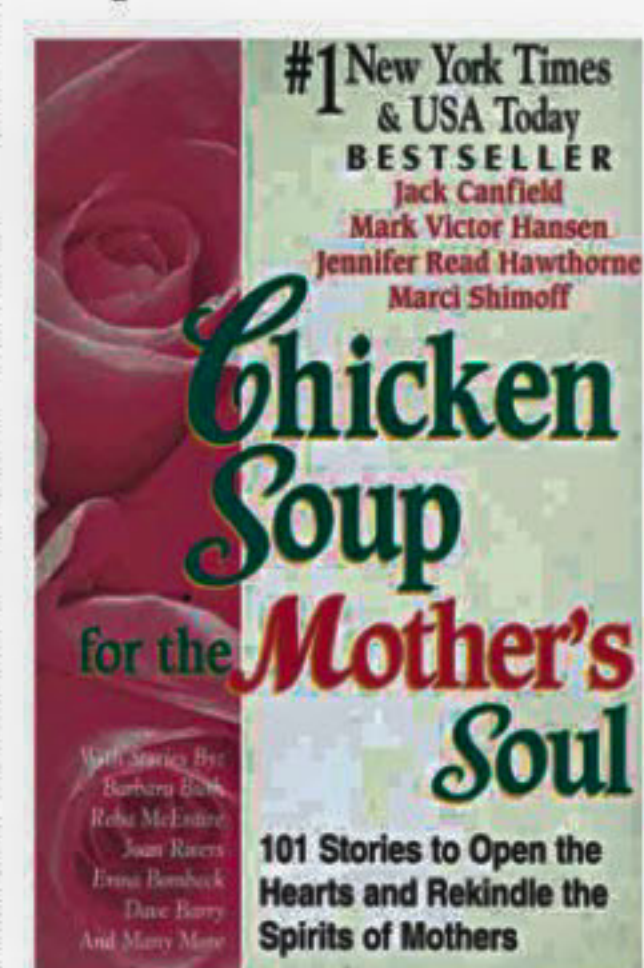
sex and matches." The remark is ironic, since there's more smoking than sex in the story. The author might best be described as a cultural historian. The details he provides throughout the story describe Iran vividly, even memorably, and when necessary frighteningly. The cultural vigilantes are everywhere on the streets of Tehran, yet there goes Baba again, slipping past them in pursuit of another loose woman.

The ending of *Houri* is a little predictable, perhaps fated to be so. The publisher states of the writer that the story is "based largely on the personal experiences of an Iranian-American...." After coming to the United States as a young man, Baladi himself returned to Iran and worked as a journalist for various international news services until he was banned from working there. During that time, he apparently came to grips with his father's negligence of wife and children.

We observe the movement toward that understanding as the narrative progresses. After a particularly nasty incident, Shahed understands that his father always put himself first, before anyone else even if that meant betrayal of others. The son astutely remarks, "Yet, as much an indication of his deceit and manipulation, this episode reveals his lusty drive to live, unhampered by scruples and fears of being judged. These two are at the root of my ambivalence toward him. How should I really judge my father...based on which trait: his dishonesty or his obstinate zest for life? Should I curse him forever for pulling a fast one on me, or worship him as an earthly prophet?"

I doubt whether this novel will be translated into Farsi.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University, Washington DC.



Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul
Health Communications, Inc