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A breathless story of love and survival in war-torn Algeria-past and present

The devil has entered our country, and his footprints are everywhere.

Nine-year-old Jallal is old enough to know that his life in Algeria is precarious at best. Having run away from home, he survives by selling peanuts and single cigarettes on the street. The proposal by the elderly Swiss woman named Anna is shocking and preposterous: go to the mountains with her, as a translator, so she can find her lost lover from decades ago and pray over the graves of their murdered children.

Anna and Jallal's journey is wrought with danger and unspeakable tragedy. It was under similar circumstances that Anna first met the Arab Nasreddine. Ousted from the traveling circus where she performed as a trapeze artist, she had little choice but to accept Nasreddine's dangerous offer to live with him in a makeshift tent. But it was here, amid poverty, racism, and terrifyingly random violence, that they fell in love.

A best seller in France, *The Lovers of Algeria* is an unflinchingly candid story about a country where terrorism and government corruption are commonplace. As Anna and Nasreddine, beaten by time and memory, circle each other in Algeria, Anouar Benmalek shows with heart-wrenching detail that love can endure even the most inhuman conditions.

A Lannan Translation Series Selection

The Lovers of Algeria Details

Date : Published August 1st 2004 by Graywolf Press (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9781555974046

Author : Anouar Benmalek , Joanna Kilmartin (Translator)

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Northern Africa, Algeria, Fiction, Cultural, Africa, Historical, Historical Fiction, Romance

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From Reader Review The Lovers of Algeria for online ebook

Artyfacts1 says

From Reading the World List. I didn't know anything about the war of Independence in Algeria. The cruelty of the people both from the government forces, the French and the rebel groups was disturbing to me.

Aziza says

In a 2007 interview with BookForum.com's Suzanne Ruta, Benmalek stated that what he "reproaches most in the Arab world is the failure to denounce its own crimes" and that "No one is more racist toward the Arab world than Arabs themselves [because of their] refusal to impose standards on [them]selves." Benmalek himself now lives in Paris, France due to death threats he received after founding the Algerian Committee against Torture. It is therefore not surprising that this novel about Swiss Anna and her husband Algerian Nassreddine focuses on the effects of Algeria's bloody war of independence from the French (1954-1962) and the more recent civil war (1990s). The novel starts in 1955 when the husband is imprisoned and tortured because he is suspected by the Algerian Liberation Front of being an informer. When he is finally allowed to go home, his mother and children have been murdered brutally, while his wife was deported. Forty years later, his wife, Anna, defies an unwelcoming Algeria and its Islamic terrorists to visit her children's graves and to search for her husband. She enlists the help of Jallal, a homeless street urchin in Algiers. Together they travel to the Aurès Mountains, where they ultimately find Nassreddine, a lonely, worn out man.

Warning: This novel is not for the faint of heart because before the spouses finally meet again, they as well as Jallal have to endure and witness many horrors - tortures, a beheading, rape- amply illustrating that violence begets violence. Benmalek's horrifically cruel Algeria is like a severely abused victim (of the French oppressor), who instead of breaking the cycle of violence, perpetuates it and in turn abuses those it is closest to (-its own people during the Civil War-).

Anna Sidera says

Το παραδ?χομαι. Εδ? και χρ?νια δεν διαβ?ζω μυθιστορ?ματα.

Ε?ναι που λ?γο ως πολ? ?λα ?χουν ειπωθε?, ε?ναι που τα περιθ?ρια στενεουν και αν πρ?πει να διαλ?ξεις πο? θα αφιερ?σεις τον ελ?χιστο χρ?νο που εμβ?λιμα, μ?σα στην μορ?λα της καθημεριν?τητας ,θα χαρ?σεις στον εαυτ? σου-πρ?πει να σταχυολογ?σεις τ? ε?δους βιβλ?ο θα ξεχωρ?σεις να σου κ?νει παρ?α και ?λο και κερδ?ζει το πολιτικ? κε?μενο και οι μελ?τες τον ?νισο (;) αυτ?ν αγ?να ...

Οι ?ποιες παρεγκλ?σεις, συμβα?νουν το καλοκα?ρι : αν?λαφρη η δι?θεση ,επιτρ?πει να "ελαφρ?νει " και το αν?γνωσμα.

Και ?τσι ,και πολ? συμπτωματικ? ,?πεσα π?νω στο "ΕΡΑΣΤΕΣ ΔΙΧΩΣ ΑΥΡΙΟ."

Μα πως μπορε? και περιγρ?φει ?τσι την αγ?πη ,μιλωντας τ?σο πολ? για θ?νατο ,τ?σο απ?στευτα για βανανυσ?τητες και την απ?στευτα σκληρ? και πολλ?ς φορ?ς αδι?ξοδη ζω? αυτ?ς ο ΜΠΙΕΝΜΑΛΕΚ; Και πως γ?νεται η επ?γευση απ? ?να σκληρ? σε κ?θε του σελ?δα βιβλ?ο , να ε?ναι γλυκε?α σαν γλυκ? τριανταφυλ?κι;

Οι γάλλοι αποσπρονται απ? την Αλγερ?α που καλε?ται να αυτοδιαχειριστε? , στραγγισμ?νη και αν?τοιμη να μ?θει να ισορροπε? αν?μεσα στην υποχρεωτικ? της επαφ? με τον ευρωπαικ? νεωτερισμ? , και την μακρα?ωνη ιστορ?α της .Το ισλαμικ? στοιχε?ο θ?λει να επιβληθε? -το νεοσ?στατο κρ?τος δεν του αφ?νει περιθ?ρια, ο εμφ?λιος αναπ?δραστα ξεκιν? και κατακερματ?ζει ?ναν λα? του οπο?ου ?δη η ζω? ?χει δε?ξει το πιο σκληρ? της πρ?σωπο.

Οι ηρωες : ?να παιδ? -παρ?ας , που γεννα?α βρ?σκει τρ?πους να επιβι?νει , προσπαθ?ντας να μην χ?σει την ψυχ? του , ?νας Αλγεριν?ς και μι? Ελβετ? ,ο καθ?νας με το φορτ?ο του (που ξεδιπλ?νεται βαθμιδ?ν στον αναγν?στη).Θα γνωριστο?ν , θα αγαπηθο?ν και θα ζ?σουν μ?νο κ?ποιες στιγμ?ς μαζ?.

Αδιανο?τες πρακτικ?ς που ασκο?νται και απ? τις δυο πλευρ?ς που αντιμ?χονται , αν?χεια και μια ζω? που μοι?ζει αδι?ξοδη , περιγρ?φονται σε κ?θε σελ?δα και πλαισι?νουν τους ?ρωες για να οδηγ?σουν σε μια κορ?φωση στις τελευτα?ες σελ?δες του βιβλ?ου.

Ο ΜΠΙΕΝΜΑΛΕΚ ,?γραψε ?σως ?να απ? τα σπουδαι?τερα βιβλ?α για την χ?ρα του -και μια ιστορ?α αγ?της ,λειτουργε? μ?νο ως αφορμ?.

4,8 * (χ?νει π?ντους απ? την επιλογ? του τ?τλου στην ελληνικ? απ?δοση - δεν ξ?ρω αν ε?ναι 'πιασ?ρικός ' , αλλ? εγ? παρολ?γο να μην το ξεκιν?σω καν ,ακριβ?ς λογω του τ?τλου.

Επ?σης θεωρ? ?κυρο εντελ?ς το εξ?φυλλο .Με την θεματολογ?α που ?χει το βιβλ?ο , οι επιλογ?ς πραγματικ? μοι?ζουν να τε?νουν στο ?πειρο-δεν καταλαβα?νω λοιπ?ν γιατ? επιλ?χτηκε το συσκευριμ?νο στην ελληνικ? ?κδοση ,απ? τις εκδ?σεις ΨΥΧΟΓΙΟΣ)

Trisha says

While the theme of this book (how love endures over the years despite horrible conditions) might sound a little shop-worn, the way Benalek handled it certainly was not! And although I was often frustrated trying to keep up with the various plot lines that kept back tracking and over-lapping (making me wish the author would have simply told his story chronologically) I kept reading because I was both fascinated and horrified by what I was discovering about life in war-torn Algeria and how badly it has been scarred by a history of colonialism, political uncertainty, extreme poverty and vicious terrorism. At the center of the novel were the two “lovers” - Swiss born Anna who ran away as a young woman to join a traveling circus and eventually is forced to leave resulting in her decision to live with Algerian born Nasreddine. It seemed a bit too contrived for my liking – as did the fact that for most of their lives Anna and Nasreddine were being separated and then re-united and then separated again only to finally get together in old-age after once again narrowly missing each other. Nevertheless I was drawn to the major characters as well as to many of the minor ones because they were colorful and well developed. Benalek is a good writer with a gift for vivid description and compelling dialogue. But that’s exactly what made much of the novel excruciatingly painful to read because of the violence which was graphically described in scenes of unthinkable brutality. Difficult as it was to stick with this book, I was glad that I did – if only as a sober lesson in what it is like to live in a country where violence is a way of life.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

This one was a pleasant surprise. It's not great literature, but it proved to be an enjoyable story with some

redeeming social value, and my expectations were not high (you just never know with obscure translations).

The Lovers of Algeria follows a star-crossed couple--Anna, a Swiss acrobat who initially travels to Algeria in the early 1940s, and Nassreddine, an Algerian man--through most of the 20th century. The timeline jumps back and forth, and while I was at first annoyed when I'd been reading about the 1990s, reached page 90 (where it jumps to the 1920s) and realized most of the rest of the book was backstory, it actually works out pretty well and turned out to be a more compelling story than I expected. The characters themselves are all right--adequate for their roles, and there's some complexity to their relationships (the central romance is imperfect), but they're not especially memorable.

Aside from telling a good story, this book is most memorable for its portrayal of the upheaval and violence in 20th century Algeria--a country struggling with first colonialism, then terrorism, not to mention poverty and a lack of resources to deal with its problems. It's from the perspective of average people, so it doesn't provide a high-level explanation of policy; instead we get an on-the-ground view of what life is like for civilians just struggling to get by amidst the instability and violence. And Benmalek manages to do this without being simplistic or too sentimental; the world of the book feels three-dimensional. It's an ugly place, so readers just looking for romance may want to skip this one, but it gives real beyond-the-headlines insight into what people caught between terrorists and an ineffective government have to deal with.

While I found it a worthwhile read, though, and sped through most of it in a single day, there were a lot of little annoyances that together bring it down to 3 stars. The timeline doesn't add up (Anna apparently ran off with the circus four years before she was born). The use of the present tense is inconsistent, and even more jarring in a book that jumps back and forth in time. There are a lot of exclamation points in the narration, and sometimes it's unclear who is speaking. Benmalek obsessively describes women's sexual characteristics, even when writing from their own perspectives. The ending almost seems to be missing a paragraph or two--it just ends, without telling us what the characters plan to do next.

And, perhaps most unfortunate of all, two or three major character decisions struck me as terribly implausible. For instance, Anna and Nassreddine's relationship begins with a contrived romance-novel-style scenario, in which even though he's a virtual stranger and she has no intention of having a sexual relationship, she decides to leave the circus and move into his one-room hut (just the two of them) so she can be available for a friend. Um, right.

That said, if you can put up with a few eyebrow-raising scenarios, it is an engaging story, and the translation is fluidly written. Recommended for those interested in learning more about Algeria, or those who love decades-long odds-defying love stories.

William says

The Lovers of Algeria is a horrifyingly vivid, achingly tragic novel with, at its core, a fragile and imperfect love story spanning decades of loss, relocation, and hopeful discovery in its North African setting. The story, told in overlapping flashbacks and contemporary (1997) scenes, is too involved to recite, but it should be enough to say that Anna, a Swiss gaouria, and Arab Nassreddine have an unconventional love affair that begins when they are young adults and continues, or tries to continue, amid four decades of war between European, Algerian, and religious interests. The scenes of conflict are intensely graphic, but Benmalek's skill as an author is equally as true in crafting scenes of memorable, albeit sad beauty for his cautious but passionate pair; these are the scenes that may — and I am not sure they do — transcend two lives brimmed with disappointment. Love, we hope, can outlast everything, but the scars of destruction this story undresses for us do not fade from memory so easily.

Ahmed says

Violence begets violence in the act of reopening old wounds —losing any sense of one's own agency.

Emma says

I hesitated reading a book about Algeria, because I know of so many real horror stories that happened there. But trying to follow the Middle East Reading Challenge, I had to dare.

Wow, that was quite a book! Very heart-breaking with beautiful human characters focused on loving, come what may, with in the background yes the all too common horror stories and what's going on there: terrorism, relationships between white people and natives, government corruption, dealings between Algerian and French governments.

I loved the characters, the...

To read my full review, please go to:

<http://wordsandpeace.com/2012/07/19/2...>

Nmdb22 says

Although rather brutal in certain parts (though historically accurate I believe), the language and plot in this book were exquisite. I especially liked the beginning of the book, and the ending which pulled all of the threads together into a wonderful tapestry. The development of the main characters, their at times quirky, sometimes unusual, and close relationships was excellent.

Kristin says

It's hard to say I "liked" this book, because there is a lot of violence in the book (not so much to the personal characters, as political and religious violence that takes place in Alergia in the background to the story and swirling around and in and out of the story), but, well, it's a good book. The main story of the book of a love story that starts in the 1940s and involves the unexpected charcaters of a very poor Berber living in Algiers and a displaced French woman no longer in a traveling circus. It's an odd love story, because they're very poor throughout the whole story, and even in the story, Anna (the main female) mentions that she's not even sure she finds her husband, Nassredddine, attractive. It's a very non-wetsern book. In a good way, I think. Poetic, unexpected. You follow their love story, back and forth through time, through past and present (1990s). There is good, and a lot of bad (not unexpected given the history of Algeria).

And perhaps what I appreciate is that despite knowing the general political history of Algeria, I really did now KNOW the extent of the violence that tortured that country. Yes, I knew about the French occupation,

and am quite aware of the mess that the French left many of their former colonies (and wow does this book show that Algeria was not an exception!)... And I knew about the fight for independence, and the fight against the mujahadeen. And the terrorist attacks. But this book REALLY brings to life just how violent the history of Algeria is, and just how caught in between the civilian population was in everything that happened (between the French and the local resistance, then between the state apparatus and the mujahadeen). It's quite devastating that see what happens to the civilians over and over again. Reading this really plays with your head.

Pam Giarrizzo says

I was predisposed to like Anouar Benmalek's novel, *The Lovers of Algeria*, as soon as I opened the book and saw that he'd dedicated it to, among others, his grandmother, who was born in the Vaud canton in Switzerland. My grandmother was also born in the Vaud canton of Switzerland, although the similarities between the lives of Benmalek's grandmother and mine end there. As it turns out, one of the main characters in the novel is also a woman from Switzerland, Anna, who is torn from her Algerian husband, Nassreddine, and their children during Algeria's fight for independence from France. Anna returns to her native Switzerland, marries and has a son, then goes back to Algeria as a widow many years later.

When I was an English major in college, I learned that a popular theme in literature is man's inhumanity to man, and that is certainly the case in this novel. As is true in many parts of the world, most of the characters in *The Lovers of Algeria* are just regular people who want to go about the normal business of their daily lives. This is nearly impossible, though, since they are always caught between warring political factions.

During the early part of Anna and Nassreddine's relationship, they were caught between the French colonizers and those who were fighting for independence from France. Later, the fight was between the Algerian government and the jihadists. Squeezed between opposing forces who are either demanding their loyalty or accusing them of being spies for the other side, all of the choices available to Anna and Nassreddine are fraught with peril. As Nassreddine comments at one point, "I've been against violence all my life, Anna. To live, that was all I asked... And it was probably too much to ask... We dreamed the wrong dreams, we took the wrong turnings. But were we entirely to blame?"

No, they were not entirely to blame, and I found myself rooting for them throughout the book. Life was never easy for them, but things were always better whenever they were together.

<http://thebooktrekker.blogspot.com/20...>

Jane says

Story of Algeria after Independence through that of a couple, Anna, a Swiss circus performer and Nassreddine, an Algerian, who meet, marry, and are separated by Anna's deportation back to Switzerland after Independence. Decades later, after the death of her Swiss husband, she returns to Algeria, and with Jallal, a street urchin, journeys to find the graves of her children and hopefully find her husband. She sends him a telegram saying that she will be at his mother's house in the mountains. They journey to find each other

through harrowing, horrific incidents. Indeed the whole story is shot through with inhumanity, brutality, and cruelty by both French and Algerians, but the story shows the tenacity of a lifelong love.

Jim Fonseca says

It's the war for Independence by the Arabs against France in the 1950's. That's a bad time for a French-Swiss woman, a circus acrobat, to fall in love with and marry an Arab man. They will both be under suspicion and hated by both side in the conflict. (I'm reminded of another book I reviewed, *The Painter of Battles* by Arturo Perez-Reverte, where a Serbian-Croatian couple doesn't survive the Serb-Croat conflict). And of course it happens: he is captured and tortured by the French under suspicion of Arab terrorism (even though he was not involved in the conflict). Their two children are brutally killed and she is deported from Algeria. Assuming her husband is dead, like her children, she flees back to Europe, begins a new life, remarries and has a son.

That's where our story begins. Years later, the woman, now a widow in her sixties with an adult son, returns to Algeria; back to the on-going unrest. It's unsafe for women, especially a European woman traveling alone. Is she insane? she asks herself. She tells her son that she is vacationing in Egypt. She seeks out her former husband to find out if he is dead or alive. She dons a burka as a disguise and finds a partner to help her navigate the conflict and the rural villages – a ten-year old street urchin with whom she develops a grandmotherly relationship. Translated from the French; lots of local color of rural and urban Algeria, and a good read.

Sarah Lameche says

Well what a book!! I have to be honest, this book was nothing like I imagined. I was lulled into a false sense of a happy love story. Yet after only a few pages in those happy thoughts were torn from my brain Replaced with a horrific gut wrenching "oh my God!".

Based around a story of two people who fall in love, the majority of the story takes place in Algeria during and after the occupation.

This book is so graphic that at times I literally felt sick. It shocked me how little I really understood what happened during that time.

I loved the way the book went back and forth in time. Weaving the stories of the different characters together. I know some reviewers didn't like that. Have you ever watched a film (or even soap) where one of the story's is so engrossing you hate it when it goes to a different scene? Well this book could have been like that except every new scene had a new story just as interesting!

Truthfully I really thought I would be giving this book 5 stars. But the ending really let the book down. I can live with the ending (I have no choice), however it left too many unanswered questions. The main one being...HANS!!! If only the author had written one more chapter, or even a few more paragraphs this would've got a five star.

Nevertheless this book I highly recommend.

Chrissie says

NO SPOILERS!

Last night I finished this book. I simply had to digest it a bit before summarizing my views. I have chosen three stars, but pay attention when I say this is definitely a book to read! It does have faults. These weighed in when I reduced the four to three stars. The book very well describes the pandemonium of Algerian life during the 1900s from the pov of Arabs. This is how life was for those down and under. In this is thrown a Swiss who loves an Arab and she is too drowned in the horrors perpetuated by the French, WW2 and the Islamic jihad terrorists at the end of the century. This is how life was - so it is not a comfortable read by any means! The reader is THERE, living those, but don't look for tons of historical facts. They facts are sparse. What you get is how life was then for those there, living in Algeirs. Another reason why I loved the book was its portrayal of friendship. Utterly magnificent. One such relationship is between two wives married to an Arab! Really, really this was very well done. Another is between an elderly woman and a young boy, who were not family, but who chose each other to be family. Love between a man and a woman is also beautifully drawn. (Does love lead to disaster? - Another thing to ponder while reading this book.) In addition some of the lines were just so funny or sad or sardonic that I wanted to frame them and put them up on the wall.

So why only three stars? Parts made me so uncomfortable due to the brutality and filthy language. The book had to be this way, but still I was uncomfortable. The time-line is jumbled. Sometimes I had to go back and reread sections to figure out how to get the story straight.....to understand the order of events. Maybe that is just my feeble brain. OK, and the end was too neatly tied up. I thought the end was bad, but I cannot say anything b/c that would be a spoiler. These three negative characteristics prevented me from giving the book 4 stars. I want a 4 star book to be VERY, VERY GOOD. Still, most of the time I WAS thoroughly absorbed in the book. A bad ending on a good book isn't that important. A confusing book doesn't mean a bad book. Sometimes really disgusting events must be given to correctly depict what was going on in real life. See, I can argue with myself on and on..... Since I award the stars on my reviews, seen as a clump, the tree minusues bring down the total of stars awarded - BUT READ THE BOOK (if you have a strong stomach). I am always like this - I never really can make up my mind..... There are so many ways of looking at a question.

Through page 165: Remember the title? The LOVERS of Algeria - yes it is a love story too. Why do I like it? Well because the people are emotional and real and tempermental, and they do crazy things just like real people really do. How can people be calm and practical and sane when the world they live in is in such a horrible mess?

Through page 132: Now I simply cannot put the book down. I enjoy it so very, very much. It is perhaps confusing in the beginning, but if you are a little patient all becomes clear. There are even dates mentioned. Life in Algeria under the French colonial forces and afterwards during the civil war are wrenchingly depicted. But the story is far from being horrible - there are relationships that are so wonderful that the rest seems just like life, something you have to get through. Some of the lines are stunning:

"Life isn't the best thing ever invented, little brother, as you'll soon find out...." (page 129)

"His mother, to prevent herself from crying, had resorted to shouting at him...." (page 129)

And here is a longer passage starting on page 105:

"she wonders, stupidly, how does one set about dying?"

She senses the full moon watching her, hateful with its prying glare. She retches from breathlessness. A thread of saliva runs down her chin, a drop of sweat down her forehead. The perspiration quickly freezes. She is barefoot. Suddenly she is aware that her feet are hurting abominably and, to her surprise, although determined to die, she finds herself wishing she could die with her feet in a pair of warm slippers...."

"She is delirious, but she can't fight it. She has lost control of her mind. Little by little, the dam holding back her memories is giving way. She is immersed in the past, and its warmth is even more lethal than the cold. Now she understands what is meant by 'to die': it is the sharp wrench of losing all those little things that one has lived through."

And there is such friendship . It is worth reading this book just to see this friendship grow between two women. You must read the book to see whom I am speaking of.

Through page 87: Please read comment 2 below. To give you a taste of the writing style here follows a quote. This quote from page 87 also exemplifies what I said in comment two.

"Don't cry son."

"I'm not crying. I'm just sniffing. Jallal protests between sobs. "you can see that I am not crying....."

And he began to shed hot tears. Anna, heartbroken, takes the boy in her arms and, quite unselfconsciously, dissolves into tears herself. Hugging one another, each strives to comfort the other. Jalla hiccups: "But Grandma, crying won't help!," and Anna, her tears flowing more copiously than ever, responds : "I'm not crying....what gives you that idea? You're the one who's crying.... I'm just blowing my nose!"

At last, the little guide's two black eyes focus on the Swiss woman's kohl-streaked face.

"Shit, what a sight! Your faceit's all black!"

"And what about yours, my little pirate, do you think you look any better?"

Suddenly, they burst out laughing. Jallal puts a hand to his nose: "Ow, ow! That arsehole, that fucker of his mother's lover! Ow, ow, just wait till I catch him."

Anna, startled, says wickedly: "I shouldn't say such things at my age, but ... arsehole, fucker of....how did you put it?"

"...his mother's lover..."

"That's it....dam him, he has certainly taken us for a ride! What do we do now?"

There is a real friendship growing. There is alot of filthy language, but most often most it is just talk. So far at least.
