

Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood

By Fatima Mernissi

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"I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez, Morocco..." So begins Fatima Mernissi in this exotic and rich narrative of a childhood behind the iron gates of a domestic harem. In *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi weaves her own memories with the dreams and memories of the women who surrounded her in the courtyard of her youth—women who, deprived of access to the world outside, recreated it from sheer imagination. *Dreams of Trespass* is the provocative story of a girl confronting the mysteries of time and place, gender and sex in the recent Muslim world.

Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood By Fatima Mernissi Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In 1940, harems still abounded in Fez, Morocco. They weren't the opulent, bejeweled harems of Scherezade, but the domestic sprawl of extended families encamped around a walled courtyard that marked the edges of women's lives. Though born into this tightly sheltered world, Fatimi Mernissi is constantly urged by her rebellious mother to spring beyond it. Worried that Mernissi is too shy and quiet, her mother tells her, "You must learn to scream and protest, just the way you learned to walk and talk." In *Dreams of Trespass*, an enjoyable weave of memory and fantasy, it is clear that Mernissi's fertile imagination let her slip back and forth through the gates that trapped her restive mother. She spins amiable, often improbable tales of the rigidly proper city harem in Fez and the contrasting freedoms of the country harem where her grandmother Yakima lives. There, one of Yakima's cowives rides like the wind, another swims like a fish, and Yakima relishes twitting the humorless first wife by naming a fat, waddling duck after her.

From Publishers Weekly

This rich, magical and absorbing growing-up tale set in a little-known culture reflects many universals about women. The setting is a "domestic harem" in the 1940s city of Fez, where an extended family arrangement keeps the women mostly apart from society, as opposed to the more stereotypical "imperial harem," which historically provided sex for sultans and other powerful court officials. Moroccan sociologist Mernissi (*Islam and Democracy*) charts the changing social and political frontiers and limns the personalities and quirks of her world. Here she tells of a grandmother who warns that the world is unfair to women, learns of the confusing WW II via radio news in Arabic and French, watches family members debate what children should hear, wonders why American soldiers' skin doesn't reflect Moroccan-style racial mixing and decides that sensuality must be a part of women's liberation. With much folk wisdom--happiness, the author's mother told her, "was when there was a balance between what you gave and what you took"--this book not only tells a winning personal story but also helps to feminize a much-stereotyped religion. Photos. BOMC and QPB selections.

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From School Library Journal

YA-Through a series of vignettes and recollections, Mernissi describes what it was like growing up in one of the last bastions of culturally supported female seclusion in Fez, Morocco, in the 1940s. Within its walls, the harem held young children of both sexes; in-laws of several generations; divorced, widowed, or otherwise dependent female relatives; and even ex-slaves. The presence of the French, the inevitable incursions of the war, and the Westernization of the country itself exposed the family to much that clashed with the customs of their Islamic culture. The author was continually challenged by her mother and grandmother to look beyond the habits of the past, while her father's mother and aunts argued convincingly for the benefits of the old system. This is not a denigration of harem life; rather, it is a description of the conflicts these people faced as they moved out into the world, especially as educational opportunities opened up for them. A useful explanation of the culture as well as a fascinating and highly readable tale of some unique, intriguing women.

Susan H. Woodcock, King's Park Library, Burke, VA

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Charles Lee:

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Michael Short:

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Cody Chenault:

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