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Roisin O'Sullivan

On top of a great storyline, there's a lot to be learned about Muslim culture from this book. The role of women in society is one main theme as is the perceived violence and dominance of men.

Novel look at Gulf between east and west

The most difficult part of reading Noel Scanlon's new book is keeping in mind that it is a work of fiction. This brilliantly researched novel offers us a rare insight into the Middle East, a culture that can seem at times to exist in a completely different universe from western civilisation.

The Gulf tackles our often closed-minded views of Muslim culture, but also highlights the discrepancies in how occupants of the Gulf region see westerners.

The story follows Irish banker David and his journalist wife Deborah as they live and work in the Gulf state of Khor Fahal, a strange and often hostile climate. Both are reasonably open-minded when compared to the other foreign diplomats they socialise with and so, through their eyes, we get quite a balanced outsider's view of Khor Fahal.

Khor Fahal is a deeply divided country. There are the Shi'ites, a deeply religious community with a strong majority. Then there are the Sunnis, who have only half the numbers of the Shi'ites, but are in possession of most of the political and financial control, a power they have maintained by aggressively eliminating any outspoken opposition.

Life in the Gulf has its ups and downs for the couple as they struggle with sizzling heat, strange customs and underlying hostility from the natives. However, things go from bad to worse when David finds the body of the local Mullah at the bottom of the sea. When word spreads of the development, the Shi'ites feel completely violated and decide to stage a revolution.

Led by Ayatollah Abd Wahhab, a man with a strange ability to evoke fanatical support in anyone who listens to him, the Shi'ite men, women and children pledge themselves as martyrs to their cause and attempt to expunge the state of everything they deem to be sinful. Unfortunately, for the Irish couple and all the ex-pats they associate with, this includes westerners.

Although this book falls under the banner of fiction, its strength comes from the extensive background detail provided and the often insightful comments of its protagonists who bemoan the conflict in Palestine. There are also some interesting meditations on the Irish psyche and our tendency to align ourselves with the colonised, rather than the coloniser regardless of the reality.

Initially, we see Deborah trying to 'save' the women of Khor Fahal from their oppressive marriages, but as the book continues we start to understand that, in many cases, this way of life is an informed decision rather than an enforced one. Though beyond Deborah's ability to comprehend, it gives the reader food for thought.

This book is the perfect option for anyone looking for a summer read with a bit of substance. The disclaimer at the beginning of the book offers you a choice. You either take the book at face value as a riveting fictional tale, or you can read between the lines and see Scanlon's criticisms and predictions about the situation in the Middle East. Either way, The Gulf is unmissable.