

LOVE TORN BY WAR

A woman searches for her husband 40 years after imprisonment

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In 1962, Algeria gained independence from colonial France after eight years of bloody conflict; even now, violence erupts between French and Algerians, and questions about Algerians are powerfully divisive in French culture. Anouar Benmalek's "The Lovers of Algeria," which won France's prestigious Rachid prize, follows a couple separated by war and viscerally evokes the damage war can do. While the current war in Iraq is profoundly different from France's colonization of Algeria, it's impossible, while reading Benmalek's scenes of searing brutality, not to wonder what novels will be written decades from now, what war stories will be told.

In 1955, amidst the battles for independence, the Swiss acrobat Anna and her Algerian husband Nassreddine are separated by French soldiers. Nassreddine is tortured and imprisoned. The rebels, in turn, kill their two children and his mother. Anna, despairing and unaware of Nassreddine's location, eventually returns to Europe. Forty years later, after her second husband dies, she returns to visit her children's graves and attempts to find her Algerian husband. The novel moves mainly between two stories: their time together in the '40s and '50s and their lives in 1997, as they try to find each other. The jumps from one story line to another emphasize the distance of Anna and Nassreddine's separation; 40 years is a long time to be apart. Just as powerfully, the descriptions of Nassreddine's parents and his early village life emphasize how much has been lost in the wars. Yet all eras, from the rural and reasonably peaceful to the horrors of Algiers, are connected by violence. When they meet, Nassreddine and Anna must deal with racism and World War II. By the time they are married, revenge killings have become part of the Algerian landscape. In their old age, they confront a country full of kidnapers, soldiers, criminals and rebels -- they are interchangeable -- on "killing sprees."

As the aged Nassreddine goes for a walk one morning, his eye is caught by a crowd. A woman is kneeling beside a tray, looking at what initially appears to be a soccer ball. A moment later he realizes it is the head of his neighbor's son. "The clean cut at the base of each neck is bloodless: the executioners had taken especial care with the presentation." Benmalek, author of eight novels in French, was born in Casablanca and now lives in France. He was one of the founders of the Algerian Committee Against Torture, and presents violence with an austerity and clarity of diction that underscores how thoroughly terror and violence have become a part of the nation's culture. Anna, captured by hooded men, feels fear "crushing the breath from her body," and urinates "helplessly, without even opening her legs." Later, a butcher, "exasperated, pulls up a tuft of grass and stuffs it into his victim's mouth. He drags the jerking body towards the rock with one hand and, with the other, cuts the throat as swiftly as before." "Exasperated" -- murder reduced to an irritation. Occasionally, when not discussing violence, the novel's language is stilted. Formality often clings to the words, sometimes resulting in a dense rush of language, sometimes in a series of short, declarative sentences. This feels ponderous on occasion,

with the peculiar almost-beauty of the non-native speaker. "Nassreddine listened, incredulous, rendered speechless by a seething-hot anger that choked him like a stone in his gullet. Having nothing on which to vent itself, this anger frightened even him." And though the elderly Anna -- her creaky bones, her fear, her steely determination to revisit the ghosts of her young life -- is as real as a bullet, the younger Anna feels more like myth than woman, perhaps because she's often described through the lens of Nassreddine's new love.

Within Anna and Nassreddine's stories other characters emerge, representative of the forward motion of life and its strange, unlooked-for gifts. Jallal, the Arab street waif who guides Anna through the late-'90s maze of violence, becomes a grandson to her. (He is about the age of her children when they died.) Recent widower Jaourden, Nassreddine's best friend, who is originally from the desert, has been largely overlooked and worn down in the city. The nearer he draws to the desert, the stronger and taller he seems to grow. This striking subplot serves as a reminder of the power of being in a place one belongs to, an idea that is central to a novel about a country being destroyed and the people who live in it.

But it is the violent images, flatly stated, that remain long after the book has been read. The novel ends with hope, with hard-earned faith in the ability of love to sustain the world's bruises. But the bruises in the novel are such that you cannot help but gasp. Each day, as news trickles in about the 9/11 trials in Germany, the soldiers killed in Iraq, the torture photos and the violence on all sides, "The Lovers" resonates more deeply -- as a warning, one hopes, not an omen.

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