



Stranger Magic: Charmed States & The Arabian Nights

Marina Warner

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A dazzling history of magical thinking, exploring the power of The Arabian Nights and its impact in the West, and retelling some of its wondrous tales. Magic is not simply a matter of the occult arts, but a whole way of thinking, of dreaming the impossible. As such it has tremendous force in opening the mind to new realms of achievement: imagination precedes the fact. It used to be associated with wisdom, understanding the powers of nature, and with technical ingenuity that could let men do things they had never dreamed of before.

The supreme fiction of this magical thinking is The Arabian Nights, with its flying carpets, hidden treasure and sudden revelations. Translated into French and English in the early days of the Enlightenment, this became a best-seller among intellectuals, when it was still thought of in the Arab world as a mere collection of folk tales. For thinkers of the West the book's strangeness opened visions of transformation: dreams of flight, speaking objects, virtual money, and the power of the word to bring about change. Its tales create a poetic image of the impossible, a parable of secret knowledge and power. Above all they have the fascination of the strange -- the belief that true knowledge lies elsewhere, in a mysterious realm of wonder.

As part of her exploration into the prophetic enchantments of the Nights, Marina Warner retells some of the most wonderful and lesser known stories. She explores the figure of the dark magician or magus, from Solomon to the wicked uncle in Aladdin; the complex vitality of the jinn, or genies; animal metamorphoses and flying carpets. Her narrative reveals that magical thinking, as conveyed by these stories, governs many aspects of experience, even now. In this respect, the east and west have been in fruitful dialogue. Writers and artists in every medium have found themselves by adopting Oriental disguise.

With startling originality and impeccable research, this ground-breaking book shows how magic, in the deepest sense, helped to create the modern world, and how profoundly it is still inscribed in the way we think today.

Stranger Magic: Charmed States & The Arabian Nights Details

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Warner

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<https://youtu.be/fiTg12LXER8>

Chris says

The influence of Arabian Nights is far more enduring than one would at first think. In this book, Warner not only shows how the West adapted, changed, the tales but also suggests that in some ways the tales were feminist before the invention of the word. Sherazade who tells stories to educate her husband could also be seen as educating the male reader/listener. Perhaps this is why the tales were so popular among the French salon writers.

What is also interesting is how the echoes of the tales can be seen today in the world as the Arabian spring. Does embracing the tales indict a view or an ability to change? I'm not sure but after reading Warner's work, I think it might. This could possibly tie into the Arab Spring, something that is briefly touched upon (and look at the publication date of the book before you blame Warner). I would be interested to see what an update version in a few years looks like.

Zanna says

This is a book that celebrates, with a strong critical eye, the complex and ongoing life, mainly in European culture, of the stories known by various names including the Arabian Nights. Marina Warner states her overall interpretation of the Arabian Nights (as a feminist text) at the outset and repeatedly, but she is rarely concerned with arguing for her interpretation and many of the reflections in this book are not related to it; it is not a persuasive text with a central thesis and it has no central focus. Rather, it is a collection of patterns or themes woven out of multiple threads or trains of thought that flow out in all directions from the stories and the words of their tellers / writers, hearers / readers, re-tellers, editors, imitators, detractors, advocates, misrepresenters etc. Selected stories from the Arabian Nights are taken as thematic starting points for discussions of, for example, the portrayal of King Solomon in Muslim literature, flight, the lives and voices of objects, the role of the carpet in psychoanalysis.

I don't know of many books like this, but it reminded me of The Hindus: An Alternative History because the loving engagement with the material here echoes Wendy's passion for, in particular, the Mahabharata, in its multiplicity, its alive-ness as it is retold and reinterpreted throughout its history, belonging to all hearers. The Arabian Nights has lived the same kind of life, only a large portion of it in "Western" culture.

This appropriation of the tales has often been highly Orientalist (Warner's quite extensive drawing on Edward Said is not limited to applying his critique of Orientalism) in character. Attention is drawn particularly to numerous early versions of the tales in the UK and other European countries which presented the material (heavily edited and supplemented with extra tales fabricated by their authors, who claimed to be

mere translators) as a guide book or accurate portrait of "the East", suggesting people read them to learn about "the manners and customs of the Orientals" from Egypt to India. This is absurd, because they were translating 14th century manuscripts which talked about the 8th and 9th centuries, ancient times, and magical fantasy lands. Such advertising plays directly into the Orientalist line that "the Orient" is frozen in time, or degenerate, fallen from its glorious past. Warner also critiques the use of the Arabian Nights in satire and parody where contemptuous attitudes towards "the Orient" are exploited, and the progressive orientalising of all kinds of magic, especially during "the Enlightenment". European culture was thus sanitised with fantasy steeped in foreignness. Thinking beyond the core topic, but almost always thinking through or about stories and texts, Warner also wanders into reflections on colonial projects such as the *Description de l'Egypt* Napoleon employed hundreds of savants and draughtspeople to produce.

Criticism of such racist and colonialist attitudes comes up throughout the text, most often alongside appreciation of other aspects of the same material. But it is appreciation, especially of cross-cultural exchange, that sounds loudest for most of this text. Revelling in, retelling, reinterpreting, adding to, drawing inspiration from the Arabian Nights are all acts that Warner celebrates from Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* to the shadow theatre of Lotte Reiniger. Even more so she celebrates the stories themselves, often while critiquing their misogyny, lazy plotting and other shortcomings, always finding value and pleasure. The only person safe from criticism is that preeminent heroine, Sharazad, who saves herself and all women from the murderous king with her art of remembering and retelling a dazzling profusion of tales. Perhaps stories crossing borders are what save the world...

Celia Moontown says

Rich and informative introduction to the culture of Arabian Nights.

Raul Ortega says

A great read to take your time reading. Warner retells several tales and recounts an almost comprehensive account of all the Arabian Nights translations, retellings and paths the book has journeyed in literature and the many various arts, media, psychology and philosophy practitioners it has influenced. I took a long time reading it because the book inspired me to reread those parts of the Arabian Nights I had read before (more than one-half to two-thirds of it) And to read for the first time those parts she discusses that I hadn't read yet. Magic and reality. Reasoned imagination. A flying carpet of thoughts.

Rosemary says

I would not have read this book except that I have to lead the discussion of the Arabian Nights for my book group. This is a wonderful read. How has the Arabian Nights influenced our western world? So well researched and considered by the author, it gives so much insight into the west's interpretations of the mysterious east and our fascination with it. She begins each section with a pithy, yet satisfying, version of a tale from the Nights (without Dunyasad's interruptions at the end of each chapter) and then discusses aspects of it.

Andy says

There was quite a bit of useful information in this book, though I still couldn't tell you what the thesis of the book is. The chapters are pretty disorganized and move from subject to subject without any real focus or overarching idea. If you're interested in learning a bunch of random knowledge about how various writers, film makers, playwrights, and other individuals responded to the 1001 Nights (as well as some summaries of several of the stories) and you're not really interested in a well argued or focused contention, this may be the book for you.

Caroline says

Interesting - really long, and I think the copy editor must have been asleep when going over the proofs - Marina Warner is too smart to write a sentence saying "... the much so sought-after" artist or architect or whatever was being talked about - either of those words is fine but you don't need both!

I know very little about the Arabian Nights, it was interesting not only to find out that the stories we most associate with it (Aladdin, Ali Baba) are not part of the original, and to see how the stories as we know them are filtered through the translators in the 18th century.

Eleanor says

I took a long time over this book, reading various others in and between. It is quite dense and scholarly, but I found it very interesting. Marina Warner covers an amazingly wide range of topics in her examination of the influences of "The Thousand and One Nights" on Europe and beyond, from the Enlightenment to Walt Disney, and from Harry Potter to Douglas Fairbanks. Sigmund Freud's couch covered in a Middle Eastern rug is in there, as is Rudolf Nureyev's tomb with its mosaic carpet and many other artefacts and works of art.

Ahmed says

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Jean says

Like all Marina Warner's work, this is rich, fabulous, erudite - and enchanting. Although it's nominally about the Arabian Nights, Warner ranges over a huge range of European culture, showing how Islamic culture has enriched Western ideas and aesthetics. If you've never made the connection between the Freudian couch and Turkish carpets, you need to read this book!

kasia says

I was alternately frustrated and enthralled with this book. It's an impressively exhaustive discussion of themes in the Arabian Nights and later adaptations of the text, and at its best, it draws out these threads into surprising and illuminating connections between disparate materials. However, it often feels like a catalogue or encyclopedia: lengthy descriptions of other books or films, but not much in the way of analysis. I mostly felt like I'd prefer to just read those books (or watch the films) myself. I appreciated the invitation to 'ride along' with Warner's thoughts, as it were, but would have preferred to do it for less than 400+ pages.

Beth Roberts says

Definitely worth reading. Some of the connections she finds between the Arabian Nights and other segments of the culture are too much of a post-modern stretch for me, but they are always worth considering. And, most important, I now have a much clearer understanding of what the 1001 Nights were, and are. The reader who comes to the end of the 1001 Nights will die -- because there is no end to the 1001 Nights.

doreflux says

I found this book interesting but frustrating. First the criticisms: Warner drifts into related and unrelated areas without always returning to tie up the loose ends. Perhaps she's trying to imitate the structure of the book she writes of, but it doesn't work, at least for me. Secondly, the book lacks scholarly specificity (and looking in the notes doesn't help much--very bare bones). Thirdly, at times Warner uses unnecessarily florid terms without defining them, which makes the prose feel forced. The net result is 400 pages of rumination. A good editor is needed to shape the prose and define the goal of each chapter. Now the positives: it's an interesting idea for a book--I like the structure of interweaving the stories into the scholarly text. Secondly, Warner opens up the Arabian Nights to an array of cultural influences (including cross-cultural but also feminist). Lots of interesting material but difficult to make sense of it all.

Pedro Pascoe says

I wasn't 100% sure what to expect from this book.

At first glance it was some kind of commentary on 'The Arabian Nights', and to some extent it was just that. The opening part gave a sweeping overview of themes and tropes of the more magic-orientated elements of The Arabian Nights, and was enjoyable reading.

The book then proceeded to examine, in various degrees of depth, the impact The Arabian Nights has had on the West, with particular focus on key aspects of culture from the time it was introduced (and expanded) in the West, to present day. This was more or less relevant, depending on the particular aspect focused upon, and an interesting read on the immense impact these tales have had on the multi-media, multi-generational culture in the West. The brief re-telling of particular stories serving as preludes to chapters, in order to highlight the following commentary, added a bit of spice to the narrative, which did get a bit dry at times, and sometimes seemed to steer away from The Arabian Nights.

The focus of the entire book, as stated, was about charmed and magical states in the Arabian Nights, but by and large dealt with the cross-cultural impact of the stories. It was only in the short conclusion that we finally reached anything like the beginnings of an analysis on the paradox of magical thinking in rational times, and could have been a great book if teased out and commented upon at length.

An enjoyable read, nonetheless, and a good companion-piece to reading The Arabian Nights themselves.
