

HAVING YOUR CAKE

Khalil Al Iman is: a Libyan embodying' emotional homelessness every bit as pervasive as the physical nomadism of his Bedouin ancestors. In these three stories Ahmad Faqih traces Iman's search for happiness, providing a frustrating glimpse - into the psychological tumult of arrested maturity. First buoyant, then achingly dismal, the stories take the reader on a - roller coaster of hope, disappointment and anger.

At one level the stories explore a series of Iman's I relationships. Although sub- stantially different in-form, each has one aspect in common: Iman desires what he cannot have. When fully in his grasp, his prizes immediately lose their luster. Whether bedding another man's wife, living with a woman in a traditional: Libyan marriage or fathering a child in a dream world, Iman continually casts about for the always more perfect partner. Like a child offered a choice between two sweets, Iman readily chooses one: . when finished, he longingly rhapsodizes how much better the other certainly would have been.

At another level, Faqih delivers a dual lesson in ,responsibility through a series of wrenching soliloquies. As Iman resolves to -devote himself to a particular choice, then laments the necessity to choose at all, Faqih rails 'against the vagaries of a world continually forcing individuals into the chains of decision. On the- other hand, he clearly indicates individuals. have no other option. In his telling, endless opportunities become endless opportunities lost, and potential happiness atrophies into self-imposed misery.

Faqih makes his point. However, he does so by painting a one-dimensional portrait of imam but only does Imam lack any sense of ...passionate 'love' he feels for his feels for his lateri,... he refuses to mature one whit. Instead he remains . fixed in the state of an. over eager youth bursting at the seams in fiery pursuit of release; he equates hormonal rapture with true love and fails to anticipate the inevitable emotional letdown following his conquests.

Iman occasionally escapes this dependency when he. entertains sinister fantasies. "But I was overcome by a wave of revulsion as I found myself imagining myself really standing behind Sandra, clamping my fingers around her throat, stifling her screams and cries for help... Where did they come from these dark thoughts laden with the intoxication of evil and crime?" Rather than accept these fantasies as part of his self, Iman withdraws in horror. His willingness to believe in a separate, independent ego lurking in the shadows, waiting for the

chance to leap out and assume control, underscores Iman's tenuous grip on identity.

In contrast to Iman, Faqih's other characters appear comfortable with their chosen limitations, though they, too are drawn with broad strokes. Whether this brings them happiness remains an open question because they quickly disappear. Faqih's unrelenting pessimism doesn't allow contentment to linger long. .

Stylistic and metaphorical parallels readily elicit comparisons to Salman Rushdie. Faqih does not approach Rushdie's genius, nor is he completely obscured. *Gardens of the Night* misses both the searing intensity of *Midnight's Children* and the compelling plea for understanding in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Still, Faqih gently pulls the reader through the story's rich symbolism and allegory.

Readers familiar with Rushdie's work will not like Iman. Rushdie's narrators exhibit complex layers of self-awareness as they stumble through life. They do not retrace the same path time and again, tripping over the same obstacles and stepping on the same mines. Consequently Rushdie's ! stories are much more believable, his characters much more sympathetic. Equally important, Rushdie employs alternative perspectives throughout his narratives.

In comparison, Iman grows tiresome quickly, a self-indulgent whinger deserving scorn and, ridicule rather than empathy. As well, by continually peeping at the world through the keyhole of Iman's adolescent desire, Faqih's perspective grows stale. .

These comparisons should not deter potential readers. Dark and heavy, this book makes an excellent counterpoint to the optimism found in most summer reading. Faqih allows his cynicism free rein and the reader is spared a happy ending as Iman neither comes of age nor finds happiness: "I had to bleed him out. The only way I could be rid of this freak who lived in my body and enslaved my soul was by bleeding him out. I looked for a razor or a knife to slash my wrists to be free of him."

In the end Iman destroys all vestiges of self-respect which might have provided his salvation. Rather than growing to know himself, Iman becomes a stranger to his own mind. Refusing the bonds of responsibility, he finds himself consigned to dank paths of disenchantment and madness.