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## Don Quixote in the Sahara

In “Moving the Palace,” Charif Majdalani immerses the reader in a tinted world of djellabas, caravans, daggers, banquets and palanquins.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

*By Nathaniel Popkin*

April 28, 2017 2:17 p.m. ET

**In ‘Moving the Palace,’** Lebanese-French author Charif Majdalani renders the complex social landscape of the Middle East and North Africa with subtlety and finesse. The hero of this novel, a Lebanese adventurer named Samuel Ayyad, is a master of linguistic and cultural translation. He is a personal bridge between the Muslim and Christian, Arab and European worlds. Yet one doesn’t need to care about the region’s history, or its present-day contexts, to enjoy “Moving the

Palace.” Ayyad’s brio and Mr. Majdalani’s richly textured prose are reason enough.

After finishing his studies in Beirut around 1908, Ayyad, “from a family of poets” (his father, Nassib, is the author of a seminal Arab-English dictionary), eschews the life of a scholar or functionary. He chooses instead to set out for “the most thankless land known at the time,” the Sudan. There he takes a post as a translator for the British colonial military, which is attempting to reconsolidate power over Egypt and the Sudan by defeating insurgent Mahdist tribes.

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MOVING THE PALACE

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*By Charif Majdalani*

*New Vessel, 198 pages, \$16.95*

Mr. Majdalani, the author of five other books of fiction and nonfiction, immerses the reader in this tinted world of djellabas, caravans, daggers, banquets and palanquins. (First published in French in 2007, the book




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WHAT TO READ THIS WEEK »

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Revisiting Walden; health care’s original sin; Martha’s Vineyard in mind; speeding up evolution; the lives of “infidels” in the Middle East; Paula Hawkins’s follow-up to “The Girl on the Train”; and much more.

appears now in Edward Gauvin’s alluring translation.) Ayyad quickly impresses the British officer in charge, Col. Edward Moore, with his cultural insight, his facility in Arabic, French and English, and his “fanatical ambition to distinguish himself from the soldiers.”

This last quality—Ayyad’s fierce personal independence from even the military that pays his salary—lends critical distance that helps avoid decorative set-piece tropes. At a sumptuous dinner with chieftains, “Samuel thinks himself in some

Orientalist dream.” Seduced by neither Arab sensuality nor British military discipline, he is indeed free to call things as they are.

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## WHAT TO READ THIS WEEK

### How to Live Like Thoreau

The best way to celebrate the great naturalist’s life is to follow his example: handle the oars ourselves, pull on our hiking boots and learn about life. *Jc* reviews “The Boatman” by Robert M. Thorson and “Thoreau and the Lang Trees” by Richard Higgins.

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He is, however, seduced by adventure. Moore assigns Ayyad the job of finishing off a Mahdist-aligned warlord in the mountains and sends him funds to buy the support of other tribal chiefs. Once the warlord has been defeated, Ayyad is free, and his pockets are filled with excess gold. He meets another Lebanese on the make, Shafik Abyad, a dealer in antiquities who is transporting an entire Alexandrian palace, disassembled and packed in numbered crates, across the desert in hopes of finding a buyer. For Abyad, a coarser sort of dreamer than Ayyad, the sales pitch is “all or nothing.” Either hungry for the company of a countryman or “the kind of man to shoulder other people’s whims, to make them his own,” Ayyad agrees to join Abyad, and they set off with their ridiculous convoy in tow.

They have no more chance of selling the palace than Don Quixote did of slaying the knight. Yet if Abyad, “starting to look lost, for his eyes are too wide for a face that shrinks a little more each day” after months in the desert, is a sort of Quixote, Ayyad is far too certain a figure to be Sancho. And this, perhaps, is the book’s shortcoming. Ayyad, a hero from the start, rarely falters. Often challenged but almost never compromised or weakened, he is more myth than man.

Something, however, seduces Ayyad into joining Abyad on his trek, and that may be the force of the landscape, present and yet untouchable. At one point, he notices “on the horizon, carved out in immaculate light, archipelagoes of baobabs . . . like legions of unmoving women hitching up their robes.”

Here Mr. Majdalani lets the desert, giver of clarity but thief of reason, assert its power. It is a reminder of the beauty and complexity of a landscape that is lost in our fixation on Islam, terror and oil.

—*Mr. Popkin is the author of the novel “Lion and Leopard.”*

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