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Books

Seductive book gives a glimpse of life in a harem

By MICHAEL GILSENAN
Los Angeles Times News Service

"Harem: The World Behind the Veil" by Alev Lytle Crouler, is like a marvelous box of expensive chocolates, or rather, perfumed Turkish delight. The titles are enticing as the aroma of jasmine: training of odalisques, harem walls, death, secrets of flowers and birds, riddles and stories, opium, disenchantment, death, desire and consumption, regeneration of (eunuchs') genitals, jewelry, death... Mortality taps away in the perfumed garden, a woodpecker amid the singing birds.

The sumptuous pictures seduce us too. Ingres' coolly classical male "La Grande Odalisque" of 1814 with her rich jeweled clasp in the hair emphasizing her skin's luster, looks over her right shoulder at the viewer, her hand loosely holding the phallic handle of her peacock fan. Bouchard's naked beauty in "After the Bath" of 1894 looks away intent on her testing of the water; her body faces us but so-tastefully, heavy gold bangles and rich drapery on the couch tell us she is not of our European world of the feminine. Sir Frank Dicksee's sultry "Laila, 1882, reclines in flaming red and gold robes but manages to look only poignantly repressed and English beside Renoir's "Odalisque," 1870. Her slouched pose and hooded eyes, tired with who knows that pleasures, make her business all too clear. She is not serving tea.

Sensually. Better. Oriental sensuality. The air is to heavy you can smell it in Delacroix and Renoir. We know it is "Eastern" air and these are Eastern breasts, thighs, sultry glances because of the almost suffocating colors,

glittering pearls in rich settings, damasks, a leopard skin here and there. Black slaves play their part, male and female. Mother of pearl inlay is everywhere and so are the inevitable hubbly bubble pipes. If Western males were to have their fantasies, every dream element had to find a place in the clichéd decor of desire for The Orient.

The Orient as Woman. Accessible woman, passive-yet-alluring woman, always-available-but-cause-always-possessed woman. Explored, examined and dominated like "The East itself, she must also look mysterious." The glowing canvases are a rhapsody of mostly Turkish European men's erotic imaginations.

And there is the eternal and clichéd question of this book's subtitle: "Just what was 'The World Behind the Veil'?" More to the point, what was the world behind that tight, all-covering black suit of the respectable middle class gentleman in the gallery, dressed permanently as if going to a funeral (as the French poet Baudelaire sardonically observed)? What is the world behind the designer jeans the man looking at these images of 1989? Is he turned on? Does "the harem" still intrigue us, tempting women to into secret dreams?

Publishers certainly think so. They are in the business of selling things and knowing markets. We still want to consume the world, pry into its hidden places, penetrate all its, her, hidden ways, see everything that is concealed. The pictures reproduced here themselves sell for millions. High art plus sex plus fantasy plus money, even in this age



Alev Lytle Crouler has filled her book with rich images.

that's a heady cocktail. Alev Lytle Crouler begins her superbly illustrated stroll through this universe of illusion recalling her own family, and growing up in an old house "which was once the harem of a pasha." A girl, she women told her things about the

world of women. She is Turkish but left for the United States in 1963 when she was eighteen. So she was there, but is partly an outsider ideal credentials.

Old photos tell their own stories of her family. A great uncle poses with his wife and daughters. The riding boots and crew, military uniform and sharply turned up mustaches are the very type of officer gentleman. The wife has her head covered in a scarf and two-tone boots peep out from beneath what looks like the rich material of her all-concealing dress. The children in identical off-the-face brimmed hats lean formally on their parents' knees or shoulders. On the opposite page the author's father and mother pose in "Turkish costume," which reminds us how quickly "the folk" came to be used in showing up by the local well-to-do, a kind of charade of something called "the traditional."

In an odd way the strapshot resembles the picture of Mr. and Mrs. Silk Buckingham elaborately costumed in Oriental clothes in the England of 1818 (by Peckersill). The irony here does not seem to be part of the author's own awareness. She is inclined to fit from subject to subject, picture to picture, book to book. Sometimes she comments stringently on the Orientalism and fantasy of the pictures.

Her blandly content with a few lines on Ottoman history or a paragraph or two on shopping, food, dress. The pictures themselves are often treated merely as illustrations of a reality. She will suddenly use Sir Richard Burton or even Montesquieu's "Persian Letters" as if they were just reliable reporters of the world,

say, black eunuchs.

Amid the history there is a real howler when the author refers to the Angel Gabriel passing on "slips of parchment" to the Prophet Muhammad. The whole point of the Koran is that it was a "spoken" revelation. Gabriel was not God's secretary and someone body from Turkey — not to mention the editor — really ought to know that.

The ideal credentials are not so ideal after all. The book becomes an Orientalist commodity too, despite the rather unabsorbed comments about illusion and repressed desires. The photos show up one of the problems. Pictured in a studio as was so often done, they were supposed to look like the "real life" of the harem, but are merely pale and gray beside the glowing display of the artists. And a "real Turkish harem," as a caption says of one, shows a blank-faced and self-conscious woman in a white dress on a sofa supposedly playing a lute; an up-cadabra and a long frame packed with photos dominate the little room. The photo is simply there in a chapter, illustrating rather than demystifying, because of course the publishers do not really want to demystify, as their blurb claims. They too are selling odalisques.

The author hesitates occasionally, but mostly decides to go along uncritically and without real comment on all these powerful images.

What a pity those grandmothers and aunts to whom the book is dedicated, over a posed photo of a dancing girl, are swamped by production values. This is a chance missed.

In Brief

By SONJA BOLLE
Los Angeles Times News Service

MAN WITHOUT MEMORY by Richard Burgin: Opening this book is like stepping into quicksand. Richard Burgin's ingenious tales are disconcerting from the word go. The opening story, "Notes on Mrs. Slaughter," begins: "I'm living with Mrs. Slaughter in her apartment in Cambridge. She's not a bad housekeeper and now that the Mafia is beginning to take her alone, she's regained her skill in cooking." The reader never knows where to find solid ground: Are these characters joking? Are they sane? "It's only a story," one comforts oneself. And yet...

These may be the people one stands next to in the grocery line. One justifies them in the street. After reading these stories, who knows how they will react?

There is a sort of mad logic and gentle ambivalence about Burgin's world; everything has several faces, but one never knows which one is reliable. A vacationing musician tries to sort out the odd advances of a couple she meets by making lists of her observations and reactions to them. Her hesitant conclusion is typical of Burgin characters: "Not that sex was a major priority in my life, but it wasn't so minor that it didn't have to be addressed sometime." Aware that the most likely future for the incipient ménage à trois is that the trio will drift apart, she wonders: "Why didn't more people go crazy?"

"BLACK BODY," by H.C. Turk: "Black Body" is the intricate and lubricious tale of Alba, a young witch caught in the schemes of an 18th-century English noblewoman. The story is told through

Alba's eyes as she awaits execution; she tells the secrets of witches so as not to be burned and become a "black body." Born on the Isle of Man, Alba is a freak among witches, a white witch who can pass for human but is deadly to any man who falls prey to her irresistible attractions. Lady Amanda Rachel seeks revenge against a man who has lured her, and when fortune reveals to her the secret of the white witch, she takes the orphaned girl as ward (Alba's mother has recently been burned at the stake). Lady Rachel arranges to marry Alba off to her enemy's son, thereby ensuring his demise.

Which though she is, Alba is portrayed as an innocent child of nature. Born in the wilds, she is suddenly introduced to London society, where she attempts to decipher the social codes and artifices of the English aristocracy.

If there is a theme to "Black Body," it is the familiar moral revelation that outsiders are not the dangerous ones; rather, human society is intolerant of deviation and implacable in its drive to exterminate the foreigner. In more capable hands, this might have been an interesting tale. The dialogue is written in a convoluted way ostensibly suggestive of archaic speech; moreover, the witch hunts ended long before the period of this book. The author's crude, unmercifully drawn out scenes of sodomy, bestial and otherwise, are unfortunately more memorable than his clever invention of the race of witches; and neither are adequate compensation for his total disregard of historical detail. The only appealing point about this book is its beautiful jacket, don't be taken in.

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