

BOOK REVIEW

# A Royal Mess

Novel about a French nobleman's romance with a harem girl races past a good story

**THE PALACE OF TEARS**

By Alev Lytle Croutier  
Delacorte, 192 pages, \$19.95

Reviewed by Brigitte Frase

**T**he Palace of Tears" is a rather peculiar miniature. A fairy tale of cross-cultural romance is grafted onto a historical novel about late 19th century upheavals in France and Turkey, then compressed into a small-format book of 192 pages. The historical centerpiece is the visit by Empress Eugenie, wife of Bonaparte's grand nephew Napoleon III, to the sultan of Turkey while on her way to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal on Nov. 17, 1869, in Egypt. Eugenie was the first Western woman to be allowed to visit the sultan's harem. From that fact hangs the climax of a fictional love affair between a French nobleman and a harem girl.

In San Francisco writer Alev Lytle Croutier's impatient handling of historical events, the march of history turns into a race. The Suez flashes by, followed by the Panama Canal. The sultan is deposed, the French army loses the Franco-Prussian war at Sedan, the Commune insurrection in Paris leads to Louis Napoleon's abdication, and there are wars in the Balkans. Croutier dispatches whole epochs in chapters of two pages or less.

The love story fares no better. The author can't settle down with any character or dwell on a scene for more than a few sentences. Relax, one wants to say to her; there's a good story in here if you'd let it unfold. Near the outset, Provençal wine grower Casimir de Chateaufeuil visits Paris and comes across a store specializing in Orientalia. He falls in love with the miniature portrait of a young woman in a green caftan.

"Her eyes: one blue, the other yellow. The face was terrifyingly familiar yet his memory could not place it anywhere. The edge of the gilded frame was inscribed with the words La Poupée. 'The doll.'" Night after night he dreams of meeting her in a perfumed garden where she murmurs "Je vous aime."

He promptly abandons his vineyards, his family and even his red-haired Parisian mistress to travel to the Orient in search of his beloved. He becomes feverish crossing cities and deserts and is finally shipped back home, where he resigns himself to watching his grapes grow. But fate is waiting for him. A seer in Antioch has told him, "You must wait for your kismet to find you."

On another visit to Paris he meets Ferdinand de Lesseps, architect of the Suez Canal and cousin to the Empress. They hit it off and Casimir joins the inner circles of Eugenie's court. When she takes a ship bound for Istanbul, he's one of the courtiers on board. Like Woody Allen's Zelig, he's now in every historical snapshot. Eugenie's visit to Istanbul was, historically, the



"The Palace of Tears" is based on a story that Alev Lytle Croutier, who grew up in Turkey, learned from her grandmother.

In light of the personal connection, it's difficult to understand why the book reads like an outline rather than a finished work.

Also, on almost every page there are bizarre vocabulary choices and awkward grammar. What, for example, is an "unseemly vertigo"? What sort of image do you get from "Heads sprang up with unexpected agility"? And why in the world does Eugenie resemble "a smoking sphinx" when Casimir asks her to deliver some personal letters?

And the poetic prose isn't. "The rising sun tinted their vulnerable forms. . . . The trees, all clipped into the same shape, extending infinitely like a paisley sea of leaves. Casimir left his mistress on her bed, undone, infused with a sacred glow she had not previously known. She craved to hold on to it. . . ."

Croutier did better producing the lush 1989 coffee-table history "Harem: The World Behind the Veil." In one chapter of that book she tells the story of the French Sultana Nakhshidil. Abducted by pirates on her way home from convent school in France, she was sold to the Dey of Algiers, who made a gift of her to the sultan. Nakhshidil became fond of a harem girl to whom she taught French. After the sultan's death, the girl was banished to the palace of the rejected woman until the Empress Eugenie came to visit Abdullaziz.

The cross-cultural romance of a French convent girl who became a captive queen with the slave/doll/friend whom she introduced to books and Western culture clearly fascinated Croutier. Why didn't she abandon Casimir, a plot pawn without a personality, and tell the richer story of the blue-eyed harem queen and her protégée? ■

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## LETTERS TO BOOK REVIEW

### Making a List And Checking It Twice

Editor — Even though there's no such thing as "first best poet, second best poet," and so on, thanks for the list of 50 great writers anyway. ["50 Over 50: The Chronicle List of American Writers in Their Prime," Nov. 19]. For someone like me — an English major trained in classical literature who's trying to read and assemble a library of good modern books — it's important to have lists like this to get an idea of where to start.

It was a relief realizing that I had read most of the authors on your list at least once. Always good to know that you're not quite as ignorant as you thought. Thanks!

LEE CLINCH  
Berkeley

Editor — I know that lists never satisfy everyone; however I find it extraordinary that your list omitted one of the most talented writers of any age — Paul Theroux. To include J.D. Salinger, who suffers from terminal writer's block, yet omit Theroux, who is not only prolific but whose work grows in stature and originality with each book, seems a travesty. Further-

more, to put writers such as Burke and McBain in while leaving out Theroux is beyond comprehension.  
JOAN AHLBERG  
Petaluma

Editor — Thank you for a really, really fine holiday issue, especially the "50 Over 50" feature. Having been mercifully spared Mr. Guterson's top five, we happily welcomed Ishmael Reed's bounty of names, mostly new to this reader. (At least Ethan Canin kept his remarks brief and to the point: himself.) I am glad that all the other contributors responded in as generous and interesting a manner as Reed.

In addition, we found much to admire in the picks for Mysteries and Thrillers, several of which were books we at our bookstore, "M" is for Mystery, have seriously endorsed (i.e., "The Immortal Game," "Suspension" and "Manifesto for the Dead"). We were also glad to see that the holiday issue is no longer a slick-mostly-advertising section.

Keep up the fine work, and have a great holiday.  
JEANNIE KAUFMAN  
San Mateo

Editor — Ethan Canin is right. Lists such as these are ridiculous. Still, how could you leave Barry Hannah off this one? A paragraph of Hannah contains more poetry and energy than any

book of Anne Tyler. Not to mention Tobias Wolff

ALAN KUNZ  
Yosemite

Editor — You compiled a list of the 50 best American writers over 50 by "turning for a jury to the surviving writers of The Chronicle Western Hundred" (writers of the best Western fiction). Does not writing also include essays, poetry and drama? Why did you not turn to outstanding writers of those genres also? A dumb approach can only lead to stupid results.

Your list does include two outstanding poets (Thorn Gunn and Gary Snyder) and a few writers of fiction who often publish books of poems (Ishmael Reed and John Updike). And it includes a couple of dramatists (Horton Foote and Arthur Miller). But a list of 50 best American writers over 50 that does not include poets John Ashbery, W.S. Merwin and Adrienne Rich and the dramatist David Mamet cannot be taken seriously.

CLARA SMITH  
Aptos

### The Plath Of Least Resistance

Editor — Because this is The Chronicle, I expected more from Dodie Bellamy's review of Sylvia Plath's "Unabridged Journals" [Nov. 12]. Instead of paying much attention to her

use of language, however, which is the chief concern of writers, Bellamy gives us the tired and unproductive feminist jive that has dogged Plath's reputation since her suicide. In Bellamy's view, Plath's husband, the poet Ted Hughes, is a "philanderer," while Plath's own indiscretions are "tumultuous affair[s]."

When Plath writes about "the sterile forced pathetic smell of a woman without a man," she is exercising, in Bellamy's view, "internalized misogyny," which translates, one supposes, into "She bought the bulls."

So long as women who write can't be viewed as writers but must be either female victims of philanderers or heroic Soviet stereotypes, we oversimplify, demean and degrade them and their published output. To buy into the feminist version of Plath, we must believe, as Bellamy apparently does, that a woman cannot drive a man away, but a man can drive a woman to suicide, which simply assigns all the personal power to the man. Such an imaginary paradigm does justice to neither.

DENNIS GREEN  
Alameda

### Disguised as a Review

Editor — Judith Tannenbaum's book "Disguised as a Poem" (Oct. 22) is about her coming to San Quentin to teach and discovering that the men she had as students were just as human as she. As I wrote in my poem —

which shares the same title as the book — we all grew close in the four years we spent "wrestling with words" and exploring through poetry the notion of what it means to be human.

That's the story I asked Judith to write: her story. I and many other inmates would have been deeply offended had she written a book about us, detailing, as reviewer Christian Parenti suggests, "a glimpse inside" our cells. Obviously, Mr. Parenti wanted Judith to write a different book, a book more like his, and attacks her for failing on that count.

Ms. Tannenbaum spent four years sharing and caring with me and the other men in her class, and I will always be grateful for that experience. Until Mr. Parenti is willing to give that much of himself, until he has walked a mile in her Birkenstocks, I believe he should refrain from making personal attacks "disguised" as a book review.

ELMO CHATTMAN  
California State Prison, Solano  
Vacaville

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