

Jabra I. Jabra

*HUNTERS IN A NARROW STREET*

Translated from the Arabic by William Heinemann. Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1990. Pp. 227

Reviewed by Robert DiAntonio

Jabra I. Jabra was educated at the Arab College of Jerusalem and at Cambridge University; he has been a university lecturer in English literature both in Jerusalem and his present residence, Baghdad. His novel, *Hunters in a Narrow Street*, begins by focusing on the reasons behind the Palestinian diaspora. The main character is a Christian Arab, Jameel Farran, who is about to travel to Iraq where he has accepted a position as an English instructor at a newly opened university. He leaves behind the memories of a girl who may have been killed by Israeli terrorists who were pressuring Palestinians to move out of Jewish neighborhoods. The year is 1948 and the book, which reflects its time, is awash in political maneuvering.

As Jameel comes to know prerevolutionary Baghdad, he becomes fascinated by its city life—the cafés, the brothels, the incessant political conversations, the beauty and the squalor—and by the various levels of political and social attitudes that comprise the Iraqi populous. Although the political rhetoric used in the novel comes closer, at times, to pamphleteering than to literature, the work's strength lies in its intriguing presentation of the traditional family life of the Iraqi upper classes.

Jameel is an outsider, as both a Palestinian and a Christian, and through his eyes we witness two monied families, the Nafawis and the Rubeidis. He is hired as the private tutor for the daughter of Imad Nafawi, a bright, beautiful, and rebellious young woman, with whom he falls in love. These two lovers find ways to be together, but the terrible specter of the many "crimes of honor" that the book's author underscores keep them at a distance. The novel's plot is riveting, for not only is Jameel in love with the young woman, Sulafa, but he also has let himself be seduced by her aunt, Salma, a voluptuous, restless society matron.

It is a well-told and compelling love story, one that sheds light on the lives of the wealthy women of Baghdad society. "Most of the women don't complain. They have their own parties, they gorge themselves with food, they gamble most of the day" (174). Jabra I. Jabra juxtaposes these seemingly empty lives with a call to political sensitivity. "Back home, while you worry about your soul falling down the abyss, which is a luxury, a million people around you in dirty refugee camps will be worrying about a crust of bread to eat, a drop of water to drink" (174).

This was one of Mr. Jabra's earliest novels and, while it may be considered overly doctrinaire by some, it is a well-written and fascinating transcription of

Iraqi and Palestinian life in the late forties. It is a brilliant commentary upon a specific time and place.

W.P. Kinsella

*THE MISS HOBBEA PAGEANT*

Toronto: Harper & Collins, 1989. Pp. 200. \$10.95

Reviewed by Don Murray

W.P. Kinsella has published six volumes of short stories about his Ermineskin Indians. The fourteen stories in *The Miss Hobbema Pageant* feature the characters familiar to readers who have laughed with, perhaps sighed for, these engaging folk who first appeared in *Dance Me Outside* (1977). The medicine woman, Mad Etta, is now old, "much as we hate to admit it" (143), says narrator Silas; but she doesn't seem to have grown old, just more solid in her four hundred pounds, more rooted in a tree-stump chair on the reserve at Hobbema, Alberta. Ermineskins do not wander as much nowadays: no longer visit the Queen at her palace, nor look for the Pope among the Dene in the Arctic. Half of the new stories are about Ermineskins who seek work in the white man's world.

In "Graves," a University of Alberta graduate takes a job at the Wetaskiwin Co-op and moves his family off the reserve to Totem Pole Estates, "the ultimate in modern living" (98). But then the distraught man buries himself in his new septic tank in order to dream back to "his culture and his traditions" (100). The local bigot, Pastor Orkin, gathers his choir over Phil's "grave" to sing "Let the Sunshine In" (109). Another church sends two priests in brown garb who are caught as they "skulked in the underbrush, fingering their beads, the setting sun flashing off the crosses at their waists" (108). A radio station sends a reporter to talk with Phil, but she declines to use her interview because it is not newsworthy. "You could pass it off as progress," Frank Fencepost argues, "—white people been burying us for years—now we learn how to do it ourselves" (104). Frank would be comfortable down there if he had "an Indian television" (110), which means a six-pack of Lethbridge Pale Ale. Silas believes that what Phil is doing is no joke. The last words of the story are Frank's: "He ain't never gonna dream if he don't shut up and go to sleep" (111).

Despite some changes, the people in the comic world of *Pageant* are just a step away from the pastoral scene of earlier Ermineskin books. Now a published author, Silas still lives on the reserve and quietly takes a welfare cheque. "I don't think the people of Hobbema," Bedelia Coyote declares, "are ready for a radical leader just yet" (142). The clever Samantha Yellowknees, the truly subversive Indian in their midst, "is an Eastern Indian, a Huron somebody say, come out here from Ontario to be the brains behind Chief Tom" (142)—perhaps she is akin to the real-life Mohawks who forced a violent showdown with the government in Quebec in 1990.