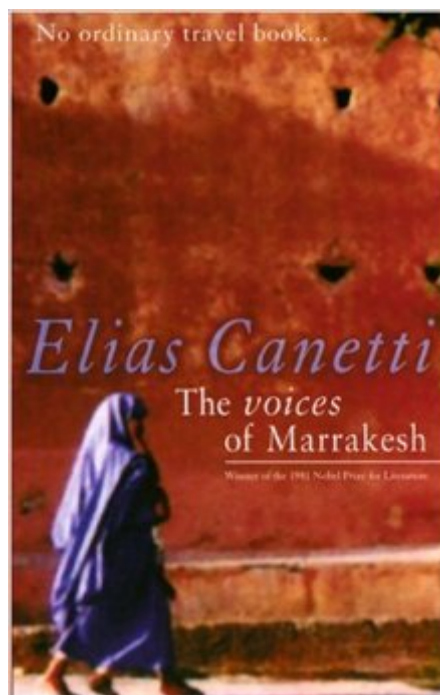


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The Voices Of Marrakesh: A Record Of A Visit



Synopsis

Winner of the 1981 Nobel Prize for Literature, Elias Canetti uncovers the secret life hidden beneath Marrakesh's bewildering array of voices, gestures and faces. In a series of sharply etched scenes, he portrays the languages and cultures of the people who fill its bazaars, cafes, and streets. The book presents vivid images of daily life: the storytellers in the Djema el Fna, the armies of beggars ready to set upon the unwary, and the rituals of Moroccan family life. This is Marrakesh -described by one of Europe's major literary intellectuals in an account lauded as "cosmopolitan in the tradition of Goethe" by the New York Times. "A unique travel book," according to John Bayley of the London Review of Books.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As a twelve-year foreign resident of Marrakesh, I read with interest this slim volume in about two hours. Before reading, I thought this was something written in the past 20 years. But I quickly discovered that the author's sejour in Morocco must have occurred in about 1959 (according to my Moroccan husband) due to certain events mentioned. (The book was first published in 1967.)The book takes place in the time when Morocco was still part of the French Colonial Empire, and when the French had placed a "puppet" sultan on the throne. The author speaks of camel markets in Bab Khemis, the camels having walked in a train of 105 animals from the Western Sahara. Those not purchased by butchers (yes, for eating) in Marrakesh were to continue walking north to Settat, the end of the line for the camel trains (just outside of Casablanca). This must have been before trucking was the common method of transport. Occassional "blue men" of the Sahara could still be

seen in Marrakesh. This book will be of particular interest to any visitors of Moroccan Jewish origin who may be returning to visit the land of their parents. The author, we find out, is Jewish, and just happens to meet up with some members of the Jewish community. He gets pulled into their own little world (which no longer exists in Marrakesh, as most of that community emigrated to Israel after 1967). He relates his experiences. If you are thinking of traveling to Marrakesh, or anywhere in Morocco, this little book will open your eyes to the sights, sounds, and smells of the city. Much of the city has changed, but the atmosphere has remained the same.

"The Voices of Marrakesh," by Elias Canetti, has been translated from German by J.A. Underwood. The copyright page of the 2001 edition notes that both text and translation have a 1967 copyright date. The back cover notes that author Canetti was born in Bulgaria and received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981. "Voices," which is divided into 14 short chapters, is the first person account of a visit to the Moroccan city of the title. Canetti tells of encounters with and observations of camels, beggars, donkeys, merchants, and other inhabitants of the city. The book is a fascinating record of cross-cultural contact, and includes an intriguing view into the Mellah, the Jewish quarter of Marrakesh. The book is full of vividly rendered scenes; Canetti really brings these people and animals to life on the page. The book also has a dark edge as he recounts the exploitative underside of the city. Literacy and linguistic difference are also key themes. "Voices" is a short text (103 pages), but rich in mystery, tragedy, and wonder. As a companion text I recommend "The Jaguar Smile," by Salman Rushdie.

"The voices of Marrakesh. A Record of a Visit" is one of the sharpest and most original accounts of the life in the Moroccan city written by a tourist. The 1981 Nobel Prize winner, and author of the famous "Auto da Fe", Elias Canetti, has described his impressions from the stay in Marrakesh. He was indeed a tourist, although the better word in his case might be "a visitor", and many of his observations are typical for such, but his language and style would make this slim book exciting anyway. His view makes the streets of Marrakesh interesting and mysterious, the camels have their own personal life, the donkeys accept their sad fate and the art of negotiation at the souk is a starting point for the divagations on the human nature. There are, however, many chapters on not-so-touristically-obvious subjects. Canetti, being Jewish, was especially interested in the life of the Jewish minority and explored the Jewish quarter, which resulted in amazing observations, central to the book. His perception is acute and his opinion of people he encountered (he loved the native women!) are witty and deep at the same time. His voice is very fresh, the book does not

sound like a guide, and one of the best points is that, despite his obvious fascination with his exotic surroundings, he can be very critical without being offensive and retaining the respect for the people he describes. His use of words is superb and the translation does not cause the loss of the flow and atmosphere he evoked. Although written more than 50 years ago, "The Voices of Marrakesh" did not lose the charm and magnetizing quality.

This is, not surprisingly perhaps, yet another voyeur/flaneur version of exoticism. Canetti in this small book observes, intrudes, comments, walks, speaks French, gets frequently, guiltily and somewhat embarrassingly excited by all the women he sees... and employs the gestures of a sympathetic, lonely walker who is trying to behave properly in a foreign country. He is sensitive when it comes to animals; when it comes to people, he sympathises with the paralysed, the crippled, the weak in the head. Somehow, through all this poeticised tenderness - and Canetti's writing (if not his life) is markedly tender - the reader may feel the writing is stifled and Marrakesh is presented as the city of the maimed. The vignettes are evocative and beautifully crafted all right, but there is something disquieting in the account.

Even though this book is several decades old, its contents remain true to current Marrakesh. A sharply observed portrait, with each vignette, no matter how short, illuminating an aspect of this fascinatingly diverse and vibrant city and culture. The biggest change between Canetti's time and now, and the only "voice" of current Marrakesh absent from this book, is that of the tourist. But even in today's touristy Marrakesh, none of the voices Canetti describes are hidden or difficult to find. A lovely introduction to a lovely city.

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