

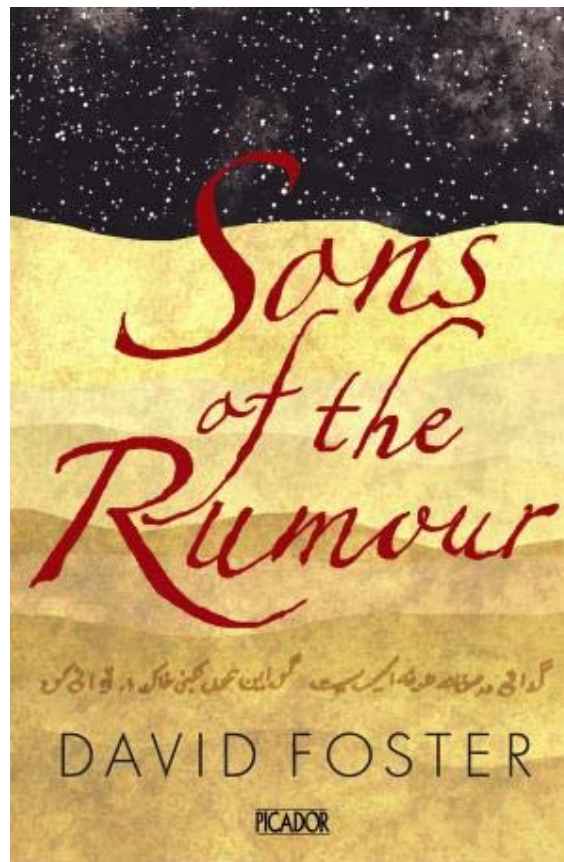
PICADOR

AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

David Foster

SONS OF THE RUMOUR



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

Thematic & Plot Summary

'Little by little, the Shah is slipping back into a bad old habit. He wants a woman with whom to grow old. He wants to find something that will last forever.' (p 121)

Tales from the Arabian Nights is a tantalizing piece of literature which dazzles with its narrative ingenuity, and here David Foster pays his own tribute to the work in an equally dazzling virtuoso performance of storytelling. Just as Shahrazad keeps the Shah in a lustful trance of continuous story weaving, so does Foster beguile his readers with a richly suggestive concoction of traditional and contemporary storytelling. This is a 'remix' of narrative in a postmodern style written for the 21st century. It is also a deeply intellectual investigation of the issues which beset humankind, of the rapprochement between Christianity and Islam, and the effect of this nexus on the politics of today.

The narrative consists of two interwoven stories. One is set in the early ninth century AD (although much of the action takes place in the eighth century) and features the often lascivious King Shahrban of Persia who has been so enraged by his wife's infidelity with a blackamoor, that he has decided to marry and then behead a fresh virgin every day. But then the Shah meets Shahrazad who tells him stories over 1001 nights, and totally entrances him with her beauty. The other story about Al Morrisey is contemporary, and tells of a middle-aged everyman figure who as an Anglo-Irish, former jazz-drummer, is fleeing from a failed marriage to Pastel, the love of his life, and is cursed with guilt-ridden and Freudian daydreams of his mother, and with odd nightmares of all things Persian. His odyssey to Ireland becomes a surreal dream in which he tries to reconcile his past with his present, and a time in which he confronts his mortality. His vision of a Viking Longboat completes the interlude, as does the Shah's penitence in the desert.

Central to the themes in this novel is the conflict between the Islamic and the Western (or Christian) world view. This theme is subtly and often obtusely explored in a work which never preaches nor makes a definitive statement, but instead prefers to tease the reader with overlapping and sometimes conflicting points of view. However, the author's standpoint (explained in his note at the end) is revealed when Al reflects, 'And that is the

entire problem. Modern Western Secular man, Cronulla Man, does not fear God.' (p 359) Later he cements this opinion with another statement: 'Mustapha from PUNCHABOWL envies and fears modern Western debauchery. We fear and envy his Eternity and contempt for Death.'(p 375) Foster challenges the prejudices of those who have no concept of real cultural values and who behave thuggishly towards ethnic minorities, by acknowledging the deep rifts which are exposed when people fail to see the world from someone else's viewpoint.

The role of the spiritual versus the physical in human nature is another theme. 'As men we need to move between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit. This is seldom easy.'(p 48) Al's experience of resurrecting a man who collapses in a street in Dublin, and his later musings on the meaning of the incident (p 365) suggest that the book is as much concerned with Christianity and its belief in resurrection and conflicting fear of death, as it is with the Muslim faith's belief in eternity.

Male/female relationships and attitudes to sexuality are part of this theme as well. The ideas of fidelity or betrayal are viewed through different prisms. 'Monogamy in a monotheistic society is quite dangerous for it tends towards Romantic Love which confuses God with His creature.'(p 58) The Shah is incensed by Shahrazad's former loves but has no compunction in 'doing the deed' with many other women. While Al is aware of his estranged wife Pastel's former sexual adventures (p 332) he refuses to investigate, preferring to think of their love as a fine romance. Of the contemporary view of adultery the comment is made early in the novel that public opinion often shapes our damning view of such actions. But where feminists would have us believe that men must be faithful, men find that difficult to understand: 'No adulterer ever felt in his heart that he was doing wrong' (p 59). Of a boy tried and acquitted with a bond for assaulting Pastel as a girl, Al writes ironically that: 'In the *Arabian Nights* they would have both been put to death.'(p 332)

Despite the Shah's emphasis on sexuality, the idea of romantic love also imbues this narrative: 'I am earth for her treading and dust to her sandals. My vitals are consumed. My love for her is mingled with my flesh and with my blood and has entered into the channels of my bones.'(p 133) The love of the Shah for Shahrazad, which he finds so hard to confront, is like that of Al for Pastel, complicated by the lack of understanding which men and women routinely suffer. It is differentiated, though, by the opposing attitudes of these two men, towards women generally.

Many other social issues are canvassed in this novel including: Catholic priests and sexual misdemeanors (pp 326-7); caring for the elderly and infirm; the ethics of war and torture; the subjugation of the powerless; the modern obsession with celebrity: 'If I've heard of him he's good and if I haven't then he can't be.'(p 301) The novel is a pained lament for all that is not right in a western world which prides itself on its compassion and sense of

social justice: a world which maintains a sense of moral superiority which is often not justified.

The idea that narratives and storytelling make sense of the world is another underlying theme. Each of the tales are parables for life as much as they are pastimes. They evince fundamental truths and are each followed by a kind of homily by the teller who summarises the story's central tenets. But they are also often deeply ironic for this is not a novelist who has any truck with cliché or humbug.

David Foster has written a polemic about racial and cultural difference. But he has also written a meditation on the nature of the human heart. For in the Shah's proclivity towards sexual promiscuity, and his alter ego Al Morrisey's disappointed romanticism, they each reveal that they are really just fools for love. They've each been looking for love in all the wrong places for a very long time. And in the end they show no sign of discovering where it might really lie.

WRITING STYLE

1. The **Structure** of the work begins with a framing story about **Shahrban** entitled 'Iranian Days' in which the Shah and his newest wife Shahrazad are sharing evenings of storytelling. These linked stories are interrupted by a series of tales told by various visitors to the Shah's palace: 'The Fire Lamb' by a Turkmen, who is an escaped Chinese toll-barrier guard (pp 9-15); 'The Mine in the Moon' by a tartar (p 29-36); 'The Tears of the Fish' by Mawdudus, an Aristotlean scholar (pp 47-65); 'The Gilt Felt Yurt' by Marquis Singqu (pp 75-114); 'The Man Who Fell in Love with his Own Feet' by the Sufic Pir (pp 133-158); 'Hashim Wali Abu Muslim' by Shukrat 'a burly man...[who] converted the Oghuz horde' (p 177) (pp 179-203); 'The Tunic of Santa Eulalia' by Vermudo, the Deacon, a Roman Catholic Bishop of Leon (pp 214-230); 'Cartouche Chiseldorf' by one of the gypsy race named Kubera (pp 253-271). But to this structure is added another layer when **Al Morrisey** is introduced in a long chapter set in the contemporary world and entitled 'Forbidden Transitions from Crystalline Kingdoms' (pp 285-384). 'Iranian Days' continues and then there is one more story: 'Blue Melons' by Musa, the Jewish cameleer (pp 392-418) before 'Iranian Days' concludes the narrative. How did these series of alternative voices strike you as a reader? What links between them were obvious to you?

2. The **voice in which this is written is deliberately anachronistic in a postmodern style.** For example, when Mawdudus tells the tale 'The Tears of the Fish' (pp 47-65) he speaks of attending a seminar and people use expressions such as 'give you the drum' (p 57), 'I funkyed it' (p 59), and 'Phwoar, check that out, mate, there on the left. Like a slice o' that?' (p 60) Shahrazad, too, is frequently coarse in expression: 'Cool,' she says. 'Oh mate, the weight of these *tits!*' (p 122) and later she compares herself with the Shah: 'Because you're such a big girl's blouse while I'm a bit acca-dacca.' (p 130) When Vermudo the Deacon describes a fight to his Palatine nobles he says 'we kicked their butt' (p 223). What effect does this style have on the reading of this novel?

3. **Humour is another aspect of the writing.** For example, when Shahrban requests of her supposed 'father' Abu Bakr that Shahrazad resume telling him a story, the father asks which one and Shahrban replies. 'Oh, I don't know. It's bound to feature a Jinni and a palace with a trapdoor.' (p 73) Later, when Bogu and Marquis Singqu are involved in building the city of Karabalghasun they make a series of hilarious blunders including using gates which are too heavy to open or close (p 99) and then decide to build a grand palace yurt on the roof of the enclosure which is made of felt and then coated in gilt (p 104)! Bogu's increasingly eccentric behavior is also humorous (p 113); as is Shahrazad's offhanded revelation to the enraged Shah that she has been a slave storyteller to not only Enneco of Pamplona, king of the Basques (p 127) but also to a string of other royal figures; and her explanation for sleeping with three blackamoors (p 168); the release of the Jinni by the Shah and his wish for a larger member (pp 233-6); the Lava Desert where John the

Baptist and others have resided is described as 'a dangerous place to work on your tan while enduring a forty-day detox' (p 238). Sexual and often black humour in this work is also vigorous and visceral. eg the description of the woman who has been mutilated (pp 24-5) and who is then subject to the Shah's attentions; or the tank full of fish trained to perform a certain purpose (p 55); or the night in Harran where the pilgrims must bed 'the breeders' and Mawdudus vows to perform 'a deed of kind on every woman in the place(p 63) including the ugly Uzza. Is this humour intended to be entertaining or does it mask some troubling, even tragic issues?

4. **Description of landscape and people is richly evocative in this text.** For example, the scene by the Warm Lake Issyk-kul with the many animals gathered to graze on Rascals' grass (p 79); the arrival in Samarkand where they meet the beautiful vendor Anahitaivandak, eat many delicious delicacies (pp 92-3), and then visit the vendor's trader father's warehouse where their senses are assaulted by the range of exotic goods (pp 94-5); or the Shah's description of Shahrazad's many tempting physical attributes (p 125); or of the many delicacies on which the Shah and Shahrazad feast while in bed for days after he spares her from execution (p 175); the flora and fauna in the limestone *tajo* near a beech forest where the hermit Mocholmoc lives(p 217). The author writes in this novel a lyrical tribute to the many fascinating aspects of the region in which it is largely set. What were the descriptions you particularly noted, enjoyed or found intriguing?

5. **Compare this epic novel to other retellings of, or tributes to traditional tales.** eg *The Once and Future King* by TH White or Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* or AS Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* or Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* or Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and other Stories*. What do such re-versions aim to do? What have these or other such works have in common? How do they differ?

THE AUTHOR

David Foster has been described by one critic as a worthy successor to Patrick White. He was born in Katoomba, New South Wales in 1944 and grew up in the Blue Mountains. He studied science at University of Sydney and took a doctorate from Australian National University. He has worked as a research scientist, truck driver, postman and trawler deckhand as well as a writer. The subjects of his many novels range from rock music to ancient mythology. His awards include: 1974: The Age Book of the Year Book of the Year and Imaginative Writing award for *The Pure Land*; 1997: Miles Franklin Award for *The Glade Within the Grove*; 1998: Shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for *The Glade Within the Grove*; 1999: *Courier Mail* Book of the Year for *In the New Country*.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The history described in this novel has led to many of the conflicts being fought today in the Middle East. For example when Moy-yen and his troops drive out an Arab garrison of 20000 men from Samarkand, Marquis Singqu says: 'This was the beginning of the Uighar Empire, the greatest empire in all the world, and no one even noticed.' (p 97) What did you discover about the present day, from reading about this 'legendary' past?
2. 'There'd never been a war, I explained to Moy-yen, in which Turks were not involved but if we'd half a brain we'd realise what it meant that we were always in the front lines.' (p 97) Are Turkic peoples a brave, misunderstood or downtrodden warrior race?
3. 'I mean no one down here knows or cares what happens up on the steppe. You only notice when we turn up on your doorstep in a bad mood. You laugh at our empires.' (p 98) Discuss this statement in relation to today's stalemate between the western powers and countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Iran.
4. In the Author's Note (pp 424-5) David Foster states his inspiration as a 'premise' about Islam and Christianity. Read these two pages carefully and discuss in relation to this novel. 'And we can't defeat someone who has no fear of Death. Deep down we're fucked and we know it - but deep down.' (p 375) Discuss in relation to the so-called 'War on Terror'. You may also wish to read entries such as the *Wikipedia* entries on the Uighar (Uyghur) people, the city of Samarkand, the Turkic peoples, the city of Chang'an (now known as Xian) to offer some background to the novel:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uyghur_people>
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samarkand>>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkic_peoples><<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chang'an>>
5. Read the *Sutra in Forty-Two articles* (pp 108-9). What relationships does it have with the themes explored in this novel?
6. Marquis Singqu expounds with anger on how his formerly nomadic fellow Uighars became 'grass-eaters' (pp 115-18) under the reign of Bogu, in what seems to be an exaggerated piece of rhetoric. But there are actually some wise statements being made here. Discuss.
7. In 'The Man Who Fell in Love with his Own Feet' by the Sufic Pir (pp 133-158) the narrator tells a story which explains the Chinese practice of binding women's feet. What does this story signify with regards to male sexuality? How does this novel present sexuality in general?
8. Shahrazad implores the Shah to 'Understand me and kill me' (p 169) in what is a major turning point in the narrative. Pastel's refusal to stay with Al has also led to his odyssey.

For, as the author has indicated in his note at the end of the book, men's attitude to women (in two different cultures) is at the heart of the narrative. How does it convey differences between Turkic and western representations of women? Discuss.

9. The Shah explains why he murders his wives (pp 177-8). Apart from the scale and nature of his reactions, is the Shah's response so very different to how any man reacts when he learns that he has been betrayed?

10. This novel deals with or refers to many social and personal issues including male/female relationships. Al comments on women leaving husbands because 'The kind of man they needed to become financially independent has become a trial to them' (p 291) and cites Gayle Rivkin, Annita Keating, and his own wife Pastel as evidence. Is this a sexist view? Discuss one of the following quotes: 'Great female beauties cause collateral damage in their young.' (p 293); 'Modern marriage, in the absence of utter poverty, has a thirty to 35-year span, max.' (p 299); 'You have tried to explain to Pastel how women *cannot* demand sanctity and sex from the same individual man' (p 299); 'there is, to a modern woman, one moral tenet only: a guy must *never* cheat.' (p 299); 'It is absence makes the sperm grow meaner.' (p 333)

11. The Pir's explanation of circumcision (pp 159-161) is physically graphic and yet spiritual in dimension. Discuss.

12. Each of these stories may be seen as parables for life. eg 'A civilisation chokes on salt' (p 211); 'the jinni being out the bottle the wish cannot be undone.' (p 242) Choose a story and discuss its meaning, for example, what does Vermudo learn from his long imprisonment and supposed discovery of the tunic of Santa Eulalia?

13. This novel is also a satire of contemporary politics and society. eg When Abu Bakr tells the Shah that he has arranged for him to speak at a conference on 'Silk Road: Implications for Future Ummayad Policy Directions' he asks his advisor 'What, is there a road somewhere made of silk?' (p 250) (George Bush would have been proud of such a riposte!) What other satirical lines did you notice in the novel?

14. What does the title 'Sons of the Rumour' mean?

15. Al's mother's dementia is a universal subject of concern. 'Carers of the frail mentally ill have the lowest Australian Unity Wellbeing Index of any marginalized group.' (p 319) Discuss society's response to this issue.

16. The author attributes his inspiration to the Cronulla Riots, an event at which he was present. Al's comments about the dead in Bali and the attitudes expressed by those

involved there and in the Cronulla Riots inform this novel's themes (pp 334-5). Read more about the Riots and discuss them in relation to this novel.

17. This is a provocative novel in which racial attitudes are tested. Al's reflections on black relationships (pp 310-1) and his description of himself as a 'blackajew' (p 311) is one example. What is the author attempting to convey to a reader in this section of the novel? How might various racial groups react to this sort of honesty? Discuss.

18. Al's views of JK Rowling's talents (p 313) suggest that the author, too, is frustrated by contemporary literary tastes. 'All she does is turn literary lead into fool's gold, the currency of late capitalism.' (p 314) Discuss this opinion. What challenges does a highly literary writer like Foster confront in such an environment?

19. Two black and white pen drawings or etching adorn pages 284 and 384. Both depict the beauty and the beast. What do they symbolize in relation to this novel?

20. 'Nature always goes too far' is quoted at the beginning and on p 178. What does it mean? The novel opens with several quotes about 'nature'. Have we in the contemporary world strayed from understanding that all peoples everywhere share a fundamental nature? Is the conflict between different cultures, politics, and religions leading us astray? What does the concept of 'nature' represent in this novel?

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David Foster
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