

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

One Way by Mohammed Sumili

A. L. Diaz · Wednesday, October 9th, 2019

Mohammed Sumili's *One Way* is a collection of short stories about a group of individuals who all seem to be connected, whether by friendship or friend of friends. The protagonists of each story each experience some disruption of daily life, as one would expect of any story. The only difference, however, is that the main characters are all Saudi-born. But this additional note is almost irrelevant to the stories, save for two of them. The novel's title story "One Way" tells of two brothers who witness a fatal car accident while "Murderous Bastard" follows a vengeful pet-owner's quest to find the cat who murdered his own feline's kitten. "Dance with Me" introduces Ali, who is fascinated by his Anglo friend Kate. While "Dance with Me" touches base on Ali's Saudi customs, "Suspect" and "The Matchmaker" focus more on the topic of ethnicity and customs. In "Suspect," a police officer questions the protagonist regarding a bombing, despite the protagonist's lack of knowledge of the event. "The Matchmaker" interweaves Saudi traditions with the Western practice of "ghosting" in a devastating way. The variety of narrations gave a refreshing take on Saudis, and Muslims in general, as protagonists. Unlike the way popular media insists on portraying Middle Easterns as either terrorists or the quirky neighbor with the funny accent, *One Way* places them in real life.

The book opens with "Suspect," where the narrator is questioned about a bombing that had happened prior to the story's opening scene. The fact that he is Saudi is the only reason the police question him, as the protagonist knows nothing about it. This profiling sets up the tone for the rest of the book. In each of the stories, the main characters are the most normal human beings one could expect. They eat lunch with friends, go to clubs, drive cars, have pets, catfish people online for fun, normal things done the way almost every human does them. In the opening of "Dance with Me," the narrator makes a sarcastic note about a woman reading on a train: "I sat beside a chubby girl who was reading a book about losing weight. There was a pack of doughnuts and a can of soft drink. It seemed that she was sticking to every point mentioned in the book" (7). Even the Ramboesque nature of "Murderous Bastard" creates a mixture of anger, sadness, and a humorous relatability when the narrator seeks retribution for his precious feline. Any person who has ever labeled their quadrupedal companion as their "fur baby" will understand the rage the narrator has and his need for revenge when a random stray cat comes into his yard and attacks his own fur child's baby. The characters' ethnicity play almost no real significant part in most of the stories, making the emphasis more about their humanity. In fact, if it were not for the occasional mentions of *thobs* or names like Rakan, one's Euro-centric default might activate. The only story that did have a significant cultural presence was "The Matchmaker." Western culture has a plethora of labels for those who seduce people with the intention of sex and then ignoring them once they accomplish their goal. Phrases like "ghosting" and "hit it and quit it" spark thoughts of possible

sitcom revenge hijinks. But in a culture where a woman's virginal status is not only expected but the difference between life and death, those kinds of manipulation become much more severe. Ideas of vengeance on the individual in "The Matchmaker" become less *Mean Girls* and more *Gone Girl*.



While the stories varied in terms of vivid descriptions, this did not come off as a bad thing as it let the characters and the situations speak for themselves. Internal narration followed organic trains of thoughts that laypersons would have if describing events playing out for them. The narrator in "Dance with Me" provided some of the least description, but he also seemed uneasy being in a club, thus hinting at an awkward person in general. "One Way" has a skillful balance of vivid descriptions at certain points without becoming too morbidly graphic in other areas.

The car was like a piece of paper that had been ferociously folded by an anxious writer. A hand dangled out of a narrow space in the flattened car. The body of an injured youth was stretched out on the ground. The crash had forced him out of the vehicle. He was covered in blood, his *thob* pulled up, exposing his wounded legs. I reached him and he stared at me, speechless. He needed help, yet helpless I stood (24).

In the way traumatic events make moments more vivid and others a blur, Sumili executes this well in this story, as well as the rest of his pieces.

Mohammed Sumili's *One Way* paints simple tales of simple people whose ethnicities differ from ours. A satisfying change to what society has deemed "standard," these stories bring a standard of what minorities in literature should look like. Nothing too rich, but not ignored. It simply is.

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