



Cities of Salt

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CITIES OF SALT is apparently set in Saudi Arabia before the 1950's. Although time and place are not specified, historic landmarks lead the reader to believe that Saudi Arabia is the locale and that the action commences sometime around 1930 and ends in the early 1950's. This novel is the first volume of a trilogy; the proposed remaining volumes will bring the story closer to the 1980's. An oasis, Wadi al-Uyoun, is the central location of CITIES OF SALT. It is inhabited by a Bedouin population that has had no contact with the outside world; when oil is discovered, the Bedouin culture comes into conflict with the American engineers who come to search for oil. These intruders are thought to be devils by the Bedouins.

Munif describes in an episodic manner how the old world and its old ways are trampled by the technology of these "devils." The Bedouin world cannot hold up under the strain: Their religious practices and cultural customs run counter to the new world that is closing in around them. Munif moves the story along by presenting snapshots of the transformation, not by providing psychological portraits of individual characters. Patriarch Miteb al-Hathal rides off and never returns because his pleas in support of the Bedouin point of view fall on deaf ears. By the novel's end, though, when Bedouin protest turns violent, he seems to have returned in spirit. It is believed that an explosion at the oil fields is really caused by Miteb al-Hathal come back to take revenge for what has been done to his land and his people.

CITIES OF SALT is Munif's seventh novel, and it has caused a furor throughout the Arab world. It has been sensitively translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux. This is not only a marvelous novel for its panoramic scope, but also an important one for its powerful political statement.

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