

SECRET SON



A Conversation with the Author

Questions for Discussion



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Your first book-length work in English was a collection of short stories. Can you contrast the experience of writing a full-length novel to that of writing shorter works? What challenges and rewards are offered by each form?

Before the publication of *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, I had already written a couple of novels, which have, fortunately for readers, remained unpublished. So *Secret Son* was really just a return to a form I had known and loved for most of my life. For me, writing a short story is a bit like getting to know a significant part of a character's life, while the novel is like living that character's life for a few years. A short story is very intense, like a brief but powerful commitment. A novel is more moderate, but also a very rewarding undertaking.

As far as the writing process is concerned, what struck me with this novel was that the revision process was very different. For instance, with *Hope*, I was able to pull out one story and revise it, or even replace it with a new one, without having this affect the shape of the entire book. But with *Secret Son*, any changes to one chapter inevitably meant changes somewhere else in the novel, so the revision process was much more labor-intensive.

Can you comment a little about your decision to write in English rather than in one of your native languages? Why did you make this choice? What challenges are involved?

I grew up speaking both Moroccan Arabic and French, but my earliest exposure to books came through French because I received, to my long-lasting despair, a semicolonial education. Nearly all of the children's literature that I was exposed to as a child was in French, so when I started writing fiction, it was in that language. While I could read and write Arabic competently enough, I found it very hard to write fictional narrative in Arabic. I should say that my use of French in fiction isn't at all that unusual for a Moroccan writer of my generation (witness, for instance, the work of Fouad Laroui, Abdellah Taïa, or Driss Ksikes).

However, once I left Morocco to study abroad, I started to question the bilingualism with which I had grown up. In my country, French and Arabic did not always have a harmonious relationship; rather, they were often in competition in the public sphere. I started to feel really uncomfortable with the idea of writing fiction using the colonial tongue. At the same time, I had been working on my dissertation at the University of Southern California, and I had to write in English every day. That was how the idea of writing fiction in English came about. Ideally, I would have written in my native language, but since I could not, it seemed that English was my only other option. And between writing in English and not writing at all, I made the choice of writing.

Writing in English about Moroccan characters comes with certain challenges. For instance, I tend to excise idiomatic ex-

pressions (common phrases like “she went to bat on this project” or “he kicked the bucket”) from my writing because they are so culturally specific. I include words from Moroccan Arabic that are hard to translate in simple ways. For example, it is easier to use the word *tagine* than to say something like “a stew of meat and vegetables cooked in a clay pot.”

What do you hope English-speaking audiences will take away from your novel?

As a novelist, I try to tell the most engaging, the most complex, and the most truthful story I can. So my hope is that audiences are engaged and immersed in the story, and that they see a truth, however small it may seem, about the human heart.

Many American readers are unfamiliar with African literature, either in translation or written in English. What other African novelists or short story writers would you recommend?

The work of J. M. Coetzee always hits me with the full force of revelation. Readers who have not had the pleasure of reading him yet might begin with *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K.*, and *Disgrace*. I would also recommend *Distant View of a Minaret* by Alifa Rifaat; *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih; *For Bread Alone* by Mohamed Choukri; *Year of the Elephant* by Leila Abouzeid; *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe; *In the Eye of the Sun* by Ahdaf Soueif; *This Blinding Absence of Light* by Tahar Ben Jelloun; *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o; *Desertion* by Abdulrazak

Gurnah; *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* by Assia Djebar; *The Radiance of the King* by Camara Laye; and *Palace Walk, Palace of Desire*, and *Sugar Street* by Naguib Mahfouz.

***Secret Son* makes references to Moroccan social, political, and historical contexts with which most Americans might be unfamiliar. What resources would you recommend for your American readers who want to understand contemporary Morocco?**

I think one might begin by reading Morocco's poets, short story writers, and novelists, though unfortunately many of them are not translated in English. However, readers might be able to find translations of Driss Chraïbi, Leila Abouzeid, Abdellatif Laâbi, Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Mohamed Berrada, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Mohamed Choukri, and Bensalem Himmich. I would also suggest reading the work of the feminist and sociologist Fatima Mernissi, the historian Abdallah Laroui, and the anthropologist Abdallah Hammoudi.

You've lived in the United States for the past several years and also spent time in London. One of your characters, Amal, experiences great conflicts about the choice between living in the United States and returning to Morocco. How has this choice played out in your own life? Where do you consider "home"?

For the first twenty years of my life, I lived in the same house, had the same circle of friends, and visited the same places. But afterward, things changed somewhat drastically; I went to col-

lege in London and in California, I traveled a lot because of my work, and I moved nine times in the last fifteen years. I think we now live in a world where such a life is wholly unremarkable, but you're right, it does raise the question of what one might consider home. It isn't something that I have fully resolved yet, but I hope that my life is in some way like the Qur'anic parable of the good word—a tree firmly rooted but with its branches in the sky.

Your blog (lailalalami.com/blog) provides interesting commentary on reading, writing, and political issues. How does blogging inform or complement your other writing? What do you hope readers gain from your blog?

I started blogging mostly because I wanted to have a space in which to record my thoughts about literature, culture, and politics. The ongoing, online conversation about books and literature helped introduce me to books I would not normally have come across on my own. So I would say that blogging has certainly informed my reading. I hope readers have that same experience—that they find books or articles that intrigue and interest them.

Given the outcome of Youssef's story and the bleak outlook you paint for other young characters, particularly men, of his class, what kind of future do you see for your native country? Do you propose any solutions that could help derail the seemingly inevitable march toward violence and terrorism?

I am merely a writer, not a prophet. The future of Morocco is dependent on so many factors—geopolitical, economic, social,

educational—that it would be hard, if not impossible, to predict. Despite the bleak outlook in the novel, I try to be optimistic about the future because, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

Your first collection was entitled *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. Is it foolhardy for characters like Youssef to hope for or dream of a different reality?

I wanted the title of that first book to capture the courage and willpower it takes to want to start a new life somewhere else, as well as the desperation and danger that underlie such a decision. Although they come from different cities in Morocco and although they are leaving the country for different reasons, my characters all share the dream of a better tomorrow. What intrigued me was the idea that they were risking their very lives for the sake of a better life. This is such a huge gamble. Of course it is not foolhardy to hope. Hope is what drives us everyday, but hope occasionally needs to be restrained by common sense.

Issues of journalistic integrity, investigation, and truth are central to your novel. As someone who has written a number of opinion pieces and essays for a variety of media, how would you characterize the state of journalistic inquiry today in Morocco and in the United States?

One of my main concerns in *Secret Son* was the idea of truth, and how hard it is to get at it because of a variety of limitations: how facts are reported to us; how and when we perceive them; how our individual life experiences shape the way we interpret the facts;

and how the facts themselves don't necessarily add up to the truth. I think journalists, both in Morocco and in the United States, are a very diverse bunch. There are some good journalists and there are some bad ones. Some are dedicated to verifying facts and some are quite content with repeating whatever the government is telling them. It's really impossible to generalize and compare all of the professionals in both countries.

You teach at the University of California, Riverside. How would you compare the young Americans you teach with Moroccan college students like Youssef? How do your students understand world events, particularly terrorism and extremism?

I would say that the students are very similar in their concerns: they are all worried about getting a good education, finding a job after graduation, enjoying their youth, etc. But of course there are vast differences in the way in which they interpret the world around them. If you ask them to read the same story or watch the same movie—*Invisible Man*, for instance, or *Lawrence of Arabia*—they might interpret the book or movie quite differently. This is because they have different agendas: they have been exposed to different literatures, different movies, different languages, different political realities. And they bring these different experiences to bear on their interpretations.

What are you working on now? What themes would you like to explore in forthcoming works?

I am working on a novel about a young professor—and that is all I can say about it right now.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What, if anything, did you know or believe about Morocco before reading *Secret Son*? How did reading this novel confirm or change any of your preexisting beliefs?
2. How would you characterize the city of Casablanca—its culture, its society, its people—based on specifics from the novel? How does the author paint a portrait of the city using sensory details?
3. At one point in the novel (page 179), Amal and her mother see a Delacroix painting of Moroccan musicians. To Amal, the painting “looked nothing like [her] memories of home, and yet it made her miss it.” How does this contradiction between image and reality relate to Amal’s larger conflicts about, and longing for, home, family, and country?
4. In many ways, language in Morocco signifies class and social structure. Can you point to places where the use of different languages signifies social class? How is language used to include or exclude individuals or groups?
5. What is the significance of the opening epigraph by Gustavo Pérez Firmat? What does this say about the author’s own

decision to write the novel in English rather than in her native Arabic or French? About Youssef's decision to study English literature in college?

6. One of the novels that Youssef studies is *The Great Gatsby*, a classic American novel about, in part, class hierarchy and the so-called American dream. If you are familiar with Fitzgerald's novel, what parallels do you see between Youssef's story and *Gatsby's*? What happens when the "dreams" that Youssef references (pages 31 and 90) are unattainable?

7. Youssef is fascinated by motion pictures and secretly longs to be a film actor. The theme of acting, of playing a part, runs throughout the novel. What roles are played by Youssef? By his mother? By Nabil Amrani? By Amal? Are any characters genuinely themselves, or are they all playing roles?

8. Youssef realizes (page 139) that "he was his father's creature, waiting to be trained before it could be shown to the world." Why does Youssef pursue a relationship with Nabil in the first place? What factors motivate Nabil to accept Youssef as his son? What do both men hope to achieve from the relationship? How does the relationship evolve over time?

9. Compare Youssef's relationship with his father, Nabil Amrani, to the relationship he shares with his mother, Rachida Ouchak. How does Youssef's behavior, demeanor, and impression of himself change in the context of each relationship?

10. At a couple of key points in the novel, the author retells the same scene (Youssef and Nabil's first encounter, Amal's visit to Rachida) from different points of view. How do these different perspectives shape your understanding of situations and characters? What new information do you learn from each point of view?

11. Over the course of the novel, Youssef and his friends, Amin and Maati, are drawn into the Islamist organization known simply as "the Party." What techniques do Hatim and the other Party members use to gradually draw in these young men? What circumstances in Moroccan society work to the advantage of the Party? At what point did you begin to suspect that the Party might have sinister motives? Are there any other realistic opportunities available to young men of Youssef's class beyond organizations like the Party?

12. Near the end of the novel, Youssef learns new information about his family history on his mother's side. He realizes (page 282) that through the bloodlines of his mother's and father's families, he holds within him all of the richness and contradictions of the Moroccan people. In what ways does Youssef's character and his story represent the larger challenges and struggles facing his country? Is Youssef's story merely an allegory of an entire people, or does it also provide insights into a specific individual's circumstances?



SARA CORWIN

Laila Lalami was born and raised in Morocco. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Nation*, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of a Fulbright fellowship and was shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2006. Her debut collection, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, was published in 2005. She lives in Los Angeles. Her Web site is lailalalami.com.

