



INTERVIEW WITH

Laila Lalami

Introduction by *Cassandra Christopher*

In an interview with National Public Radio, **Laila Lalami** mentioned that she believed the “closest we come to truth is in the form of fiction.”

Truth: the supernatural powers that be do not spare anyone based on race or religion. In shared adversity we all become equal.

Truth: humans are complex creatures, equally capable of cruelty, kindness, and unimaginable darkness in desperation. No one is purely hero or villain.

Truth: Mustafa, the titular character of Laila Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* tells us what he knows as fact, but we must infer our own truth, so that each reader discovers his or her own connections to the story.

Personally, I understand Mustafa’s strong familial connections and his willingness to do anything for the people he loves. I understand his Portuguese master’s affection for his horse that runs much deeper than that for an animal merely used for transportation. And I feel Mustafa’s pain as a slave when he realizes that he never thought about the people he once sold until he joined their ranks. As I read *The Moor’s Account* as well as some of Lalami’s other essays and short stories, I realized the truth I was finding in all of her work was that an author needs to understand the complexities of people: the different struggles we face across the world, the love we can feel for so many people, and the blackest parts of our soul that we like to pretend do not exist. I am no longer in awe that *The Moor’s Account* won the American Book Award, but rather aghast that Laila Lalami did not win the Pulitzer for which the same novel was named a finalist. Only in the hands of a skilled storyteller can we as readers be suckerpunched by a revelation that touches our souls, and only in the hands of a skilled storyteller can these truths so deftly be presented, as Mustafa says, “in the guise of entertainment.” In other words, only in the hands of someone like Laila Lalami.

Cassandra Christopher: *So, religion is an absolutely huge factor in the book and it just kind of changes over the course of the book with Mustafa being very devout at the beginning and then at the end he can't believe that the Spaniards would think that there was one god for every person on the earth. I wanted to know if your own religious beliefs played into that or if writing this at all changed your religious beliefs.*

Laila Lalami: I knew because of the time and the place that he had, that religion was going to play an important role in his life. In the beginning of the book he is more religious but he's never, he's not the most literal-minded person in terms of religion. As he falls into bondage and he comes to America and he sees that there are all these alternate modes of thinking about the world, I think makes his views of religion more complex. And it seemed like a very natural growth for anybody who has gone through those experiences. So that was something I was interested in exploring in a 16th century way even though that's something we see a lot in the 21st century. Whether that actually connects with my own views of religion, I don't think so. Well, I guess it could in a way. When I was younger I was sort of a more religious person in a more traditional way, but now, obviously things are different for me. I'm older, I'm wiser hopefully, I've lived in many different places and different cultures. So I would say yes, I guess it does mirror it in a way. It's funny because the reason I'm pausing is that somebody tweeted me the other day that there's a list of the five hundred most influential Muslims in the world and apparently I'm on it, and so when they told me that I said "I'll raise a glass to that." Not a very good Muslim, but I do identify as Muslim. And I think part of the reason that I do identify this way is because I am interested in models of social justice and that is something that is central to Islam.

CC: *I also wanted to ask, you talked about that you learned*

about the expedition, you learned about Esteban, and that kind of sparked your curiosity on him. Is that a normal beginning for your writing process, like a spark of curiosity?

LL: Yeah. The inspiration can come from anything, but I guess what distinguishes just an idea that lasts a couple days versus something that you're going to devote several years of your life to is it has to speak to you, it has to resonate in some deeper way. It's kind of like when you meet someone and you have to decide whether this is an affair or a marriage. Because, in marriage you have to find stuff to talk about all the time and if the conversation continues for a while you're like, oh this is a marriage. But if you run out of things to say after a couple of days that was just an affair. And it's kind of the same way, deciding whether it's a book or not. Does the interest last? And once I start dreaming about it, then I know I'm onto something.

CC: *Do you mean daydreaming or sleep dreaming?*

LL: No, I mean both. Like I daydream about stuff but I find that at night if my thoughts have drifted to whatever the topic was, then I know it's deeper than that. You know, in a way writing a novel is almost like having this dream that you can return to at any moment. And because that interest lasts I know that this is a book project, this is something I want to be thinking about.

CC: *You mentioned something at the reading that made me rather curious because I didn't pick up on it when I read the book. You mentioned a gay love story, and I started thinking about it.*

LL: Diego Dorantes and the friar.

CC: *Ooh. The friar I picked up on a little bit.*

LL: Yeah. So in the book I wanted it to be subtle, that they're just friends, and you know Dorantes kind of rejects his younger brother. So the younger brother doesn't really have any friends, the only friend he has is the friar. So in the book if you go back and look you'll see that they're often alone and there is a scene that kind of hints that there is something between them. Dorantes kind of teases Diego about women and in that teasing you can tell that he senses there is something going on with his brother, but it's never addressed directly. And that was the only way I could do it. This is the 16th century so I was trying to kind of hint at it. Again I was trying to look for opportunities to make the story as different from the myth of exploration as I could make it.

CC: *Okay. You have studied in three different countries now, and now you teach in California. Has your education experience in any way informed your writing style, has any one of them informed it more than others?*

LL: Your writing is in a sense a sum of all your experiences. Everything that you've experienced goes into it. But I think where the education played a role is that when I was an undergraduate student in Morocco, that was where I first started reading English and American literature not in translation but actually in English. I had always loved literature and I had always written but then I kind of fell in love with it. I started reading it a lot and then later I studied linguistics and that made me more sensitive to language in all of its complexities. I don't just mean things like syntax, but more than that, how language is used within society. And I think maybe that actually has played a role in my writing. I noticed that in my book language is used as a tool of, for lack of a better word, power. It can be used to bring people into or exclude them from groups. I'm also interested in these situations where there's more than one language

being used in communication. So that was true for all of the expeditions, particularly true for this one because the members of the expedition used Spanish to communicate with one another but that wasn't the only language that was being used on the expedition. Portuguese was being used, of course Esteban's thoughts are in his own native language and there are indigenous languages all around them. And that complexity and all of the potential for misinterpretation I find to be realistic.

CC: You use the truth a lot in your work, which is something I definitely picked up on for the introduction, but do you have a definition that you kind of base the use of it on, or is it just you know something to be true?

LL: You know, I think the truth is very slippery. I like to say you can take the same set of facts and you can shape them into completely different stories, and to me the truth is really on the side of the stories. A fact is something that is independently verifiable, it's something that we know happened. So in 1527 six hundred people departed from Seville, and that was something that was witnessed by a number of people, it's documented. But then truth, the story of what really happened once they got there, we have only one person for it. It's a little grayer there. Another example might be people still today are debating the Iraq war. Why was it waged--was it waged because there were weapons of mass destruction, because they needed to have regime change, was it waged for any number of reasons. But of course the facts are known to all of us, we know exactly what happened. We know when decisions were made, we know when the US invaded, we know all of this stuff that's beyond debate. But when you try to ascertain what really happened that's when you get into very different interpretations and different truths, so to speak. So I think that it's slippery. I think that's what makes fiction interesting because fiction is

interested in that gray area. That's where fiction can give us the most. It can make us aware of all the ways the facts can be interpreted.

CC: *Did you ever consider any alternate endings for the book?*

LL: Estebanico is mentioned in the chronicle of Cabeza de Vaca, but he's also mentioned in another relation, a very short relation, written by a friar named Marcos de Niza who had been sent by the viceroy to be the advance party for Coronado and look for the Seven Cities of Gold, except that Estebanico separated himself from the friar. So the friar had to write and say what happened, and he said that he had seen the Seven Cities of Gold and of course there were no Seven Cities of Gold, so it's very fun, but because we know that the friar lied in that relation what he says about Esebanico I also take with a grain of salt. So he said that he had last seen him when he was going forward, and that Estebanico had been killed because he had made some demands. And when I looked at that I thought, come on man, how do I know that he died, and plus I don't want him to die. So it was again, that was a plausible ending so I went with that. I thought that that would be a more interesting way to end the story.

CC: *So essentially the ending was the alternate ending.*

LL: Yeah.

CC: *When I first read Ruiz talking about his cannibalism, I had to stop. I had to put the book down, I had to stop reading. My roommate was asking if I was okay, and I said, "You don't understand; the character just ate someone else." Was that the most shocking thing that you learned?*

LL: When I was reading the book, because Cabeza de Vaca

does not talk about the torture of the Indians, but does mention cannibalism among the Spaniards, that was really quite shocking to me when I read it. In Cabeza de Vaca's narrative, it's described in maybe a paragraph. And he is actually very ironic, he says, "And he came back because he had nobody else left to eat." Something like that. It was really, kind of like sarcasm. But anyways, in the scene I wanted it to be in dialogue so that it slowly dawns on you what just happened. But again, I must say these things like cannibalism happen more often than people think, whenever people go somewhere they're not supposed to go or somewhere uncharted and they meet with a lot of resistance whether from the natural elements or from the indigenous people.

I think what was interesting to me about it was that in the 16th century, when the Spaniards invaded and took over Mexico, they found that the Aztecs actually would sacrifice bodies to their gods and feed parts of the bodies to animals. And they were utterly revolted by the behavior of the Aztecs, so there were all these images of the natives as being the savages. There were actual discussions about whether or not they were human, whether they had souls, rather. And so to me, narratively, yes the cannibalism was revolting, but what made it kind of interesting in the story was that everything that they feared out of indigenous people, they actually became themselves.

CC: You said at the reading that you set up the book especially like an arabic travel narrative from the time period. Was it just the time period that had you form it that way, or did something about the form of calling the chapters, "The Story of..." make you choose that?

LL: It was a combination of things. I felt like, when he's writing, he is in a sense writing about something he knows no other person in his town or perhaps his region or his

country, no other person has seen before. So he is in that sense performing the role of the travel writer, going into a new place and writing about it, so travel narrative made a lot of sense. And also, one of the influences is that there is a great Moroccan traveler named Ibn Battuta who was born in Tangier and who traveled huge spots of the world and came back as an old man and wrote about it. I thought, interesting: maybe I could do something like that. In terms of calling them stories, that's where *One Thousand and One Nights* pops up. Because I thought, if I say chapter, it's such a modern way of dividing a book. Because the book is about storytelling, about truth, and because of the influence of *One Thousand and One Nights*, I thought it would make sense to use stories as sections. And then the beautiful thing about calling them stories is I could actually play with the timeline so that it didn't have to be straight-up chronological. It could move back and forth more easily.