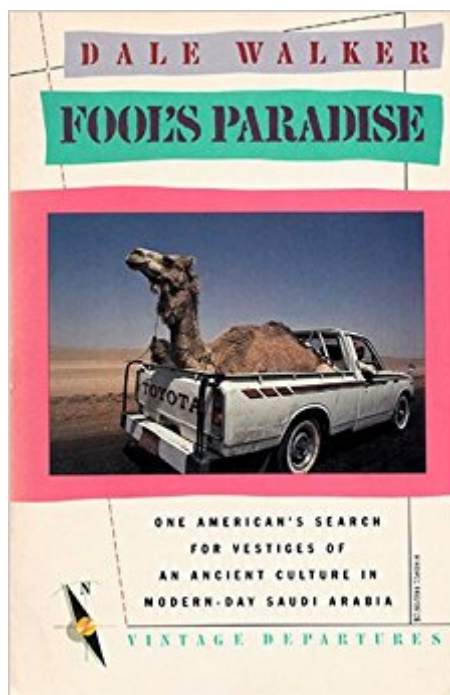


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Fool's Paradise



Synopsis

In this account of travel in one of the remotest corners of northern Saudi Arabia the author attempts to explain some of the complexities of the country which the Romans named "Arabia Felix" - "happy Arabia". He used public transport on his travels which allowed access to remote regions. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Bleedin' shame nobody has bothered to review this book (as of my writing); it's one of the best books about Saudi Arabia (and Bedouin culture) I've ever read, though it is light reading. Vintage marketed this book (now out of print, it seems) as "international travel," which seems to me a pretty dubious classification when you read what I say below, although since the guy spends most of his time wandering around a foreign country I guess I understand their reasons. But it's really a kooky adventure story . . . The plot is as follows: Walker (an on-again, off-again ESL teacher in Saudi Arabia during the boom years of the 70s and 80s), has heard many times from his students about the custom of "sexual hospitality" as practiced in some regions of Saudi Arabia, such as in the Asir (just north of Yemen). The idea of such a custom is that travelers (even "kuffar," non-believers) who are visiting into certain villages are put up in a house for three days and nights, no questions asked. Perks supposedly include bed, breakfast, and THE SERVICES OF A FEMALE. Anthropologists (and many Arabists) swear the custom was not a myth -- up until about the 1960s, when television helped to unify the country's mores, bringing them more in line with those of Riyadh. Naturally such a free-love custom is directly contrary to Wahhabi Islam, of course. Anyhow, Walker, the narrator, has been hearing about this custom for years. His students from the Asir (privately) swear to him it's not

a myth, and students from other areas of the Kingdom angrily deny that such a custom ever (or could currently) exist. Well, on his last tour in KSA, Walker resolves to make an odyssey from Jedda down to the Asir, ostensibly to visit a former student but really to see if he can work himself into a situation where he is a recipient of this fabled "sexual hospitality." In other words, he spends the book basically trying to get a free ride on a Saudi chick. Well, I won't tell you how it ends, but that plot line is what Walker uses to hang his observations about the Kingdom, about Arabs, Muslims, Saudis, and the rapid modernization of their world -- and what it is like for a Westerner to live and travel there. Most of the books about Saudi Arabia are either about how the Kingdom supports terror, about the coming revolution, about the oil wealth, etc. Not this one. It's witty, amusing, and incredibly well-written. What Walker was doing spending his time as an ESL teacher is beyond me. It's neither overly-sympathetic to the Saudis, nor uselessly over-critical. In fine, a balanced, insightful, and deftly-written book.

Published in U.S. and England. Shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Already four good reviews on .

Don't want to visit KSA because of a lifetime of hassles with the TSA? No worries - Dale Walker has taken that risk for you. I picked up this book on a whim - one dollar at a library sale. It turns out to be a very readable, informative and thought-provoking book - a real pleasure. I was surprised to see this listed as the author's first book (in his forties?). The writing is completely fluid, far more than some best-sellers that leap to mind. This book certainly deserves to be much more widely known, especially given the relevance Saudi Arabia has to our daily lives.

Fool's Paradise is one of those jewels of literature that can give readers such a sense of another land, a strange and wild land, that they -- the readers -- are almost able to feel it. The heat, the air, the barren, the depth, the rough road and the modern interfaces to it -- you will feel all of it, pleasantly and sometimes wonderfully, but never in a way that betrays the wary feeling we have about the regime. I stumbled onto the book through the generosity of an English literature professor who evidently knows (or knew) the author well -- and could speak of the book and its writer at length.

Great

Suddenly, what seemed a secretive, even a sinister, alien civilization became comprehensible and human." (p 174) What a wonderful maxim Mr. Walker used, which aptly describes his entire book. As the only other reviewer, "Freston," of this gem of a book said: Most of the books about Saudi Arabia are either about how the Kingdom supports terror, about the coming revolution, about the oil wealth, etc."... in other words, so many books that theorize, and depict the "other" in negative terms, often by individuals who have never been to the Kingdom. Much that is written is also sheer fantasy, masquerading as insight. But this book has the authentic ring from one who places his own culture's faults on an equal footing with those of others. There is a tongue-in-cheek quest that ties together Mr. Walker's tale, his journey across the Kingdom from West to East in the early '80's: a search for the custom of Arabia which predates Islam, from what is considered the Jahaliya, "the time of darkness," when a widow was given to a male guest for three nights. Was there still a place so remote, so high and wild in the Asir, where this might still be possible? In this pursuit, as the guest of one of his ESL student's, to attend his wedding, he did things that probably only 10 other Western expats had ever done - such as ride in a crowded Toyota land cruiser, with the Sudanese and Egyptians, on a long journey from Jeddah high into the Asir. With the exotic backdrop of his tour, and the cast of characters that he meets along the way, including old Saudi acquaintances, Walker makes numerous original philosophical observations on the respective cultures. He savagely and very wittedly skewers the foibles of Saudi society, which certainly would ban the book for sale in the Kingdom. But his strength is that he invariably compares their faults with the West's own, and sums up his agnostic position: "Don't get me wrong. I do not consider Islam any more a threat to mankind than Christianity or Judaism; in my view, no religion has the edge, in either absurdity or potential for mischief, over any other." (p 190) Another comparison is the relative merits of "repression," as espoused by Freud, and the sickness it brings on in society: "In Arabia the Repressed an unbalanced person is a sight so rare as to be shocking, whereas in permissive New York you are afraid to meet the eyes of half the people on the street for fear of encountering unrepressed madness." (p 196) In drawing his honest portrait, he aptly indicates the central reason why much of the West has a negative image of the country: "... just as it takes no Goebbels to appreciate the value of a propaganda so effective the before I ever laid eyes on an Arab, I despised them. It helps, when you take someone's land, to picture the owner as undeserving of it anyway." (p 135) (the American Indian would fully appreciate this sentiment) As a weakness, I think of the authors of yore who visited Arabia, Walker placed too heavy a reliance on Charles M. Doughty, a crotchety traveler from whom Walker extracted the book's title. Walker repeatedly quotes him, yielding limited insights, burnished slightly only due to their age. Towards the end of the book, his "quest" still unfulfilled, he is

rather provocatively challenged by a woman who says: "You weren't looking in the right place." Likewise, if the slew of Saudi-bashing books has left you unfulfilled in your search for the real Kingdom, perhaps this is the right place to start. Surely a country that is spending three trillion dollars on the so-called war on terror can afford a few dollars to have this book re-issued, for the rich insights it renders of those who "live on the other side of the river," as well as ourselves.

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