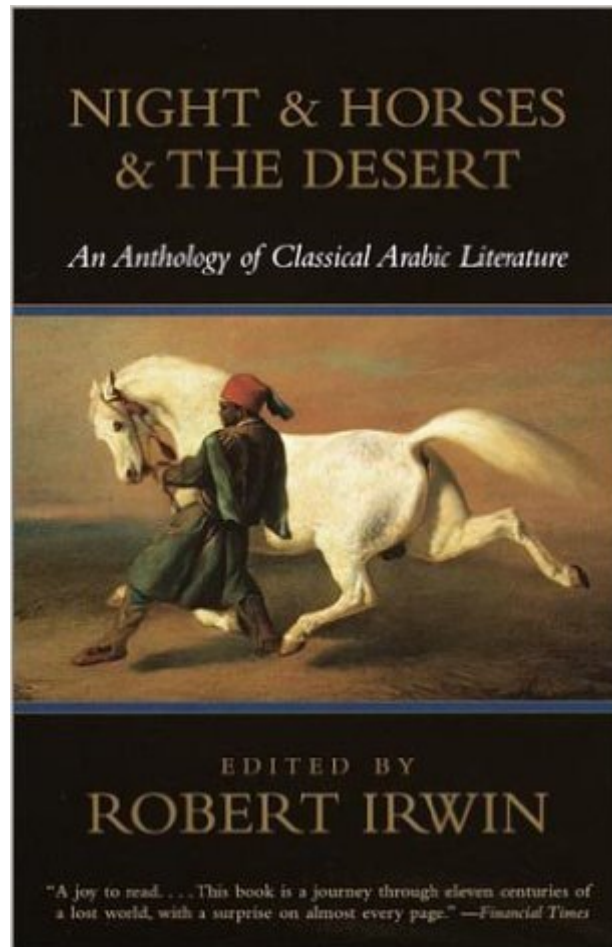


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Night & Horses & The Desert: An Anthology Of Classical Arabic Literature



Synopsis

Spanning the fifth to sixteenth centuries and societies that range from Afghanistan to Spain, this anthology is a testament to the astonishing grandeur and variety of classical Arabic literature. Here are excerpts from dozens of works—both renowned (The Qur'an, The Thousand and One Nights) and esoteric (Ibn Washshiyya's Book of Poisons; a 10th-century poem in praise of asparagus)—all accompanied by Robert Irwin's erudite commentaries that illuminate readers on the vanished world in which they were written. In Night & Horses & the Desert we encounter the dashing Byronic poetry of Imru' al-Qays and a treatise on bibliomania by Al-Jahiz, possibly the only writer to have been killed by books. There's a sorcerer's manual from 11th century Spain and an allegory by the mysterious Brethren of Purity, in which animals argue their case against humanity. Encompassing piety and profanity, fables and philosophy, this volume is a thrilling and invaluable introduction to one of the world's great bodies of literature.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In what may be his most ambitious non-fiction work to date, Mr. Irwin has tackled a truly daunting task - an anthology of Arabic literature. I give him four stars. The fourth star is for attempting the effort in the first place. Theoretically, there is no reason why it should be any more difficult to prepare an anthology of Arabic literature than it would be for, say, Chinese literature; rather the contrary. However, I suspect that preparing an Arabic anthology is much harder. First of all, the traditional themes of Arabic literature - religion, romantic lament, fate, panegyric - on the whole have little

appeal for Westerners, especially compared to a literature like the Chinese, which seems so secular and "modern" in theme by comparison. Secondly, most truly great Arabic literature is poetry, which is notoriously difficult to translate, and what's worse, the canons of poetic taste that govern it are almost entirely untranslatable into anything comparable in English. Despite these handicaps, Irwin has done an admirable job. One notices that there is a great deal of commentary. The selections tend to be short, with a great deal of explanation in between. There is so much commentary, in fact, that the book sometimes seems more a literary history than an anthology. However, this approach is necessary if the reader is to develop any appreciation at all of the material. Quite frankly, Arabic literature is a closed book to most readers, even in translation, and without a large amount of explanatory material the average reader would be lost. Irwin also resists the impulse, very common in specialists in a given literary area, of putting in a large number of his own translations.

The editorial reviews (above) by Dr. Ali Houissa, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Librarian at Cornell, and by John Green of "Booklist" describe this volume very well. Thomas F. Ogara's customer review is also excellent; but this 460-page anthology and guidebook to a millennium of Arabic literature really deserves FIVE stars, not four. Because not everyone is interested in ANY literature from the Middle Ages, this may not rate as a five-star topic for some; but it is certainly a first-rate treatment. Americans like myself, from a country whose history is less than half as long as the period covered in this volume, may be much more interested in the increasingly-translated Arabic literature of the Modern Period (which coincides with the European settlement of America); but for those curious about the long Classical Period (6th-17th Centuries) of one of the great world civilizations, this is a superb introduction. Author Robert G. Irwin, Middle East Editor of "The Times Literary Supplement" and author of 14 books concerning Arabic literature, introduces us to dozens of writers and their major works from seven sub-periods of this medieval millennium. He also explains the system of Arabic names, which may include all of the following: kunya/nickname, laqab/honorific name, ism/given name, nasab/father's & grand-father's name, nisbah/name of geographical origin. This may result in a daunting string of appellations; but individuals are commonly known by just one part of the entire name. Irwin gives us the full name of each writer but with the familiar, short form of it in capital letters; for example: Abu'l Tayyib Ahmad ibn Husayn al-MUTANABBI.

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