

TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

ADÉLAÏDE DE CLERMONT-TONNERRE

MARC LAMBRON

LEÏLA SLIMANI

STORIES  
*of*  
MARRAKECH



■ CASSI EDITION

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LEÏLA SLIMANI

THE BLUE HOUSE



*The writer Paul Pearsons died November 17, 2016 in Marrakech and will be buried in the city that gave such inspiration to his writing.*

AS I HAPPENED upon this AFP wire story, I was devastated. I'd completely forgotten about the existence of this writer who had nonetheless nurtured my adolescence. Learning of his death, I recalled how I read his short stories in my parents' house in Normandy the summer I was 16. In these stories, he brought to life extraordinary characters who were at the crossroads of the real and the fantastic. For a long time, I was haunted by the silhouettes of his sorceresses, by the shadows evoked by the storytellers in Jemaa el-Fna Square, a place that Pearsons knew and described so well.

I jumped up from my chair and raced into the office of my editor-in-chief. To my great surprise, he'd never heard of Pearsons' writing. "Paul who?" he asked me. I told him all I knew of the man, which wasn't much: that he was born in England into a wealthy, eccentric family, that he moved to Marrakech in the 1950s, never to leave again. At the end of the 1970s, his short story collection was published and brought him renown in the literary world. All the more so as Pearsons himself was a man shrouded in mystery: nobody had ever managed to interview him,

and the rare photos of him all dated to the prime of his youth. Nothing was known of his private life nor the exact place he lived.

My editor-in-chief listened to me with great interest. "Now that's an excellent start to an article for the December issue. Buy a plane ticket and go. I want to know who this Paul was. Paul who, again?"

The next morning at sunrise, I boarded a plane to the Ochre City. It was my first time going there, and all I knew of the city was through Pearsons' dreamy stories. I was both very excited and a little worried about finding myself confronted by its reality. I was afraid of being disappointed, of no longer being able to lose myself in these reveries with reality poised to contradict them.

It was November. I had left a gray, rainy Paris where an icy wind had begun to blow. The Marrakech airport was like a giant white beehive, and a hot, blistering sun pierced through its honeycombs. For a few minutes, I stared at the intense blue of the sky, that blue that figured in one of Pearsons' books; for its cover, he'd chosen a famous painting by Jacques Majorelle.

I had only a few leads to start my investigation. I learned that Pearsons has been buried the day before in the city's cemetery, so that's where I first went. Leaving the airport, I told a taxi driver where I wanted to go. He didn't know the French word for cemetery, *cimetière*, and had to call a fellow driver to have him translate my destination. I knew that he'd understood when he turned to me with a sad face, expressing a look of sympathy. He put his hand on my shoulder, no doubt believing that I'd made the trip to mourn a friend or someone from my family.

We crossed the city, which was bathed in a golden light. Across from me were solemn-looking palm trees, the silent witnesses of centuries of history. A passage of Pearsons came to mind, where these trees played a strange role: at night, when a cold entered this city between mountain and desert, the trees came to life. Their leaves waved like hair, and their trunks began to move. The branches, covered in dates, transformed into long arms, heavy with trinkets. They were half plant, half woman.

This was the first time I'd been to a Muslim cemetery. The taxi dropped me off in front of the entrance, and I walked, a little embarrassed, toward a man sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk. He was wearing a long white djellaba and a small knitted hat on his head. He smiled at me and, after shaking my hand, he placed it on his heart. I explained to him that I was looking for the grave of someone named Paul who had been buried the day before. He listened to me with a skeptical look on his face, then suddenly gesticulated around. "Monsieur Paul, yes, Monsieur Paul!" He held his hands on his forehead and nodded, visibly moved by the mention of Pearsons' name. Then he turned around and pointed at something. At the end of the cemetery, I saw a group of white-clad women. I remembered that in Islam women were not allowed to mourn at a grave the same day as a burial. They had to wait a day before paying their respects to the dead. I walked over to them, followed closely by the man who was murmuring prayers.

I stopped a few feet from the grave, which was just a small mound of soil, still fresh. No one had put any stones on it, and there was no name anywhere to be seen. I waited until the women were finished and tried

to be as discreet as possible. But several of them began to look at me suspiciously, and I could see that they were talking amongst themselves and that my presence was disturbing them. Suddenly they began walking, quickly, zigzagging between graves with amazing precision. The man who followed me moved to block my way, though I didn't dare run after them in this sacred place. And that's when I noticed a very old woman having great difficulty walking, who was still crying as she left Pearsons' grave. I went over to her, covered in sweat, stammering. I explained who I was and the reason I was there. She shrugged her shoulders and raised her head toward me, giving me an enigmatic smile. Her craggy face wore her many years, and her eyes, which must have been gorgeous once, had taken on a bluish hue bestowed by advanced age.

I offered her my arm, and she took it, telling me how she had worked for "Monsieur Paul" her entire life. She was his friend, secretary, cook and, at the end, nurse. I was convinced that she had also been his muse and that there was a little of her in Aïcha and Rim, the most emblematic characters in Pearsons' writings. She shared several vague anecdotes but refused to reveal to me how he died, what he had been doing in his final years or where he lived.

"I'd like to visit his home. Do you think that'd be possible?"

The old lady looked up at me and began to laugh.

"I'm tired. I have to go home to rest." As she let go of my arm, she added, "There is nothing to know about Paul Pearsons. Everything is in his books."

She headed off down a small street across from the cemetery, disappearing into the crowd. For a moment,

I thought about following her like a detective, but the ridiculousness of my plan was like a slap in the face. I stayed there, under the November sun, feeling stupid and disoriented.

Fortunately I'd thought to bring with me my copies of Pearsons' books, and I sat down on a bench in Koutoubia Gardens. The gardens were quite present in his work. Cracking open one of his books was to breathe the scent of mint, orange and pomegranate. It was to smell Marrakech's unique air, a blend of the odor of dung from the horses pulling carriages, fresh jasmine and lemon. I read until nighttime, his stories acting as a travel guide: each time he wrote of a place, I went there. And that's how I spent hours in the little side streets of the souk and around Jemaa el-Fna Square.

Contrary to what I thought, Marrakech did not have the problems found in so many touristy cities. It didn't feel like its soul has been disfigured by its visitors, that it was merely cardboard scenery stripped of all authenticity. The reality was just the opposite, of a city propelled by its own energy, both vibrant and calm. The energy of a city where for centuries inhabitants have engaged in both commerce and contemplation. A city of caravans and mystical texts. A city where, after dark, at long tables, families dine on succulent and spellbinding meals.

Pearsons' greatest novel is called *The Snowy Night*. It begins with an improbable snowstorm that blankets Marrakech. In a passage of extraordinary sensuality, the writer describes the snowflakes, downy like a chick's feathers, falling on the ramparts. The snake charmers,



the square's storytellers and the peddlers all wear large wool blankets woven on mountain slopes, but they do not leave. Life continues in the city, suddenly finding itself in the grip of such cold. The main character, a painter, spends his days and nights on his house's terrace, trying to capture this magical moment as best he can. He is so immersed in his passion for this landscape of interlocked houses and the tiny, low-lit streets that he doesn't feel how his hands and feet are freezing. The house! Of course. I hadn't thought of it before, but the famous "blue house" that Pearsons described in the book suddenly sprung to mind. A peaceful haven in the middle of a small garden where an extraordinary datura grows and whose flowers sometimes speak. This blue house existed; I was now certain of it.

I walked around the medina for days, meeting dozens of passersby who all claimed to have known the man called "Monsieur Paul" or "the Englishman." Someone told me that he had an old car, but he didn't know how to drive. A woman was behind the wheel while he, dressed in always-fashionable linen suits, sat in the backseat. He had a reputation as a man of great discretion and equally great generosity. The manager of a nearby hammam told me that every time Paul learned that someone was in need, he did what was necessary to help. But nobody would give me the address of his house or reveal more specific details about his daily life. Each time, the person I was speaking with would look up at the sky and walk away from me before I could even finish my sentence.

In a dusty antique store lost at the end of one of the medina's small streets, I had the good fortune of

finding a signed copy of one of Paul's books. The dedication was written in Arabic and French, in a fine, assured script. I rushed over to the shopkeeper.

"Where did you get this book?"

"It's not for sale," he responded to me with a wary look.

"Fine, but can you tell me how you got it?"

"It's mine. Monsieur Paul gave it to me."

Hamid had known the writer for twenty years. Together they loved walking the streets of Marrakech in the early morning and having silent picnics in Ourika Valley when the city was pounded by heat waves.

"These words," the antique dealer told me, "he put them in his books."

He told me that Paul loved to blend into crowds, linger between the market stalls near the ramparts. He knew even the smallest secrets of this city, its palaces as well as its humble homes. He spent time with its most famous residents and yet would also take naps at the back of a leather boutique or in the cellar of a modest cabinetmaker.

Hamid seemed to soften as he spoke, and I used the opportunity to ask him, "And his house? The blue house? Where is it?" Hamid pretended not to have heard me. I'm ashamed to admit it today, but I was so desperate that I offered him money in exchange for an answer. He stood up and escorted me out.

I walked for a long time in the nearly deserted streets of the medina. The night cold had taken hold of the city, and I shivered. From time to time, a scooter disturbed the calm of the sleepy streets. A meat vendor was still open, and his tiny shop had music emanating from it. The city was not revealing its secrets to me.

It existed, lazily and arrogantly, indifferent to my investigation, which I had come to realize was a petty one. The whole city had been his house. Its residents were his brothers and accomplices in his vow of silence. No one would betray him, and his memories remained unattainable for me. At that moment, I understood the passion that burst forth from his books, a passion for this joyous city where one embraces solemnity.

I did not meet Paul Pearsons. I never saw his blue house. But I already know that every passing year, I will come back to Marrakech.



LEÏLA SLIMANI was born in 1981 in Rabat. A journalist and writer, she is the author of *Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre* and *Chanson Douce* (published in English as *The Perfect Nanny*), which won the Goncourt Prize.

TEXTS

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