

The Fairy Tale Kingdom of Baghdad

By a strange sort of serendipity, here is a novel by one of America's best writers that is set, for more than half its hefty length, in Baghdad and the Persian Gulf. As the writer in question is John Barth, and not one of the international press corps' literary camp followers, like Robert Stone or Joan Didion, the Baghdad being presented to us is not that of Saddam Hussein but of Sindbad the Sailor, and even the most ingenious interpreters of allegory would be hard-pressed to discover a topical political relevance in the arabesques of Barth's tale. That the fairy tale kingdom he writes about happens to go by the name of Baghdad only underlines the fact that Barth is, among all contemporary novelists of the first rank, the one who least aspires to timeliness.

Timelessness, rather, is the Barthean element: the misty headlands and oceanic vistas of myth, a land and sea of pure fancy where Greek legends may cohabit freely with the *Arabian Nights* (as in his ineffably clever novel *Chimera*), where the mustard seed of an Aesopean fable can swell into the largest whimsy ever written, which is at the same time a knowing satire on academic life (*Giles Goat-Boy*). This time, the irreconcilables Barth seeks to wed are contemporary realism and the *Arabian Nights*, both territories he's explored before, though not, in the latter case, so exhaustively.

Here is how the novel works: Within a narrative frame set at the banquet table of the original Sindbad, alternating chapters recount (1) the first-person reminiscences of a beggarly guest, the "Somebody" of the title, from his childhood days in 1937 in East Dorset, an imaginary city in tidewater Maryland, and continuing at intervals through his fiftieth year, and (2) the day-by-day intrigues and amorous dalliances of Somebody during the six days and nights he spends chez Sindbad. The two strands of this narrative braid remain quite distinct, both in substance and tone, until, at the touch of the author's wand, the Somebody of Here and Now is transported bodily to There and Then, after the manner of Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*. There is never to be any science-fictional accounting for this wonderful journey; the machinery that accomplishes

Review of *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, by John Barth.

it is transparently aesthetic, just as the Baghdad Sindbad resides in is patently fabulous, a city and society of narrative conventions as artificial (and often as tiresome) as High Mass or opera seria.

While Barth's scheme makes for occasional tough sledding, there are corresponding rich rewards. Chief among them is a lapidary prose style that out-Nabokovs Nabokov, whether Barth is painting the scenery or caressing memories of erotic pleasure or evoking the Sensual Sublime, as in this evocation of that borderline between daily life and the Beyond, passage across which is the crux of the plot and (Barth implies) the Secret Meaning of Sex:

My recent reading in Mrs. Moore's *Arabian Nights* had made me chafe not only at being ineluctably I and here and now but likewise at the iron constraints of nature itself, which made it quite certain that no fish would ever talk and no genie appear from a bottle, nor would Daisy and I be magically transported from Dorset County to Samarkand or Serendib. . . . No, the eerie moments of a true near-ecstasy, whose scary disorientation I had learned to protract and relish, had been . . . [when] I was able in a certain combination of drowsiness and less-than-total darkness to rock myself just beyond all usual and normal sensory cues into a charged suspension, vertiginous, electrically humming, in which the ceiling, the walls, the frames of the doors and the windows, and the very bed beneath me were at once their familiar selves and unspeakably alien, their distance and configuration fluid, and I myself was no longer and not merely I but as it were the very lens of the cosmos.

Even readers who delight in such sonorities and extended cadences (and my excerpt ruthlessly truncates the original) may find themselves surfeited as they read *The Last Voyage*. It is not a novel one reads in a desperate haste to reach the denouement; rather, it is like a two-week voyage on a luxury liner, a steady succession of rich meals, each one thirty or forty pages long and fully satiating.

There is another reason why the book resists quick reading, and that is (to put it bluntly) its pornographic nature. Once Simon William Behler, the Somebody of the title, has exited the purlieu of childhood and begins the account of his "second voyage," at age thirteen, the novel's very nearly exclusive focus becomes sex. Barth writes about sex with a languorous, caressing appreciation, or with a zesty exuberance; he writes about it in B-minor and C-major, with ribald glee and with hieratic pomp. And always the sex he writes about is of that healthy variety commended by

such authorities as Dr. Ruth and *The Joy of Sex*. When the plot requires unpleasantnesses like rape and incest, they take place offstage or at an ironic distance.

On the other hand, anyone approaching the book in the spirit of salacious interest will be likely to conclude that Barth's lust for metaphor, particularly in the "Arabian" interchapters, much outweighs lust of the triple-X variety, as in such a (not untypical) passage as this:

We therefore set to as I had foreseen, and if his dhow was not the first to make a dawhat out of the bi'r next door to my wahat, it was the largest, stoutest, and most fraught. So eloquently did it convey to me his love for Marjanah, and I relay it to her, and her dainty Magharet to speak to my tongue of her love for Sindbad, and I relay it to him, that the three of us all too soon climbed Adam's Peak as one, and I was so provisioned both stern and aft that for some moments I left this world altogether.

There is, behind these shimmering veils, a moral intention or allegorical purpose—or, to give it its most unfashionable name, a Meaning other than the unexceptionable one that sex is real and sex is earnest. Sex can be, like the sea that is Barth's protean, ever-present metaphor, dangerous, and of its many dangers the one that has received the most public scrutiny in recent years, and the one that Barth gingerly treats in the text and subtexts of *The Last Voyage*, is father/daughter child abuse and incest.

Simon Behler's first love, Daisy Moore, is a girl who has been abused by her father, and this adds a sinister undercurrent to the otherwise brilliant erotic set-piece in which the teenage Simon and Daisy make love. In the Arabian chapters there is a parallel suspicion of incest between Sindbad and Yasmin, but though the plot knits the most elaborate arabesques of mystery and ambiguity about this primal sin, it doesn't finally find a catharsis to (in Barth's word) "catharse" it. Barth's own last word on the subject would seem to be as casually dismissive as this summing-up by Daisy's luckier kid sister, Julia:

It's screwed us up, more or less. But long after I was out of the house and Ma was kaput, Daisy went on taking care of him. I believe she happened to love old Sam more than she loved her other men, and I can't help thinking that in a different world everybody could've shrugged their shoulders and got on with it.

In fairness, that is the moral being drawn by one of the author's characters, and the allegory of the Arabian component of the plot resolves the issue otherwise.

An affection for the *Arabian Nights* in the jewel-crusted translation of Richard Burton is not a prerequisite for enjoying Barth's revision of Sindbad's voyages, but it would help, especially when his scheme obliges him to gild refined gold in lavish emulation. But despite the longueurs of such passages, it's a beautiful book, and one that has the rare good fortune to have a cover that is a fair visual analog for the complex richness of its contents.

The collage by Carol Wald depicts a many-minareted city by a sea that is a Turner in the distance, a photograph close to the shore, while an Ingres odalisque luxuriates in one corner beneath a jeweled tabernacle that is the gate to the city. It is, like the book it illustrates, gorgeous, playful, enigmatic, garish, eclectic, and unlike anything else around.