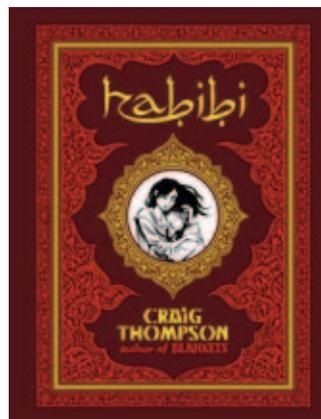


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AN FCBOOKS INTERVIEW - HABIBI



"I WANT EACH BOOK TO BE ENTIRELY DIFFERENT FROM THE LAST - THE WAY BECK EXPERIMENTS WITH DIFFERENT GENRES WITH EACH ALBUM."

IT'S NEARLY BEEN A DECADE SINCE *BLANKETS*.

SOARING ABOVE THE MUNDANE AND YET DEEPLY INTERMESHERED WITH THE DETAIL OF THE EVERYDAY, *HABIBI* IS AKIN TO A TIME TRAVEL MACHINE; TRANSPORTING YOU TO THE DESERT, INTO A WORLD OF SULTANS AND HAREMS AND CAMELS (WHERE WATER MIGHT JUST BE MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD, AND HUMAN LIFE, TOO CHEAP). IT LIFTS YOU UP WITH ITS SHEER GRANDEUR OF NARRATIVE,



PROFOUND UNDERSTANDING OF PEOPLE AND LIFE, ITS MAGNIFICENT SCRIPT (THE ART OF CALLIGRAPHY AND READING ARABIC, RENDERED ANEW), ITS MYTHOPOEIA OF THE PROPHETS AND NOAH'S ARK AND JOB'S MISERY. THERE ARE STORIES WITHIN STORIES ("THEY SEEM VERY INTUITIVE TO ME IN TERMS OF HOW MOST OF US THINK AND COMMUNICATE. RARELY DO WE FINISH A THOUGHT. ESPECIALLY NOW IN OUR SHORT-ATTENTION SPAN DIGITAL CULTURE WHERE WE PURSUE ANY FLEETING THOUGHT BY LOOKING IT UP ON OUR SMARTPHONES. AND ANY CONVERSATION WITH A FRIEND BECOMES ONE STORY FEEDING IN AND OFF OF ANOTHER."), ABOUT SLAVE-CHILDREN, TRAVELLERS, EUNUCHS, PALACES; THERE IS ALCHEMY, DECEPTION, DESIRE, GREED, RELIGION, ESCAPE, THE ARGUMENT FOR THE PLANET, AND THE ULTIMATE CHOICE YOU MAKE ABOUT LIFE, AT THE JUNCTURE WHERE IT MEETS DEATH. IT'S ALSO A LOVE STORY. RATHER A STORY ABOUT LOVE; THE EPIC TALE OF DODOLA AND ZAM.

CRAIG THOMPSON



Craig Thompson, born in Michigan in 1975, grew up in a rural farming community in central Wisconsin. His graphic novel, *Blankets*, won numerous industry

awards and has been published in nearly 20 languages. He is also the author of *Carnet de Voyage*, *Good-bye Chunky Rice*, and now, *Habibi*. Currently, Craig lives in Portland, Or-

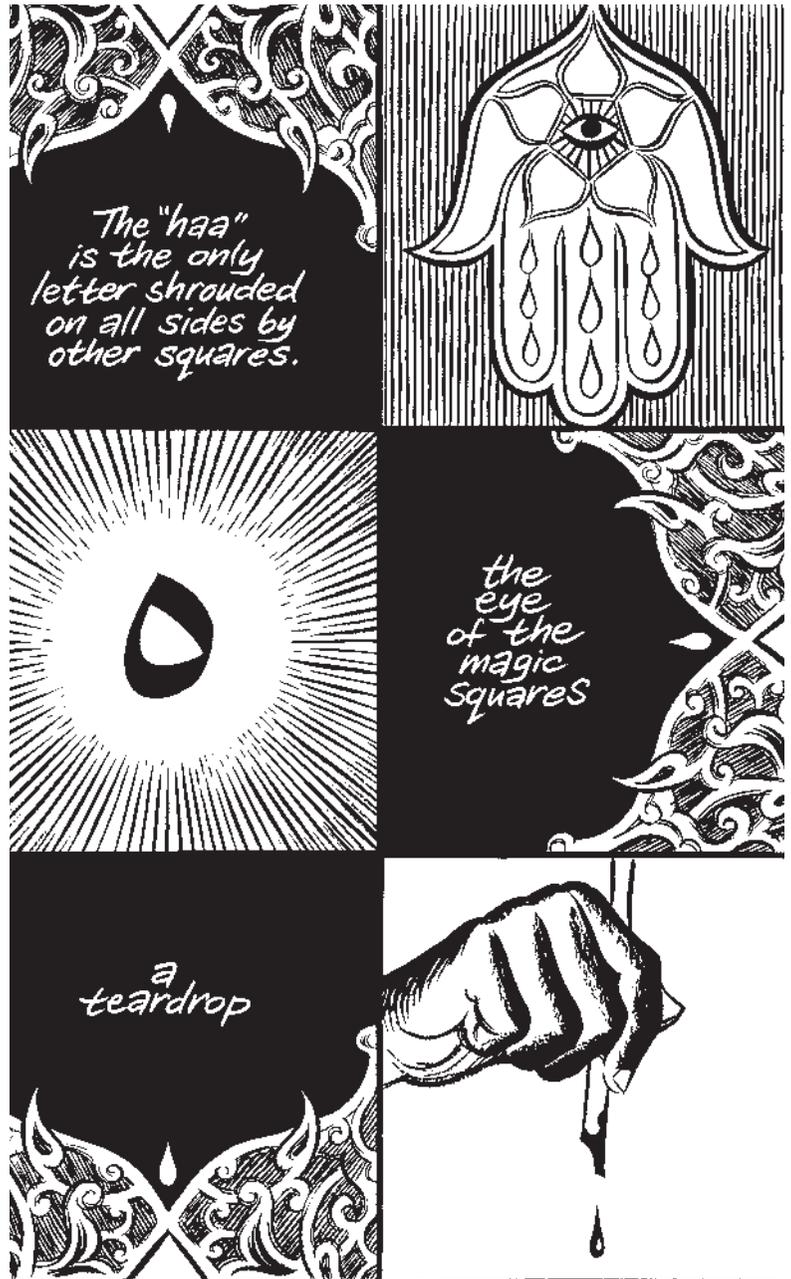
egon. Whilst working on *Habibi*, Craig was struggling with depression, "so I related to Zam's predicament standing at the edge of the dam. Each moment becomes a decision to turn away from that ledge, and live". He describes the process, "Depression is also a dam. Some emotion (sadness or anger) is blockaded within you, and you need to find a healthy way to externalise it and have all your energies - emotional, spiritual, sexual, creative - flowing again."

Besides cultivating a healthy obsession with "Khalil Gibran's illustrations and poetry, the poetry of Nizar Kabbani and Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and of course Rumi and Hafiz", Craig's research included reading "Armstrong's omnibus of monotheism *History of God* and Arundhati Roy's examination of dams in *India, Power Politics*". His choice of music, we learn, was Sigur Ros and the soundtrack of Devdas.

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AFTER BLANKETS, I WAS SICK OF DRAWING MYSELF AND MUNDANE MIDWESTERN BACKDROPS. I WANTED TO CRAFT SOMETHING OUTSIDE OF MYSELF, AND WAS CONSIDERING TWO TRAJECTORIES: A FANTASY EPIC TYPICAL OF COMICS (THOUGH NOT TYPICAL OF ME), OR A NON-FICTION WORK WITH SOCIAL/POLITICAL RELEVANCE LIKE JOE SACCO'S COMICS JOURNALISM. HABIBI MET SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE OF BOTH DESIRES.

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD DESCRIBED WAR





AS A LESSER JIHAD AND THE STRUGGLE WITH ONESELF AS THE GREATER JIHAD. SOME COMMENTATOR I'VE HEARD SAID THAT ALL GLOBAL CONFLICT BEGINS ON A PERSONAL INNER LEVEL. SO IT'S TRUE THAT THE GREATEST STRUGGLE WE'LL EVER FACE IS WITH OURSELVES AND OUR OWN POISONS OR WEAKNESSES. THIS IS CERTAINLY TRUE IN LONG-TERM ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS. THEY HAVE A WAY OF BRINGING TO THE SURFACE WHAT IS MOST BROKEN AND VULNERABLE IN OUR PERSONALITIES.

THE PRIMARY RESEARCH OF HABIBI WAS BORN OUT OF CONVERSATION WITH MUSLIM FRIENDS - ALL OF THAT EXAMINATION OF THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS. I FOUND THAT THERE WAS FAR MORE OVERLAP THAN DIFFERENCES IN MY EXPERIENCES GROWING UP IN A FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIAN FAMILY AND MY FRIENDS' EXPERIENCES IN MUSLIM HOUSEHOLDS.

RECENTLY, I'VE ENVIED THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS OF

PEOPLE WHO WORK IN THE FILM INDUSTRY. IT LOOKS LIKE SO MUCH FUN, WORKING IN A STUDIO WITH HUNDREDS OF TALENTED, CREATIVE FOLKS. BUT I RECOGNISE THAT I WOULDN'T BE CONTENT TO BE ASSIGNED TO A SINGLE DEPARTMENT. I WANT TO WRITE THE STORY, DESIGN THE CHARACTERS AND SETS, CRAFT THE BACKGROUNDS, AND DO THE ACTING! THE FINE ART WORLD HAS BECOME SO CONCEPTUAL THAT THE ARTIST IS ESSENTIALLY AN OVERSEER ASSIGNING THE ACTUAL GRUNT WORK TO NAMELESS INTERNS. BUT COMICS MAINTAIN A SENSE OF DIY INTEGRITY - AND WHILE DOING EVERYTHING YOURSELF MAY BETRAY A CONTROL-FREAK PERSONALITY, IT ALSO INVOLVES A LETTING GO OF EGO - SACRIFICING YOURSELF RATHER THAN OTHER PEOPLE'S ENERGIES TO ACTUALISE A PROJECT.

AS FOR THE READER, SOME OF THE PLEASURE OF CONJURING THE VISUALS IN YOUR OWN IMAGINATION - AS HAPPENS WITH PROSE - IS LOST... BUT IT'S REPLACED BY THE PLEASURE OF STUDYING DRAWINGS. THE CARTOONIST CHRIS WARE HAS DESCRIBED COMICS AS SHEET MUSIC - A PATTERN OF SYMBOLS ON THE PAGE THAT A READER NEEDS TO UNLOCK TO HEAR/SEE THE RHYTHM AND PACING AND MUSICALITY. SO THERE IS A GREAT INTERACTIVE QUALITY TO COMICS.

WHEN I'M WORKING ON PAGES, I CAN ONLY SEE THE MISTAKES. SO THERE ISN'T A GREAT PLEASURE THAT COMES WHILE CREATING. BUT THERE IS A SENSE OF NECESSITY. AND I'VE LEARNED IT'S IMPORTANT TO FINISH THESE CREATIVE PROJECTS WHETHER THEY FAIL OR NOT. BECAUSE OTHERWISE THE BOOK IS JUST A NOISY, CHAOTIC ENERGY WITHIN YOU. ONCE YOU EXTERNALISE IT, PUT IT DOWN ON PAPER, YOU CAN CONTAIN IT IN A MORE GRACEFUL FORM - LIKE BOTTLING UP A JINN IN A LANTERN. AND I DO EXPERIENCE A CERTAIN PLEASURE IN MY WORK ONCE IT'S A PRINTED OBJECT - BECAUSE THEN IT'S SOMETHING OUTSIDE OF ME. I NO LONGER JUDGE IT WITH SELF-LOATHING, BECAUSE IT NOW HAS A LIFE OF ITS OWN.

DODOLA WEAVING IN STORIES OF THE PROPHETS INTO HER LIFE WITH ZAM IS A NOD TO SCHEHEREZADE IN 1,001 NIGHTS. I FOUND MYSELF, AS AUTHOR, CRAFTING A MASH-UP OF SORTS BETWEEN THE SACRED MEDIUM OF HOLY BOOKS LIKE THE BIBLE AND QURAN WITH THE POP, PULP MEDIUM OF COMIC BOOKS. COMICS ARE SEQUENTIAL ART - AND THUS A PERFECT MEDIUM FOR COLLAGE. NOT SIMPLY IMAGES IN SEQUENCE, BUT STORIES IN SEQUENCE, IDEAS IN SEQUENCE. THE READER CONJURES THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ONE PANEL AND THE NEXT.

INTERESTINGLY, THE BOOK'S HAD A POSITIVE REACTION FROM INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES AND MUSLIM READERS, AND CRITICISMS HAVE MOSTLY ARISEN FROM 'POLITICALLY-CORRECT' AMERICAN READERS. THE LATTER'S CRITICISM HAVE LABELLED THE BOOK AS BOTH 'SEXIST' AND 'ORIENTALIST' WHICH SHOWS THEY'VE MISSED THE ENTIRE POINT. HABIBI IS AN EXAMINATION OF AMERICAS' ROLE AS AN OPPRESSIVE EMPIRE, AND OF MEN'S ROLE AS PERPETRATORS OF SEXUAL TRAUMA TO WOMEN AND



CHILDREN. SO THE CRITICISMS CAN BE FRUSTRATING, BUT THEY'VE BEEN REDEEMED BY READERS OF ALL AGES AND NATIONALITIES AND SEXUAL PERSUASIONS THAT REALLY GET THE WORK.

THE WRITING PROCESS IS HARD TO PIN DOWN - IT'S THE MOST NEUROTIC STAGE FOR ME. SOMETIMES YOU CAN BE MORE PRODUCTIVE IN A SINGLE DAY THAN IN A MONTH. THE DRAWING PROCESS IS MORE TANGIBLE, AND I KEEP CLASSIC WORKING CLASS HOURS. I'M AT THE DRAFTING TABLE BY 9 AM, PENCIL A PAGE BY LUNCH, THEN INK IT IN THE AFTERNOON FINISHING AROUND 6 PM. SO A PAGE A DAY... THE BEST PART OF THE PROCESS FOR MOST CARTOONISTS, INCLUDING MYSELF, IS THE INKING. BECAUSE YOU'VE WORKED OUT ALL THE SKELETON AND TECHNICAL STRUCTURE OF A DRAWING WITH PENCILS, AND NOW CAN FOCUS ON THE SIMPLE PLEASURE OF LAYING INK DOWN ON A PAGE. IT'S THE PART OF THE DAY WHEN I OPEN THE SHADES AND PUT ON MUSIC AND TALK ON THE PHONE, BECAUSE THE INK-WORK IS INSTINCTUAL AND FLOWING. EVERYTHING ELSE IS LABOUR.

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(Pages excerpted from *Habibi*, Pantheon, available online.)