

Celestial Bodies (Alharthi)

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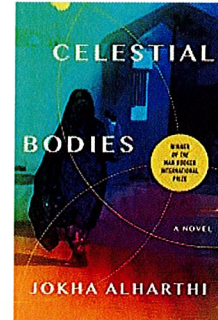
Celestial Bodies

Jokha Alharthi (Trans., Marilyn Booth), 2019 (U.S.)

Catapult Books

256 pp.

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Summary

Winner, 2019 Man Booker International Prize

In the village of al-Awafi in Oman, we encounter three sisters: Mayya, who marries after a heartbreak; Asma, who marries from a sense of duty; and Khawla, who chooses to refuse all offers and await a reunion with the man she loves, who has emigrated to Canada.

These three women and their families, their losses and loves, unspool beautifully against a backdrop of a rapidly changing Oman, a country evolving from a traditional, slave-owning society into its complex present.

Through the sisters, we glimpse a society in all its degrees, from the very poorest of the local slave families to those making money through the advent of new wealth.

The first novel originally written in Arabic to ever win the Man Booker International Prize, and the first book by a female Omani author to be translated into English, *Celestial Bodies* marks the arrival in the United States of a major international writer. (From the publisher.)

Author Bio

- Birth—July 1978
- Where—Oman
- Education—Ph.D., University of Edinburgh
- Awards—Man Booker Prize
- Currently—lives in Al Khoudh, Oman

Jokha Alharthi, an Omani writer and academic, is the 2019 recipient of the Man Booker International Prize for her novel, *Celestial Bodies*.

Alharthi was born and educated primarily in Oman. She traveled to the U.K. where

she earned her doctorate in classical Arabic literature from Edinburgh University. Currently, she is an associate professor in the Arabic department at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman.

Alharthi has published three collections of short stories, three children's books, and three novels: *Manamat*, *Sayyidat el-Qamar (Celestial Bodies)*, and *Narinjah (Bitter Orange)*. She has also authored academic works.

The novel, *Sayyidat el-Qamar*, translated into English by Marilyn Booth and retitled *Celestial Bodies*, was published in the UK in 2018 and the US in 2019. The novel was the first work by an Arabic-language writer to be awarded the Man Booker International Prize (2019), and the first novel by an Omani woman to appear in English translation.

In addition to English, *Sayyidat el-Qamar (Celestial Bodies)* has been translated into the following 20 languages: Azerbaijani, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, English, French, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Malayalam, Norwegian, Persian, Portuguese (also, Brazilian Portuguese), Romanian, Russian, Sinhalese, Slovenian, Swedish, Turkish. (*Adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 4/10/20.*)

Book Reviews

[A]n innovative reimagining of the family saga. Alharthi avoids the languid ease of chronology in favor of dozens of taut character studies, often no more than a page or two.... These vignettes are sharp-eyed, sharp-edged and carefully deployed in a multigenerational jigsaw that's as evasive as it is evocative.... [T]his is a contemporary novel, insistent and alive... a treasure house.

Beejay Silcox - New York Times Book Review

The glimpses into a culture relatively little known in the West are fascinating.

Jane Housham - Guardian (UK)

A book to win over the head and the heart in equal measure . . . Its delicate artistry draws us into a richly imagined community — opening out to tackle profound questions of time and mortality and disturbing aspects of our shared history....

Celestial Bodies evokes the forces that constrain us and those that set us free.

Bettany Hughes, chair - 2019 Man Booker International Prize

The form's remarkable adaptability is on brilliant display.... *Celestial Bodies* tells the subtle and quietly anguished story of several unhappy marriages.... Yet one of the book's signal triumphs is that Alharthi has constructed her own novelistic form.... The novel moves back and forth between the generations very flexibly, often in the course of a single page or even paragraph, owing to Alharthi's deft management of time shifts.... The leaps and swerves seem closer to poetry or fable or song than to

the novel... at once intimate and historical.

James Wood - New Yorker

[B]reathtaking... *Celestial Bodies*... follows the lives of three sisters from a small village at a time of rapid social and economic change in Oman. The tale is replete with history, poetry, and philosophy, but also slavery, broken marriages, passion, and not-so-secret lovers.

Kim Gattas - Atlantic

(*Starred review*) Alharthi throws the reader into the midst of a tangled family drama.... The novel rewards readers willing to assemble the pieces of Alharthi's puzzle into a whole, and is all the more satisfying for the complexity of its tale.

Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review*) Readers will come to this novel... and will leave with a sense of original storytelling, rich characterization, and transparently bright language, expertly translated. Highly recommended.

Library Journal

(*Starred review*) Alharthi's unique structure demands vigilant participation as it is more jigsaw puzzle than linear narrative.... Pieced together, a robust village emerges, of alliances and betrayals, survival and murder, surrender and escape. Patient readers will be seductively, magnificently rewarded.

Booklist

(*Starred review*) [A] sweeping story of generational and societal change.... A richly layered, ambitious work that teems with human struggles and contradictions, providing fascinating insight into Omani history and society.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, use our LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for CELESTIAL BODIES ... then take off on your own:

1. *Celestial Bodies*, set in a village outside of Muscat, Oman, depicts a culture unknown to most of us in the West. What have you learned, what surprised you, what angered, even shocked, you?
2. Outwardly, women have little, in any, power in Mideast society. But things are not always what they seem. Talk about the kind of subtle, invisible power that the

women in *Celestial Bodies* wield outside the traditional norms.

3. Most of the chapters are told in the third person point-of-view, except for Abdallah, Mayya's husband, who speaks to us in his own voice. Why might Alharthi have made the decision to let Abdallah tell his own story?

4. Speaking of Abdallah and Mayya, when Abdallah asks his wife if she loves him, she responds, "It's the Egyptian films, have they eaten your brain?" What do you make of her response? What does she mean? How does Abdallah react?

5. How are the characters in this novel trapped by the past? Who is trying to escape the past? Who is trying to ignore, or paper over, the past?

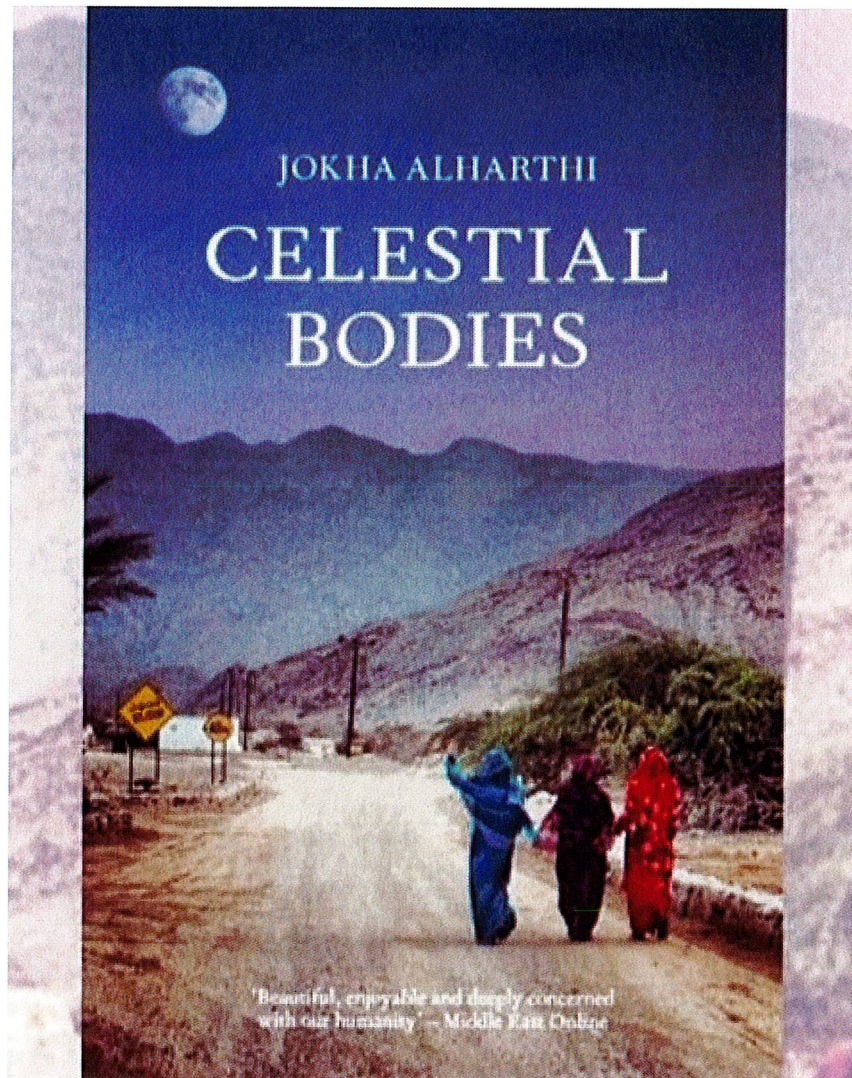
6. In what way does the novel hint at currents of change coming to this very traditional society?

6. Much has been made of the book's structure with multiple points of view and shifting time frames. It's even been referred to as a puzzle with each chapter providing a single piece of the picture. Did you find the narrative choice difficult to follow? Why might Alharthi have chosen to write her novel using this fragmented technique?

7. The book's title, literally, means "ladies of the moon." How does this title (perhaps more so than *Celestial Bodies*) reflect the novel?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online and off, with attribution. Thanks.)

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BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

Celestial Bodies by Jokha Alharthi

(<https://annbenjamin.wordpress.com/2019/06/30/book-club-questions-celestial-bodies-by-jokha-alharthi/celestial-bodies-by-jokha-alharthi/>).

In preparing for my book club this month, I realized there were almost no book club questions in place for the 2019 Man Booker International Prize Winner, *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi.

So, in the spirit of our upcoming discussion, here are a few questions to consider. I would love to hear additional suggestions!

- Have you read any other Man Booker prize winners? What are your thoughts or comparisons to the 2019 selection?
- Did you like any of the characters? Was there anyone you identified with?

- What do you think of the authors choice to include so many characters? Did having so many people to keep track of enhance or hurt your appreciation of the novel?
- Did you know about the Omani slave trade prior to reading this book? How do you think it is presented?
- Who would you recommend this book to? Why?
- What do you think of the first person narrative? Is it used effectively?
- Does Celestial Bodies represent what you thought of Oman? Did you learn anything about the country?
- What role does tradition play throughout the novel? Which traditions did you find the most interesting?
- How do feel about how the role of gender throughout the novel? How did the expectations of gender and class play into the development of the characters?
- Why do you think the author chose to conclude the book where she did?
- What, if any, is the role of time in the novel? Do you think a linear storyline would have changed the book?

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