

Early reviews and praise

"What I loved the most about this book is Mohammed Said Hjiouij's narrative skills... Brilliant writing." - Readers' Favorite, Luwi Nyakansaila

"Told in present time and in flashbacks, this is an intriguing retelling of The Metamorphosis, and I would highly recommend reading this after reading Kafka."
- Dawn Michelle K

"This was a unique take on Kafka's Metamorphosis. A very short novella, but I enjoyed it very much. The author has talent, and I can't wait to read more by them." - Rachel D

"The author is very good... nothing is lost in translation, and we as readers of English, I believe, get to fully experience the quality of Mohammed Said Hjiouij's writing ability." - Matt McAvoy

"A delicious, dark escape from my usual reading material. Will certainly be seeking out the author's other writing." - Khalida

"The book was a humorous and absurd Moroccan spin on Kafka. Much of the themes and events from the metamorphosis remain the same, but with the author's own voice and cultural insights on Moroccan society. It was a fun read." - Stuart Ahn Sones

"The author masterfully blends fantasy and reality to create a captivating and thought-provoking narrative that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant." - Fatima Ouaiou

Mohammed Said Hjiouij (born April 1, 1982) is a Moroccan novelist. His novel *By Night in Tangier* won the Inaugural Ismail Fahd Ismail Prize (2019). His second novel, *The Riddle of Edmond Amran El Maleh*, has been shortlisted for the Ghassan Kanafani Prize for Arabic Fiction (2022), and the Hebrew translation is forthcoming. *Kafka in Tangier* has already been translated into Kurmanji, with excerpts in both Hebrew and Italian.

Phoebe Bay Carter is a translator from Arabic and Spanish and a PhD student in Comparative Literature at Harvard University. Her translations have appeared in ArabLit Quarterly, InTranslation, Action Books blog, and elsewhere.

Kafka in Tangier

(A novel translated from Arabic)

Mohammed Said Hjiouij

AGORA Publishing

Tangier, Morocco

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Kafka in Tangier

Translated by:
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CHAPTER 1

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

He read Kafka's *Metamorphosis* before bed. When he woke up the next morning after a night of disturbing dreams, he found himself transformed into a monster in his bed. No, not a large insect like Gregor Samsa. More like a putrid and distorted version of himself. Even so, he knew that his fate would be no different from that of young Samsa: he would die in three months, no more and no less, just before his twenty-seventh birthday.

Good. Now that I've caught your attention, let's go back to the beginning and take things one step at a time.

You ask who I am? Oh, the curiosity of the limited human mind, which cannot hope to grasp me in my enormity! Suffice to say that I have gone by many names throughout human history, among them the Blind Bard, Shakespeare, the Storyteller... Perhaps Scheherazade is the most famous. And now you ask, where are these events taking place? Ah, how limitless the curiosity of your human minds! Really now, is that so important? Fine. Let the setting be Tangier. But not, of course, the city of Tangier that you know. This is another one, which merely resembles it. A Tangier parallel to the one you consider real. But, mind you, being parallel doesn't mean it

is made up. Let us agree from the outset that the binary of reality and fiction depends entirely on where you're looking from.

Now, can I get back to the tale? Good.

It began in a sewer. He was running, looking over his shoulder every other step, fleeing from an enormous insect that looked to him, under the dim light, like a cockroach the size of a dinosaur. He was dreaming, of course. I know you are smart enough to realize this, and also to realize that this dream was a predictable result of the story, or novel, that he read before bed.

Before returning home the day before his metamorphosis (this was a Sunday), he had followed his feet that afternoon to Malabatta Beach, which he had not visited in the past five years. He was impressed by the new corniche and the wide plaza, which the municipality had designed in imitation of the Hassan Mosque Plaza in Rabat. But after a few steps, he found himself face to face with an open sewer belching the city's waste directly onto the beach. He saw to his left children swimming gleefully there where the wastewater mixed with the ocean. To his right was a bridge covering a section of the drainage ditch, with cars whizzing over it at such a speed that made it impossible for a pedestrian to cross. He peered down at the sewer, contemplating the water heavy with human waste. Raising his eyes, he saw a man contemplating him from across the ditch. He looked out of place, standing there dressed in black from head to toe. Shiny black shoes and a fancy black suit. Unkempt hair, bulging eyes, and large ears perked to receive the world's buried secrets. All black except for his near-translucent skin, and a small red notebook in his left hand. His eyes were bright with intelligence, but also with a lurking sadness that threatened to take over his entire face. There was something familiar about the

face. Very familiar. Maybe he was famous. Surely he had seen a picture of this face not long ago.

He turned away from the man and pulled an envelope out of his pocket. On its corner was a green insignia of a snake swallowing its tail accompanied by the words *Medical and Reproductive Testing Laboratory*. He stared at it for a long time, until his eyes began to water. He pursed his lips. Furrowed his brow. Then let all his features fall slack. He sighed, finally letting the anguish settle onto the blank slate of his face. The envelope slipped from his grasp, and he watched as the breeze tossed it about for a moment, as though rocking a feather to sleep, before laying it to rest on the water's surface. He watched as it floated, drifting with the current until it soaked up the wastewater and was dragged under by excrement.

That bridge, with its concrete pillars sunk into the waste water, was the setting of the dream. The underbelly of the bridge, to be precise.

The further he went into the sewer, the weaker the light became, while the putrid stench grew stronger. It filled his mouth as he gulped down air, trying to get oxygen to his lungs.

He tripped and fell. He went under the thick sludgy water. He got up quickly, spitting and wiping the city's shit from his face. He set off running again at a speed not typically seen in dreams. But, like someone who's cast the evil eye upon himself, he felt a sharp stab of pain in his right leg and fell once more. The insect descended upon him. Its jaws gaped like a T-Rex's as they came closer and closer to his neck.

His heart raced, pounding like a war drum under the arch of the bridge. He realized that until then it had been completely silent. He had not even heard the sound of the water splashing under his own feet. But now he heard his heartbeat like a drum signaling war be-

tween two tribes. He wanted to lift his hand out of the water to push away the insect, which had begun to look to him like a great, black dog. It looked like — no, it *was* the hound of the Baskervilles. But, somewhere between his brain and his hand, the nerve signals lost their way. He wanted to scream, an act of desperation when there was nothing else left to do, but his tongue stuck to the back of his throat. He was choking. A shudder wracked his body and a warm stream of liquid ran between his thighs. He opened his eyes.

The first thing he was aware of upon waking was the septic stench that had hitched a ride on his nose from dream to reality. He would soon realize that, in fact, the opposite was the case. The fetid smell had traveled from reality into his dream; or, rather, it was the very smell that was responsible for creating the whole dream just as he was beginning to wake up.

The second thing he became aware of was a numbness spreading across his right side. A numbness punctuated by tingling. It was not unlike pins and needles, but ten times stronger. The strange thing was, he was lying on his left side. Shouldn't he, he thought, have pins and needles on the side he was lying on, not the side up in the air, free from the weight of his own body?

The third thing he became aware of was the warm liquid between his thighs and dripping down his legs. Yes, you know quite well what that means.

But he couldn't believe it. He figured he must still be dreaming. He blinked several times, but nothing changed. The same noxious stench, the same tingling along his right side, and still the same damp below him. So. It wasn't a dream. He cast his gaze around the room. It was indeed his bedroom, of that there was no doubt. His wife asleep on the other side of the bed, their daughter's crib nearby; the antique clock his mother had bought before her own

marriage told him it was six in the morning. On the wall facing him were three frames of the Arabic calligraphy he had once so loved to paint, back in the days before life had trapped him with its net and broken his back. This was his bedroom, of that there was no doubt at all. And this was no dream he was living now.

Then, just as he tried to roll onto his back, came the moment of truth. The truth that would make him scream a scream that would shake the building from its colonial-style gables to its concrete foundations. A scream that would echo across the large apartment as it bounced from room to room, knocking on each door and hammering at each eardrum, slinking under the chairs and leaping across the sofas, ricocheting off the walls and ceiling and floor. It would be a long time before the furniture absorbed all the despair and anger and grief of that scream.