



The Spider's House

Paul Bowles , Francine Prose (Introduction)

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Set in Fez, Morocco, during that country's 1954 nationalist uprising, *The Spider's House* is perhaps Paul Bowles's most beautifully subtle novel, richly descriptive of its setting and uncompromising in its characterizations. Exploring once again the dilemma of the outsider in an alien society, and the gap in understanding between cultures—recurrent themes of Paul Bowles's writings—*The Spider's House* is dramatic, brutally honest, and shockingly relevant to today's political situation in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The Spider's House Details

Date : Published October 31st 2006 by Ecco (first published 1955)

ISBN : 9780061137037

Author : Paul Bowles , Francine Prose (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 432 pages

Genre : Fiction, Northern Africa, Morocco, Cultural, Africa, Historical, Historical Fiction, Novels

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From Reader Review The Spider's House for online ebook

Gerhard says

The trick with historical novels is to make them equally specific and general. Reading them a long time after the events they depict have transpired, one should ideally feel the same sense of urgency of history being lived and written, as well as comprehending the socio-political context of their creation. This is no small feat.

Some historical novels go beyond even this; they become cultural and historic touchstones that, presciently, seem to predict or comment upon courses of events beyond their pages, events waiting in the wings of history when these very words were written. This gives them a power and a universality that makes such novels seemingly transcend history, and speak across the ages.

Too grandiose? Reading A Spider's House, I really do not think so. This novel is such a succinct, startling and visceral summation of all the tensions in the Middle East that erupted in the Arab Spring, it is astonishing to consider it was written in 1955, at the time when Morocco was struggling for independence from French rule.

In our time of hyper political correctness, there is a lot of pussyfooting around Islamic culture and religion in general, and a lot of hand-wringing about how the West misunderstands Islam and how fuzzy-wuzzy and tolerant it really is.

However, all that this does is appropriate Islam for consumer culture, and validate it in the context of Western values and mores. It is as far from 'understanding' as one can possibly get.

Bowles does something extraordinarily brave in this novel: his main viewpoint character is an illiterate Moslem boy, bookended by a pair of dissolute and thoroughly unlikeable Western expats. (There is also an evil Frenchman; Bowles spares no one.)

Interestingly, the male expat is an American writer bemoaning the fact that his romantic view of Fez is disintegrating in front of his eyes; this is contrasted with the female expat, a 'professional' tourist, who uses such sojourns as her Moroccan trip mainly for letter writing and dinner-party anecdotes.

She is also a 'fan' of the writer, but finds it difficult to reconcile the mouldy real-life person with the empathic author figure conveyed in his fiction. This makes for a lot of rather black humour in the novel, and a perceptive discourse on the role of art and truth in fiction.

Amar's daily scrabble for survival on the hard streets of Fez means he has no overarching sense of historical significance; he literally lives from one moment to the next, in the context of his moral convictions, which are shaped by the immutable tenets of Islam.

His world gets thrown into turmoil when nationalistic violence erupts in Fez, leading to a chance encounter with the pair of expats, and a steep learning curve for all on the mysteries and tragedies of the world.

Bowles writes in his introduction that "Fiction should always stay clear of political considerations" -- which is a peculiar statement considering that A Spider's House is acutely political.

Or is it? Maybe the concept of politics is as misunderstood and as misrepresented as religion is these days;

certainly the interface between the two is very muddled, particularly in the Middle East.

Bowles has an incredible sense of place, evoking Morocco and Africa with his magnificent descriptive powers; Fez comes alive under his pen, in all its sun-baked, smelly and dusty glory.

The sense of history, too, is crackling and immediate, amid the gunfire, chaos and brutality. There is a lot of anger here: anger against the colonial powers, anger against cowardly liberals, religious bigots, traitors and diehard fanatics for despoiling the humanist tendencies of Islam.

It is a superbly sensory novel (inevitably this means it will be a disaster as a movie, especially if Hollywood gets its hands on it; one can only shudder at the thought of Amar being interpreted as a Spielbergian waif. The Bearded One would never have the courage to convey the utterly devastating ending of this novel. Or, even worse, he would turn him into a suicide bomber.)

I would recommend this novel to anyone trying to make head or tail of the ongoing implosion in the Middle East. You will get a far better understanding of the real issues facing the citizens on the ground, and the impact on their daily lives, than any number of bite-sized television segments or newspaper reports.

Jonathan Biddle says

Excellent, excellent book. Bowles sets the story in Fes, Morocco during the struggle for independence from France. I'm currently living in Fes, so it had an added interest to me. Bowles lived in Tangier for over half of his life so he was well acquainted with the Moroccan culture. He brilliantly uses different viewpoints--a local Muslim, a resident American, and a tourist American--to analyze different perspectives on the struggle.

The Fes resident is a committed Muslim who sees his hatred for the infidels--in this case the French--as ordained and approved by Allah. He displays a deterministic, resigned view of life where everything has been written beforehand by Allah and is his will.

The resident American loves Fes, at least for what it used to be. He's cynical about any attempts to change it, whether by the French or the resistance party. He knows Fes will never be able to return to its "magical" past and so he hates both sides in the struggle.

The tourist American is firmly committed to the idea of progress. To her, modernity is inevitable, and to resist the change that even the French are trying to bring foreshadows the death of that culture.

But the book is also about change. Each character slowly shifts their perspective on the struggle as they meet people that don't fit into their preconceived categories.

I don't want to throw the term "masterpiece" around lightly, but this certainly comes close. By never providing a resolution to the book's questions, he forces the reader to question what "progress" really is? Is modernity always a good thing? Shouldn't destructive patterns of life, however traditional, be eliminated wherever we find them? Isn't that in the people's best interest? After all, if they knew what they were missing, they would ask for it, right?

But Bowles isn't satisfied with surface answers. He convincingly shows how each perspective and each person's answers are inescapably tied to one's worldview. His psychological analysis is gripping and

beautiful to read. I highly recommend this book.

Tempo de Ler says

Neste livro, Paul Bowles leva-nos até Marrocos, no início dos anos 50; tempo de conflito entre árabes e franceses. A vida adquire um tom anárquico, os homens abandonaram as suas famílias, forçados pela pobreza, em busca de trabalho em cidades vizinhas ou alistaram-se no exército onde há a garantia de que terão o que comer.

Tensão, raiva e uma boa dose de preconceito de ambos os lados levam ao desencadear de acções violentas que espalham o terror...e acabam por juntar três indivíduos cuja aproximação, num cenário diferente, seria bastante improvável - uma progressista ingénua nas suas convicções, um ex-comunista americano que gostaria simplesmente que tudo voltasse ao que era antes e um adolescente analfabeto mas bastante perspicaz que se deixa guiar fervorosamente pela religião.

Não utilizei em vão o verbo *levar* no primeiro parágrafo. Com as suas **fantásticas descrições** Paul Bowles desperta os nossos sentidos e parece, efectivamente, **transportar-nos para os cenários de que nos fala**. Ficam-nos imagens fortes que, acompanhadas de uma **abordagem competente da cultura local, a nível religioso e político**, e perdendo tempo fundamentando mentalidades e costumes, transformam este livro numa **leitura muito interessante**.

A narrativa **aproxima-nos a dois lados e culturas bastante diferentes**. Muitos autores *mostram* um lado e tentam, muitas vezes até sem sucesso, *explicar* o outro, alheando-se do mesmo e tornando óbvio que há para eles um lado certo e um lado errado. Bowles mostra-nos os dois lados, e até mais, de forma equivalente, fundamentando-os. Infelizmente, fá-lo também através das suas personagens, criticando-as, destacando os seus traços negativos, e cortando assim qualquer laço de afinidade que pudéssemos desenvolver com elas.

O ritmo é ligeiramente **mais lento do que o desejável** e acabei por gostar mais do exotismo do livro e da informação útil que contém do que propriamente do enredo ficcional. Incomodou-me a **mudança abrupta de pontos de vista**; acabamos por voltar a entrar no compasso do livro mas não sem passar por momentos de alguma confusão.

O jovem marroquino Amar acredita na constante intervenção de Alá; tudo o que acontece está fadado a acontecer e um homem não tem o direito de lamentar o que é inevitável. Da mesma forma, o autor cruza a vida destas três personagens com algum fatalismo, como se estivesse destinado a acontecer.

J.I. says

In *Spider's House*, Paul Bowles leaves behind the moral lessons of meddling American's and decides to focus, truly, on the events of Morocco. Set during their revolution against the French, the story follows two strands, that of an illiterate but intelligent native boy and that of an American novelist (and his cohorts, at differing times) living in the country for the last five years.

The book is at its strongest when telling from the perspective of the Moroccan boy. He is interesting and

unique, both a product of his culture and independant from it, the way the best characters are. While the American's story provides most of the context for the revolution, it is weakest because it presents, pretty much, a tired and seen-before narrative.

What is best, however, about the story, is that everyone is wrong. The book is filled with misconceptions, misunderstandings and flat out biases. No one is spared from Bowles' criticism as even the most kind hearted and giving person is full of it at points and flat out incorrect at others.

To those that loved The Sheltering Sky, this novel may not work as well. Whereas that first novel was reminiscent of the Sahara sun, spare and harsh, this one is steeped in Fez, dense and layered without the sense of clarity. It is muddled, but in the way that people are muddled. I would say it's a better book, but many disagree.

Steven says

I never wanted this book to end. Bowles is amazing in his ability to portray so many different sides and cultures that are at conflict, not only assuming how they might act or speak, but going into entire thought processes, histories and cultural values revealing an entire reasoning for every action. I felt the same way when I finished The Sheltering Sky and I can't wait to read more of his writing.

metaphor says

There were a hundred things to say; there was nothing to say. He felt as if he had turned to stone.

*

His first reaction, that day, when he had identified his fear, was to sit down on a rock and stare at the ground. You've got to get hold of yourself, he thought. He could usually discover the origin of a state of anxiety; as often as not it was traceable to some precise physical cause, like insufficient sleep or indigestion. But what he had experienced in that flash had been almost like a momentary vision: he had seen consciousness as a circle, its end and beginning joined so that there was no break. Matter was conditioned by time, but not consciousness; it existed outside time. Was there then any valid basis for assuming that it was possible to know what went on inside the consciousness at the moment of death? It might easily seem forever, that instant when time ceased to function and life closed in upon itself, therefore it could prove to be inextinguishable. The immediacy of the experience had left him with a sensation of nausea; it was impossible to conceive anything more horrible than the idea that one was powerless to stop existing if one wanted, that there was no way to reach oblivion because oblivion was an abstraction, a fallacy. And so he sat, trying to shake off the nightmare feeling that had settled on him, thinking: What strange things happen in the mind of man. No matter what went on outside, the mind forged ahead, manufacturing its own adventures for itself, and who was to know where reality was, inside or out? He thought with passing envy of the people down the city below. How wonderful life would be if they were only right, and there were a god. And in the final analysis what more commendable and useful thing had mankind accomplished during its whole existence, than inventing of gods in whom its members could wholly believe, and believing, thereby find life more bearable?

Jennifer (aka EM) says

I've been trying to figure out how to review this book. Bowles is one of the most challenging novelists I've read. I read him, and I respond to the ideas and concepts emotionally and with a visceral understanding and empathy, more than intellectually. The plots, characters, dialogue leave me flummoxed but no less entranced.

I now love the two novels I've read, *The Sheltering Sky* and this one, although I'm convinced that I truly comprehend only about 10 or 15 percent of each one.

Both take place in North Africa--*The Sheltering Sky*'s setting is a little more elusive in keeping with its greater philosophical and surreal bent; I think Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia or maybe all three, iirc--this one is Morocco just after the French overthrow of the Sultan and the Moslem (I'll go with Bowles' spelling here) response led by the nascent Istaqlal (nationalist party).

Bowles was a U.S. expat writer who lived most of his life in Morocco. Both TSS and this novel (and, from the looks of it, his other writings too) provide a vivid, tactile feel for the area. As another of his book's descriptions says, they "bring us closer to a world we frequently hear about, but often find difficult to understand."

Without, that is, actually helping us understand - which is a big part of their charm, for me at least. Bowles is, as I said, *challenging*, and by that I mean he forces you to confront your own ignorance and preconceptions about these places and cultures that are, essentially, "foreign," at least or especially to North Americans.

The novels, and this one in particular, throw a sharp light on the "otherness" of the place and people it describes (otherness, that is, from the POV of a Western reader); not only the physical landscape which figures prominently, but here in *The Spider's House*, the cultural, religious and political ones. That sense of disconnection, that lack of understanding, play directly into its themes: this novel is largely about the yawning gulf between the Judao-Christian and Moslem worldviews.

Incidentally - and this is key - the title refers to a passage from The Koran:

"The likeness of those who choose other patrons than Allah is as the likeness of the spider when she taketh unto herself a house, and lo! The frailest of all houses is the spider's house, if they but knew."

The Spider's House was published in 1954, but it reads today with as much contemporary relevance as though it was published this year. Indeed, it seems prescient. The events, although specific and localized in the novel, seem to represent any of the endless, repeated, ever-to-be-repeated conflicts that consume our headlines today. The ancient origins and shape of the forces at play; the tenor and evolution of the escalating conflict; the context in which these forces took root, grew and flowered into violence, terror and war, are laid out here.

The book's POV, i.e., the central character, Stenham's (a U.S. expat writer living and travelling in Morocco, natch) is jaded and unflinchingly accusatory of the colonial forces that were and are and will continue, in his mind, to corrupt - by transforming, modernizing, Westernizing - the essential beauty and purity of the Moslem faith and culture. He sees this, knows it is inevitable, and rages against it and his impotence* in the face of it.

* in true Bowles fashion, this kind of cultural/political impotence is rendered as a cynical, nihilistic detonation of the soul; very personal, very existential

He also condemns the post-colonial, liberal-democratic response through the character of Mme Veyron, aka Polly aka Lee Burroughs (she has a lot of names; is that intentional?), a Paris-based American-born divorcée (with all the stereotypical implications of that word; this is, after all, 1954) seeking to engage with the culture through adventurous travel, but embodying all the worst of Western naivete, ignorance and cultural insensitivity.

At the same time - and this is a neat trick - Stenham both idealizes and disparages the Moslem culture and its response to the events: an idealization that grows increasingly shaky and eventually evaporates as a result of his encounter with Amar, an illiterate and impoverished Moslem teenager, and a devoted adherent to Islam.

The closer that Stenham gets into direct contact with Morocco and the factions as they break into all-out war with each other, the less clear his own ideological position.

And ain't that always the way it goes.

Although it probably (?) wasn't his intent, Bowles has written in Amar the most compelling and, dare I say, *understandable*, portrait of how colonial oppression, poverty, and religious fundamentalism collide to create the perfect crucible for birthing jihadist extremism.

Understandable, believable, although I really don't know how accurate or true. Leaving me mystified, muddled, confused - so basically, the same way I feel reading coverage of these same political-religious conflicts today.

I dock a star because the plot is nonsensical in places (and I think not only because I was so confused as to the events/history being depicted); Polly as a character is appallingly flat and clichéd (sort of forgiveable, as mentioned, because it's 1954) and the dialogue and relationship between Stenham and Polly seems unmotivated and unrealistic.

BUT - the last scene between Polly, Stenham and Amar is breathtaking. Absolutely breathtaking. I can say no more.

SO: I always recommend Bowles, and when my friends read him they invariably dislike him. But I love love love him. Proceed at your own discretion.

For a much better sense of what this is about (but caution, some spoilers if your threshold for same is low): see this NYT review from 1955; and this more contemporary review.

Mindy McAdams says

Loved this. There were a few short bits between an American man (a writer similar to the author) and an American woman (a beautiful traveler) that got a little tedious, but otherwise it was nearly perfect. The first thing by Paul Bowles I've read. I was looking for books set in Morocco and this story, which takes place in

Fes in 1955, was of special interest because Bowles lived in Morocco from 1947 until his death in 1999.

A good part of the book (at least one-third) is from the point of view of an Arab-Moroccan teen named Amar. This seemed a real tour de force to me because it was very convincing, layered, and complex, even though Amar is not only young but also wholly illiterate. His father, a religious scholar, put Amar in school when he was small, but Amar rebelled in such a headstrong way, his father said fine and let him go. Like any teenage boy (before video games), Amar spends as little time as possible at home. As he roams the streets, hangs out with friends, and works in a potter's shop, he makes acute observations about the actions and motives of people around him. These are informed by his confident and unwavering sense of religious right and morality, which he apparently developed by osmosis in his family home, as he does not go to the mosque. Neither does he pray. But God is a constant, unwavering presence in his life, and he never questions his own certainty about right and wrong, even when he chooses to do what he knows is wrong. In other words, his worldview is firmly rooted in Islam, but he is far from devout.

The other main characters are the two Americans. The man has lived in Morocco long enough to become fairly fluent in Arabic. The woman is one of those travelers with money we find in books, not rich enough to live well at home but rich enough to live in hotels abroad. She's entirely new to Morocco and northern Africa, and her attitudes are at odds with those of the man. This starts out well but eventually leads to the tedious bits I mentioned before.

Altogether separate from these characters, the Moroccan independence party, the Istiqlal, is working hard to stir up the people to rebel against the French Protectorate. This effort comes to a dangerous head, and the effects on Amar and the two Americans make up the second half of the book.

Of course the author was an outsider, neither Moroccan nor Muslim, and I can't claim to be able to judge whether his depictions are accurate or fanciful — but I feel certain there are many truths here, and I also feel sure that in Amar, Bowles was trying to come to terms with what he knew and what he guessed about the worldview of many Moroccans at that time. As Francine Prose points out in the Introduction, this is so important in the context of our world today, when radical Islamist extremists plague the world with violence and mayhem. Even though I read her Introduction after I had finished the book, I had had many of the same thoughts while reading about Amar's thoughts regarding the French and other western people. He didn't want to kill them, but so much about them offended him so deeply. At the same time, he was attracted to the Americans. This deep contradiction was a fascinating part of the story.

Missy J says

What a delight to read a work by Paul Bowles for the first time. **Paul Bowles (1910-1999)** was a composer and writer, who settled in Tangier (Morocco) in 1947 and lived there as an American expatriate until his death.

His vast knowledge of Moroccan people and their mentality, and what it is like to be a foreigner abroad seeps through his third novel **The Spider's House (1955)**. The book starts off with two different stories. One is written from the point of view of a young, illiterate Moroccan boy called Amar. He is the son of a traditional healer and views the world solely from the "Moslem" point of view. Here is an example:

If you could not have freedom you could still have vengeance, and that was all anyone really wanted now. Perhaps, he thought, rationalizing, [...] vengeance was what Allah wished His

people to have, and by inflicting punishment on unbelievers the Moslems would merely be imposing divine justice.

The other story is written from the point of view of an American expatriate living in Fez called Stenham. He hangs out with a variety of foreigners in the city and they have different views on Morocco, the French colonizers and the future of this country in the northwestern corner of the African continent. Some of Stenham friends support the French, others including Polly, an American woman are ardent supporters of the Moroccan independence movement (*Istiqlal*) and believe that the Moroccans are entitled to the same rights like Americans and the rest of the West. Stenham is annoyed by Polly's idealism. He loves Morocco just for the land that it is and the society that was different from the West. He fears that independence will radically change the Morocco he fell in love with.

Halfway through the book, the paths of Amar and Stenham converge. Fez is in the middle of an insurrection. That's when the story becomes quite suspenseful. Will Amar's and Stenham's worlds collide into a violent clash, or will they find ways to get along? Will they both survive the violence that is raging in the city? I thought this part of the book was quite interesting, unfortunately the ending left me a bit hanging. But there's no doubt that Paul Bowles was way ahead of his time when he wrote about the culture clash of the West and the Islamic world. And when I read the news on the Middle East these days, it seems like not much has changed.

Jasmine Star says

As much as I hate to admit it, many of the observations made about culture and the perception of foreigners really opened my eyes. My favourite anecdote is when one of the Moroccan characters sees a woman, and the way he takes her in. He notices her hair is uncovered, the jewellery she wears, but mainly how brazen she is, how flamboyant her gestures are, and how loud her speech is. Initially he says, "She must be a prostitute of the lowest sort, because even decent prostitutes display some sense of modesty" and then he realizes she is a foreigner, and an American. Just makes me think about the way people view me in public, especially since I look Moroccan. It's quite amusing! The book is written from a few perspectives and has a mystical "everything happens by the will of Allah" quality at times. It is well put together, but the ending leaves something to be desired.

AC says

The major portion of this book, the first 80%, is an utterly enchanting meditation on an exotic land (Morocco) and the contrasts between the archaic and modernity. The writing is brilliant. But the final part of the story either wobbled or, in my view, just collapsed - as Bowles simply didn't know how to resolve the story he had so meticulously constructed. If one can ignore this flaw, reading this book will be enormously rewarding.

Roksolana Sviato says

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Danny says

It has been about two years since i read this book, so i won't go into too much plot detail, but i will instead share some of my impressions of the book.

This book was written circa 1956-58 by Paul Bowles, an American author who spent most of his adult life living in Morocco. The book, unsurprisingly, takes place in Morocco on the eve of the revolution in which the Moroccans won their independence from France. The story follows a young Moroccan and an American author simultaneously, and depicts what happens when their paths cross.

Bowles writes with a rather straight-forward, almost journalistic style, painting a decidedly unsympathetic picture of his characters. The book is ultimately about the differing values of the Moroccan people and their desire for sovereignty, and those of the westerners depicted in the story who wish to see the "charms" of colonial Morocco remain intact, an outcome not likely to occur under self-rule. The author's third-person voice and unemotional delivery effectively express the conflict between these cultures and allow the reader ample room to establish an informed opinion, even with little or no other knowledge of Moroccan history.

The story doesn't have outer-worldly plot twists, like Vonnegut, certainly isn't at all romantic like Fitzgerald, and doesn't ask you to put on a funny accent when reading it like "Trainspotting". Neither is it a particularly quick read, but it is an engaging, thoughtful book that will at once get you intimately acquainted with an exotic (and beautiful) locale while gently and subtly encouraging you to consider an ethical and socio-political stance you likely haven't considered before, and all without seeming too sententious. On this last point, Bowles earns my respect for executing this literary balancing act about as perfectly as can be done.

Christopher Sutch says

This is definitely the best of Bowles's first three novels, an extremely detailed and well-crafted story about the beginnings of the Moroccan struggle for independence from France. The novel's protagonist is a Fassi boy and much of the story is told from his point of view, which makes the contrast between his worldview and that of the American characters very stark and, ultimately, devastating. The American protagonists are slowly revealed to be people entirely selfish and not knowledgeable about Islam and local customs (even though the male character, Stenham, supposes himself an expert in such things; Bowles quite nicely reveals how arrogant and frankly stupid orientalist attitudes are). Bowles also nicely represents the divide between Islam and the leninist-voluntarist beliefs and tactics of the Istiqlal as they played out in Fez during the first year of the war. A very enlightening and satisfying read.

Az says

One could read this novel in many ways: as Paul Bowles' skewering of his own orientalist desires for Moroccan transhistorical "primitivism"; as a fictionalised account of the beginning of the Moroccan revolution; as a far superior, more complex and far more critical reading of the "clash of civilizations" thesis; as a novel about a stupid American man pursuing a rather bratty American woman; as a novel about tourism and travel, to be read alongside Edward Said's Orientalism; as an attempt to understand Islam; as a parable satirizing liberal qualms about post-WWII third world nationalist movements, modernization and marxism.

I think it's possible to read it in all ways at once and to revel in the prose, the bite, the wit:

"it was too bad she had to have opinions; she had been so agreeable to begin with before she had started to express them. And then, the terrible truth was that neither she nor he was right. It would not help the Moslems or the Hindus or anyone else to go ahead, nor, even if it were possible, would it do them any good to stay as they were. It did not really matter whether they worshipped Allah or carburetors--they were lost in any case. In the end, it was his own preferences which concerned him. He would have liked to prolong the status quo because the decor that went with it suited his personal taste."

For all that, it fails as a political project; precisely because it's no good reading a white dude's self-absorbed account of white tourists during a revolution (or a white dude's "channelling" of an Arab youth). One ought to be reading the novels written by Moroccans that tell the story of these things.

