



The Mirage

Matt Ruff

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A mind-bending novel in which an alternate history of 9/11 and its aftermath uncovers startling truths about America and the Middle East

11/9/2001: Christian fundamentalists hijack four jetliners. They fly two into the Tigris & Euphrates World Trade Towers in Baghdad, and a third into the Arab Defense Ministry in Riyadh. The fourth plane, believed to be bound for Mecca, is brought down by its passengers.

The United Arab States declares a War on Terror. Arabian and Persian troops invade the Eastern Seaboard and establish a Green Zone in Washington, D.C. . . .

Summer, 2009: Arab Homeland Security agent Mustafa al Baghdadi interrogates a captured suicide bomber. The prisoner claims that the world they are living in is a mirage--in the real world, America is a superpower, and the Arab states are just a collection of "backward third-world countries." A search of the bomber's apartment turns up a copy of "The New York Times," dated September 12, 2001, that appears to support his claim. Other captured terrorists have been telling the same story. The president wants answers, but Mustafa soon discovers he's not the only interested party.

The gangster Saddam Hussein is conducting his own investigation. And the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee--a war hero named Osama bin Laden--will stop at nothing to hide the truth. As Mustafa and his colleagues venture deeper into the unsettling world of terrorism, politics, and espionage, they are confronted with questions without any rational answers, and the terrifying possibility that their world is not what it seems.

Acclaimed novelist Matt Ruff has created a shadow world that is eerily recognizable but, at the same time, almost unimaginable. Gripping, subversive, and unexpectedly moving, "The Mirage" probes our deepest convictions and most arresting fears.

The Mirage Details

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From Reader Review The Mirage for online ebook

Jeremy says

This has gotten a lot of comparisons with Philip K. Dick's 'the man in the high castle' and while it is an extremely detailed and well researched alternative history, it certainly doesn't have the same subtle blend of themes and paranoia that Dick could evoke. The cosmic role reversal between America and Arabia in 'The Mirage' feels more about grafting one civilizations 'success' over another civilizations 'failure.' At first the Arab characters feel like little more than American characters with Arabic names and fairly conventional american backgrounds. Yet there are a few powerful, emotional moments throughout the book which show the cost of living in this world. Watching a deeply closeted Muslim getting blackmailed, reading about the disintegration of a marriage in a society where having multiple marriages at once are acceptable, someone flicking a cigarette butt off a roof as they wonder if their world is really what it appears to be, etc. Ruff is a strong writer, but I wanted him to focus in more on these moments of pathos and psychological tension than on the constant exposition of this world. The info dumps are well handled, considering what a deluge of new information he throws at you, but ultimately I found myself overwhelmed and often forgetting the precise history of turf wars between a john gotti-esque Saddam Hussein (weird, but effective) and the Mahdi army. The most disorienting (and I think most effective) part was when everyone goes to America and we see a truly bleak, sad vision of what right wing fundamentalist mania would do if it ran amok in the U.S. Everyone saying 'it's gods will' every other sentence, guns with violent biblical verses carved into their stocks (easily the book's most chilling image), and waring paramilitary christian groups engaging in a perpetual cycle of messianic violence. It's Rick Santorum meets the John Birch society. Like many books that try to juggle an entire made up world, The Mirage sets itself up with just too much to resolve and explore fully, and its only with a few handy deus ex machinas that it even makes it to the end at all. But look, Ruff still deserves serious credit, he's one of the few writers thus far who has actually been willing to try and tackle 'the war on terror' as a whole as a literary subject. An ongoing conflict this large, and this poorly defined is hard enough to pin down in reality, much less in fiction. If the war on terror ever develops a literature of its own, I suspect The Mirage will probably be seen as one of its antecedents. Right now, its one of the only works in a field that apparently few novelists want to examine.

Jill Heather says

Overall, the book was okay, but problematic.

Some of the worldbuilding in this book was brilliant, from small funny details (CSI: Halal, Christianity for the Ignorant) to the large strokes of the way the UAS (United Arab States) and the alt-USA were set up. The general outlines of Europe -- mostly the eastern bit -- were also fun, though I think that the results of WWI that led to WWII in this world don't entirely fit, but no details were provided so I can make up my own reasons that alt-WWI led to alt-WWII (there are some reasons given in the book, but not exactly geopolitical reasons).

The first half of the book was fantastic. But as we got more and more into the alt-USA, it made less and less and less sense. If the USA is a bunch of independent countries, what about Mexico? (One state appears to be part of Texas.) What about the entire northern half of the US, which -- other than a brief mention of NYC and DC -- seems to not exist? Shouldn't it make a significant difference that North America is big, unlike the Middle East? If a US president/dictator is trying the "all of North America" manifest destiny thing, then

Canada and Mexico should be mentioned. I just cannot imagine how different parts of the (southern) US are all at war and Mexico just stands by.

Another issue is that the UAS is in no ways better than the real-USA. Mostly they're the same, though pork is illegal (possibly other foods that aren't legal in the US are legal there), as is alcohol, though hashish isn't. It's fighting for gender equality and sort of succeeding, etc etc. Racism in the UAS is entirely ignored. It's virulently anti-gay. So the UAS is like the USA, except not as good. They also use the Gregorian calendar, for unknown reasons.

And, of course, the characters. Many of the main players' names will be familiar to you, and their personalities are much the same, though their circumstances are very different. The biggest problem here -- and this is a huge spoiler, so if you want to read the book without knowing this, beware, though I don't think you will actually lose anything if this single plot point is spoiled -- (view spoiler)

Derek Wolfgram says

Taking an interesting perspective on the "war on terror," Matt Ruff turns the events of 9/11 on their head, setting The Mirage in the United Arab States, where the population is still struggling to deal with the aftereffects of a devastating 11/9/01 terrorist attack by Christian fundamentalists in hijacked jets. While the premise is intriguing, and several of the characters are memorable, the novel is ultimately dragged down by too many jokey parallels and references highlighting various real American political figures and situations. The constant name-dropping, paired with dozens of interspersed "entries" from The Library of Alexandria, a fictionalized Wikipedia, to provide background information, ultimately detract from the storytelling. While The Mirage is nowhere near as masterful as Sewer, Gas, Electric or Set This House in Order, Matt Ruff is still one of the most interesting novelists writing today, and I look forward to his next book.

Isis says

This book reminded me not so much of The Man in the High Castle but of the TV miniseries based on it. The alternate history posited is glib, a clearly deliberate mirror of our reality rather than a logical extension of some pivotal event going a different way, and at first I thought, "Okay, but what is the *point*?" And then the point became apparent, as bits of our reality intrude into this alternate world, much to the consternation of the characters, and I got a lot more interested.

What I didn't like: "11/9" was cute, but - the US is one of very few countries where dates are written month/day rather than day/month! Iraq would write November 9th as 9/11! In general there were a few too many in-joke type equivalences, such as the band "Green Desert" with their hit "Arabian Idiot". A lot of the equivalences seemed forced, particularly the role of Israel in the alt-world, and the simultaneous existence of powerful women and the societal rules that relegated them to secondary roles.. The characters were thinly-drawn, and I didn't find myself caring much about them - I think maybe they just needed to be delved into more deeply, particularly Mustafa and Amal. I think the structure could have been improved, with a little more foreshadowing and gun-hanging early.

What I did like: the "Library of Alexandria" excerpts - the alt-world equivalent of Wikipedia - were wonderful, a great way of infodumping without being infodumpy, and very entertaining besides. I rolled my

eyes at some of the famous characters' new roles (Timothy McVeigh! David Koresh! DONALD RUMSFELD and his unknown unknowns!) but still they made me grin, especially the ones who were never named but obvious by their descriptions and roles (Dick Cheney, the Bush father and son). Osama Bin Laden being a 'wicked prince' in all worlds. The mirage artifacts, and the slow realization that leads to the truly nifty reveal, and the denouement. And I appreciate the holding of a mirror to our actions, the Arab Marines in Washington DC hoping to bring democracy to the backward Christians, and the way it makes the American reader ruefully understand how our behavior in actual history is viewed by the actual people we have affected.

Dan Schwent says

When Christian fundamentalists destroy the Tigris and Euphrates towers on 11/9, the United Arab States declare a war on terror on the nations of North America. Eight years later, Homeland security officers Mustafa, Amal, and Samir stumble upon relics from another world, a world where America is a super power and the Middle East is a fractured region...

On the heels of Lovecraft Country, I knew I had to read more Matt Ruff. This one sounded intriguing and it was definitely that.

The Mirage is an alternate history tale, one where the roles in the War on Terror are reversed, with the Arabians as the super power and the former United States as rogue territories. If I'd ever read The Man in the High Castle instead of only knowing it by reputation, I'd say they were in a similar vein.

The Mirage is essentially a detective story with Mustafa, Amal, and Samir trying to get to the bottom of things, like the relics and who was really behind the 11/9 attack, before falling victim to the machinations of Al Qaeda, the UAS secret police in this tale. Interspersed are entries from the Library of Alexandria, an online Wikipedia type of resource in this world, giving us tantalizing glimpses at the world's history without infodumping them in the text.

While the detective aspect was pretty cool, the fun of the story was seeing where everyone ended up in this reality. Saddam Hussein is an underworld kingpin, Osama bin Laden is a senator, and Dick Cheney is head of the Texas CIA and known for eliminating his rivals in hunting accidents.

I wolfed this book down in three sittings. It was quite readable and I couldn't wait to see how things panned out. By showing the war on terror in the mirror universe, Ruff shows what a shit show the whole thing was.

This is my favorite quote from the book:

"So in the other reality, Osama bin Laden is an Iraqi?"

"No, he's still from Jeddah," Amal said. "A 'Saudi' Arabian."

"Then why the hell would America invade Iraq?"

"Because God put a Texan in charge!"

I don't have many bad things to say about this book. I almost gave it a 5 but I thought the characters were a little skimpy and the ending could have been better. Overall, The Mirage was a great read and an interesting look at how things might have went another way. 4.5 out of 5 stars.

zxvasdf says

From his amateurish but exuberant Fool on the Hill to his pynchonesque Public Works Trilogy to the high octane Bad Monkey, Matt Ruff is a versatile writer whose experience you can see accreting in the quality of his work.

Mirage is a straightforward novel, but don't let that fool you. It's no less complex, the complexity arising from the many moral issues its characters grapple with. Densely researched, the Arabian analogues to post 9/11 America are clever and brilliantly done. A strange but familiar Arabia rises from the prose, revealing a cultural startling similar to us, but with the trappings of a Islam centered society. You will find characters from our own history occupying unexpected moral roles, as well as more contemporary figures.

I don't know if it means anything coming from a non-Muslim writer like Ruff (I am only assuming he's not Muslim) but I think Mirage portrays the much demonized Islam in a very positive and appealing manner. Obedience and a show of gratitude to God is central to the Muslim character, but you also see there are Muslims who have "strayed from the fold."

The ultimate message of Mirage is of love, and the difficult choices we all make for love.

Jesse says

sorta disappointing - what could have been an amazing novel, just reads like genre fiction, with a purported purpose. the characters are flat and police proceduralish. saddam and bin laden are evil and written with zero depth (and this is a trap many writers fall into - that evil characters should be written with no depth and complexity. but evil actions require the most complex motives, and yet writers settle for simple undiluted motivations: greed, jealousy, etc.) but the biggest letdown of all was the rationale as well as the mechanism for the 'mirage', the answer is really simple, taken from a fairy tale, and the motivation for the mirage is even worse, that is if you can even find it (as it's never explicitly stated). alas, you're left with genre fiction without the plot payoff and capital "L" literature without the depth of character or human motivation that allows a reader to walk away from a novel with satisfaction without a full plot resolution (think infinite jest, gravity's rainbow, pale fire, etc.) and of the two novels of his i've read, i'd stick with bad monkeys which sticks with the paranoid espionage angle throughout and tries not to veer to far from course.

Rebecca says

While reading *The Mirage*, I discovered there's a certain level of detail past which an author shouldn't go in any work of alternate history fiction, and that level is reached, passed, and left in the desert dust in Matt Ruff's novel. It's a great premise--the Tigris and Euphrates Towers in the United Arab States are supposedly destroyed by Christian fundamentalist hijackers with airplanes, and the UAS, the world's lone superpower, is then plunged into a disastrous War on Terror in North America--but Ruff's determination to use so many real life personalities and inside jokes from our world nearly ruins it. It's difficult to see people from this life who were so mentally disturbed, like Timothy McVeigh, Mohammed Atta, or David Koresh, as competent leaders in any other reality (not to mention a 95-year-old Lyndon B. Johnson still being President in 2001--

that was my definitive *Whaaaaaaa?* moment in this book). The joking references, the *CSI: Damascus*, start to get stale and predictable halfway through. The Library of Alexandria reference articles feel gimmicky, an easy way out for the author to move the plot along without having to explain why the West fell into second- and third-world status after WWI. And the ending? After all this build-up the simple supernatural explanation is disappointing. There *is* an interesting story here; maybe we readers need our own jinn to change the details for the better.

Alan says

I've been reading a fair amount of heavy, serious literature lately—authors like Philip Roth, Lawrence Durrell and Alasdair Gray—so I thought I'd go back to something lighter for a change, like this novel... about 9/11/2001 and the ensuing War on Terror.

Or, rather, about 11/9/2001, the fateful day when a small group of fanatical Christian terrorists flew hijacked planes into Baghdad's twin Tigris and Euphrates skyscrapers, shaking the foundations of the sprawling Islamic republic known as the United Arab States, and sparking the invasion of North America by UAS liberators in 2003...

It's a high-concept role reversal, you see, a book whose elevator pitch could be on the level of *Freaky Friday*, but here turned into a fully-realized alternative universe. In this topsy-turvy world, for example, Israel is a central European state with its capital in Berlin, and Wikipedia has been replaced with the "Library of Alexandria," an online service curated by Muammar Gaddafi's technically-inclined nephew (although the Library's science-fictional roots go back much further than Jimmy Wales' brainchild, to John Brunner's *The Shockwave Rider* and *Stand on Zanzibar*, if not even earlier).

These role reversals are not always entirely plausible. There's *no way* that the same taxonomy of URLs—like libraryofalexandria.org—would have been developed by an Arabic-speaking culture. But they do generate plenty of wry chuckles:

"Even in cases of extraordinary rendition, where prisoners were shipped overseas to be questioned in a human-rights vacuum like Texas[...]" (p.65)

Heh. It's funny, see, because in *our* universe Texas is... oh, wait.

Also—far too many public figures from our own history show up in roles similar to (or with only ironic differences from) our own. This is a common issue with alternate histories, of course, difficult to resist when an author wants to comment on our own universe. For the most part it did not detract significantly from my enjoyment of the story, and Ruff does eventually explain—within the context of the story—just why it is that there are so many parallels between the world of the *Mirage* and our own... but I balked (even in the midst of greater implausibilities) at seeing LBJ and JFK and even Leonard Nimoy show up in the roles they play here.

If that were *all* The *Mirage* turned out to be... well, it wouldn't have been much.

But you can trust Matt Ruff not to be that shallow. Every book of his is unique; not for him the grinding out of endless series. When Ruff does invent, rather than merely reflect, the result is sly and effective... the significance of "T.A.B." being one example. The opening scenes, in which the immediately likeable Arab Homeland Security agent Mustafa al Baghdadi has to take down a Methodist "homicide bomber" while

bantering with his partner Amal bint Shamal, daughter of Baghdad's first female mayor, are as tautly written as any thriller. And, later, I felt chills when I read "Nous sommes tous Américains" (p.82) over al Baghdadi's shoulder.

There are a few spear-carriers, redshirts and cutouts assembled from news stories, to be sure, but Ruff's major characters are well-rounded individuals, whose warmth and wit carry the story forward as the situation in the UAS gets weirder. The Mirage turns out to be a serious work of speculative literature after all (not that I necessarily forgive you, Powell's, for retroactively reassigning *all* of Ruff's works from the skiffy ghetto to general literature upon the publication of this one sf novel).

"And if I swallow anything evil,
Put your finger down my throat..."
— "Behind Blue Eyes," by The Who

In the end, the villains of The Mirage look much like our own crop of wicked princes. Ruff shows sympathy even for his devils, although he does not apologize for them—a phrase repeated more than once is that "A wicked prince in one world is a wicked prince in all[...]", and al Baghdadi's simple declaration to one of them is a moral directed as easily to our own universe's seemingly endless host of hijackers, homicide bombers and holy warriors:

Their lives are not yours to take.

Thomas says

Do you remember where you were when the towers fell? Mustafa al Baghdadi does. He was busting whiskey smugglers on the Tigris River when he saw the planes, hijacked by Christian fundamentalist insurgents, crash into the Tigris and Euphrates Twin Towers, ultimately bringing them down. That act, on November 9, 2001, sent the United Arab States into a full-blown "War on Terror," driven by President Osama bin Laden, against the struggling theocracy in America. The UAS military forces maintain a presence there for many years, suffering losses from the forces there, led by such terror masterminds as Donald Rumsfeld, "The Quail Hunter" (a man who gets rid of his opponents by inviting them out on quail hunts and then "accidentally" shoots them), and a reference to a man who sounds a lot like George W. Bush. Add in some wild conspiracy theories behind how the UAS government was behind the attacks, and you start to find a lot of familiarity in a novel that upturns the entire history of 9/11 into the alternate history of 11/9.

Matt Ruff has created a compelling read that could have been just a thought experiment into jingoism, racism, patriotism, and the role of government following 9/11, but he also adds a fantastic plot to go along with this story to further cement it into our own history. The plot itself feels like a maguffin, since the point seems to be more about making the reader think, but the plot raises enough questions along the way to keep the reader moving forward through the story, and keeps it from being just a satire. It's controversial, to say the least (it's certainly disconcerting to read the words "President Osama bin Laden"), but it all feels deliberate, as if the point of this story is to make us a little uncomfortable by considering the viewpoint of the War on Terror from the other side.

That point makes it a little difficult to rate the novel on its story. It's a little strange, and requires a significant suspension of disbelief in regards to the plot as the conspiracy begins to unravel, and ultimately I just found

it to be hokey and disappointing. It also relies heavily on creating characters out of real people, which grew a little tiresome. They became caricatures of sorts, and as Ruff peppered the novel with more and more of them, swapping their moral and political sides from history to the novel, it turned into a guessing game where you wondered who was going to be the next bad guy or good guy. Thematically, it works, as it drives home the point of which is which in the War on Terror and how much of it depends on one's perspective; story-wise, it was a bit of a failure for me.

The thing is, I liked the book. I can rely on Matt Ruff to write a compelling, interesting story with some wild suppositions, and that was certainly the case with *The Mirage*. It's not as good as *Sewer, Gas, Electric* (though, admittedly, I should stop comparing his works against that novel, as it's one of my favorites), but it raises some interesting questions and will keep you thinking long after you finish the book. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone (conservatives would find a lot to argue against here, I think), but if you're curious about it, I think it's worth reading.

John says

With "The Mirage", Matt Ruff has written the definitive 9-11 novel, a spellbinding, alternative history thriller that is the 21st Century version of Philip K. Dick's "The Man in the High Castle"; an often sly, truly memorable, fictional commentary on the 9-11-01 terrorist attacks and America's military response, especially its invasion of Iraq. This is no mere homage to Philip K. Dick's greatest science fiction novel, but instead, one that truly transcends it, with dialogue reminiscent of Elmore Leonard and David Foster Wallace, a plot worthy of Graham Greene and John Le Carre, and more than a passing nod to William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and Neal Stephenson; indeed it can be seen as a contemporary tale straight out of "One Thousand and One Nights" which perceptive readers will appreciate and understand by the close of Ruff's compelling saga. I have no doubt that Ruff's latest novel will be viewed as his most controversial. There will be those who find objectionable, his heroic portrayal of democratic Muslim and Christian Arabs, in stark contrast to his utterly reprehensible cast of fanatical Fundamentalist Protestant Christian Americans, and they will also claim that his plot is utterly preposterous (But one that is far more rooted in reality than Dick's dystopian vision of a United States conquered and divided into zones of Imperial Japanese and Nazi German occupation in "The Man in the High Castle"). Any novel that will have as characters, the likes of Saddam Hussein, Tariq Aziz and Osama bin Laden, will be the target of ample criticism, but Ruff's choices make absolute sense as this is truly a compelling work of alternative history, and one destined to be a classic in this genre.

Readers will find ample reminders of 9-11 and subsequent American history, within Ruff's compelling alternative history, starting with an almost poetic prologue that recounts a Baghdad dawn eerily reminiscent of New York City's on that fateful Tuesday morning (which, in Ruff's version is also a Tuesday), seeing the first rays of the sun striking the Tigris and Euphrates twin World Trade Center towers. And then there will be scenes set in the United States, not far from the Green Zone established by United Arab States armed forces in Washington, D. C., that will have unavoidable comparisons with America's recently concluded occupation of Iraq. And yet, despite the gross similarities, there will be differences, based on cultural and religious differences as well as the alternative history timeline, which Ruff cleverly exploits via his "entries" in "The Library of Alexandria", his alternative history clone of Wikipedia, which are often witty, quite clever, "footnotes" which merely add to - not detract from - his engrossing narrative.

Eight years after the 11-9-01 terrorist attacks on the United Arab States, Homeland Security agent Mustafa al-Baghdadi interrogates a captured American suicide bomber who claims that their recent history is but a

mirage of the truth; one in which the United States of America, a superpower, is attacked by fanatical Muslim terrorists, with the Muslim Arab world fragmented into barely civilized "backward third-world states", not the democratic superpower that is the United Arab States. Other terrorists have been telling the same stories, and Mustafa, along with his colleagues and friends Samir and Amal, soon embark on a perilous trek from the Arab world to the occupied Christian States of America in search of the truth, encountering not only other suspects, but even artifacts, that support the bomber's astonishing claims. Theirs is a trek to uncover the truth before the independent investigations of Baathist labor leader - and gangster - Saddam Hussein and Senate Intelligence Committee head Osama bin Laden succeed.

"The Mirage" is an exceptional work of fiction that warrants a mention in the 2012 "best of" lists, and one worthy of recognition as a potential Hugo and Nebula Award nominee by those within the science fiction literary community. Ruff's latest novel should confirm his status as one of the best American writers of my generation; a noteworthy literary career that includes notable works of fantasy ("Fool on the Hill"), post-cyberpunk fiction ("Sewer Gas Electric: The Public Works Trilogy"), and most recently, a heart-pounding psychological thriller homage to Philip K. Dick ("Bad Monkeys"). Much more so than either Rick Moody or Jonathan Lethem - his closest peers amongst "mainstream" fiction writers capable of writing excellent science fiction - Ruff has created a believable, realistic "world" as memorable in its own right as those envisioned by the likes of William Gibson and China Mieville in, respectively, their celebrated "Cyberspace" and "New Crobuzon" trilogies; it's a "world" that shouldn't be missed.

Maciek says

The date is 11/9/2001: Christian fundamentalists from the Christian States of America hijack four jetliners, and launch a suicide attack against the United Arab States. Two jetliners crash into Tigris and Euphrates World Trade Towers in Baghdad. One crashes into the the Arab Defense Ministry in Riyadh. The last one, believed to be aimed for Mecca, is brought down by the passengers. The United Arab States declares a War on Terror, and invades the CSA, establishing the Green Zone in Washington, D.C. Eight years later, Arab Homeland Security agent Mustafa al Baghdadi interrogates a captured suicide bomber. The man claims that the world Mustafa knows is a mirage, reality turned upside down - in the real world America is a world superpower, and the Arab states are just a bunch of backward, thirld world countries. A search of his apartment brings up a copy of The New York Times, dated September 12, 2001 reporting a terorrist attack on the Twin Towers in the city...

The premise of the novel is great, potent with possibilities and the author obviously has a lot of fun with creating a world which is standing on its head. *Law & Order: Halal* and *CSI: Damascus* are popular TV shows and in bookstores one can find books like *Christianity for the Ignorant*. On the internet, people can browse the *Library of Alexandria*, a "user edited reference source". Characters we know appear in reversed roles - Osama bin Laden is a war hero, but Saddam Hussein is still the bad guy. There's a lot of similar references in this novel, and spotting them out is great fun.

However, the biggest flaw of the text is the fact that it gets bogged down with mundanity; the fun of the mirage concept is buried down under the rough parts which slow the pace down and make the reader slog along. The ambitious idea and depth of changes introduced into the world deserved more than this; in parts it reads like any other contemporary thriller, with characters more sketched than developed, focusing more on the plotline, which seems disjointed and unfocused. The idea carries the whole novel along, and hile I felt that the ending was satisfying I couldn't shake off the feeling that this novel deserved more; in the mirage

world it would be thought provoking and memorable, while in the real world it never really becomes more than a sum of its parts, depending on the clever gimmicks and idea of its author.

Overall, I am glad that I've read it, and I think that the title suits it well - it is like a mirage, glittering with wonders which slowly evaporate as we approach it to take a good look.

Noah says

The *Mirage* started off strongly - it has a truly interesting premise, and the atmosphere Ruff creates in the alternate reality Baghdad is pretty engaging. However, as the book moves (too quickly) on, the flaws start to show: the narrative style is a bit flimsy, and it also starts to feel really gimmicky as more and more familiar faces from the "real" world (especially the notable American characters) start to pop up. I can see the usefulness (and even the fun) of making characters out of Saddam and Osama bin Laden, but it gets more and more distracting as the story wears on, especially when references to TV shows like *CSI* and *24* become more frequent. The ending is also far more sci-fi/fantasy than I was hoping for. I read somewhere that Ruff originally pitched this as a TV show, and I definitely think this would've worked way better had a network picked it up.

Selwa says

I feel I should introduce myself. My name is Selwa, and I'm an American Iraqi. I happen to be American because my dad got a job in the United States before I was born. Had he gotten a job anywhere else, or nowhere else, or still in the US but post-1980, I don't know that I'd be an American now (though, global events being what they are, if he'd gotten a job nowhere else, I might be trying real hard to get to the United States, or anywhere else, right now!).

So, having only heard of *The Mirage*, a book about an alternate world where the US is in shambles and the Middle East is unified and doing really well, less than 2 weeks ago (thanks, goodreads friend who Liked your friend's review, thereby having it pop up on my feed), I knew I needed it right away. I was also quite surprised to see it's 4 years old. Why hadn't I heard of it before now?

You want my honest answer? Alright, here goes: While a great number of Americans believe going into the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular were mistakes, acknowledge that there were no weapons of mass destruction, and, in many ways, think things are much worse now than they were pre-2003 (or maybe even pre-1990), there still aren't enough people to boost *The Mirage* higher up on various lists.

Conversely, there are far too many people who think that if you speak Arabic you must be a terrorist (especially if you're on a plane), or if you're Muslim you must hate freedom/women/gays/whatever. And those people definitely aren't reading this, though I wish they would. There was something so satisfying to me to see everything turned on its head. And I think that by swapping places, it shows how silly some things are. There's a part of the book where an Arab sees a white guy and immediately distrusts him. Isn't that silly??? Yet, my luggage is always "randomly" chosen when I fly. Not so silly, huh.

(Can you help me figure out if this is silly or not? My boyfriend is white, Italian American, but he has a big bushy beard, and the time we traveled together they also "randomly" went through his luggage. I thought it

was funny, he was annoyed.)

Anyway, that's enough yammering about my personal life ... that's not why you're reading this, I'm sure :) So, to sum up, I really liked this book (in an alternate version of GR I'd give it 4.5 stars), and I liked how some of the same historical people showed up in this universe. Saddam Hussein, for example, is a powerful gangster. Osama bin Laden is a senator. Bush Jr. tells his dog he's the "decider". The mystery was intriguing as well, and I found the ending satisfactory (though I'd have loved a bit more epilogue). And, all in all, I finished with a touch of wistfulness, of how things could have been, or how they could be, in the home that was never really mine, and also gratitude, for where I wound up, here in "the best of all possible worlds".

Mike says

I just wanted to let you know that I finished reading Matt Ruff's new book, The Mirage, and I'm over the moon about it, it is so good! It kept me up reading long into the night!!! It begins on November 9, 2001. Members of the Halal Police force are rousting a smuggler of wines and spirits from his boat on the Tigris. Mustafa al Baghdadi is a member of this squad, enforcing Islamic rules against the selling of spirits. But this is a very different Baghdad than we are used to. This is a major metropolis of modern buildings, modern culture and modern crime. We find out Mustafa is upset. He and his wife Fadwa have had another argument. He suspects it might be over his second wife, who he regrets marrying. In a pique he has taken their only car to work, forcing her to take the El to the twin World Trade centre towers where she is meeting someone. As Mustafa and the rest of the Halal squad are standing over their prisoner they hear the roar of a passenger jet engine, impossibly close and incredibly loud, flying in the direction of the twin towers. An explosion is heard, followed minutes later by sirens. Mustafa know in his heart that Fadwa is dead.

The story skips ahead 10 years. The events of 11/9 are long past. The War on Terror against the Christian States of America is winding down. Mustafa is now a member of the AHS (Arab Homeland Security) the federal police force of the UAS (United Arab States) He is still mourning the death of Fadwa. When a Christian Crusader attempts to blow himself up in a crowded market square Mustafa almost gets himself killed. His boss suspects he may have done it on purpose. So he assigns a couple of members to his team-a former ABI (Arab Bureau of Investigation)agent named Amal and his old friend Samir, both to help him and keep an eye on him. As the AHS continues investigating how this Crusader managed to get past the now very tight security, Mustafa and his crew start hearing stories about the Mirage. When they capture a Crusader alive he begins ranting about how all reality is just a mirage-that in the 'real' world America is a superpower and the states of the UAS are just rag tag 3rd world countries. The Mirage, however, is a powerful story, for Christians and Muslims alike; and Mustafa finds out that powerful people like the gangster Saddam Hussein and his sons, and the UAS Senator Osama Bin Laden, are also interested in finding out the truth about it.

Matt Ruff weaves a very believable version of modern history, but from the other side of the looking glass; and in doing so exposes truths about the last 10 years. In its essence it is a great mystery or political thriller. It could also be seen as a fantasy. But whatever genre you may want to call it is one heck of a read!! Christopher Moore is a huge fan as well, and recently was promoting this book on his website and FaceBook page.

Jaclyn Hogan says

The premise to this book is brilliant. It takes place in an alternate world where 9/11 was actually 11/9, and happened to the United Arab States. The highjackers were supposedly Christian Fundamentalists from the Republic of Texas.

But the story gets a little too caught up in its own cleverness. Ruff obviously has a ball with his alternate world, and you can see it in the details like eBazaar instead of eBay, and Sadaam Hussein's new career as a labor union leader/ mob boss.

But here is my problem. In the world, Osama bin Laden is still the architect of the terrorist attacks, this time as a senator, in order to bring the UAS back to what he believes is the correct way to practice Islam. It's like Ruff couldn't bring himself to make Christian conservatives as evil as Muslim Terrorists. I'm not saying that's why he did it, and it works in the context of the novel, but I just wonder if it wouldn't have been more interesting to have someone from the US be behind the terror plot.

Also, when the novel gets to how the "Mirage" was created, it turns out to have been a wish made by an American Commander in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Commander admits to having made the wish, but what wish exactly did he make? Did he actually wish for the United States to become a collection of anti-science, Fundamentalist States? I doubt it. I guess he could have wished that the Middle East was as advanced as and had similar values to the United States, but why would that necessitate changing the US? There are hints that the Mirage is some kind of judgement by God, but that's never explicitly stated.

All in all, these are relatively minor quibbles with a fun piece of speculative fiction.

craig says

I read 92% of it and I have no desire to finish it. What started as a fascinating and unusual novel turned boring and uninteresting to me. I really don't care how it ends so I'm moving on.

Kurt says

Matt Ruff has written a novel that, in many ways, is a perfectly fine political thriller. Three government agents fight a terrorist plot and find themselves drawn into a world of political intrigue full of gangsters and corruption and gunfights. At that level, the book would be at home on a rack in an airport bookstore - nothing special, but a perfectly competent example of the genre. The central hook to this book, though, the thing that makes it a must-read, is that this is not our world - in this world, at some vague time around the turn of the twentieth century, the United States degenerated into a loose sprawl of squabbling states run by fundamentalist despots, and the Muslim world united into the globe's dominant superpower. So in this mirage world, the three government agents are named Mustafa, Samir, and Amal, they work in a Baghdad still adjusting to the loss of its World Trade Center towers (after Christian fundamentalists flew planes into them), and the leaders of organized crime and political corruption are Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

This book could have been a simple political satire. Ruff has thought through many aspects of the mirage

world's culture, from a popular children's TV show called "Open Sesame!" to a primetime thriller called "24/7 Jihad," in which a man fights terrorists and every Christian on the show always turns out to be a terrorist who gets killed by the end of the season. Everyone does online research with the aid of a Wikipedia-style site called The Library of Alexandria, and they buy and sell goods on eBazaar. In one of the best lines of the book, a character is surprised by an intruder and thinks that at least, since the intruder is an Arab, he's probably not a terrorist. This pervasive attention to details and attitudes make for a very funny satire that slices into the assumptions readers make within the framework of our dominant worldviews.

Ruff doesn't stop there, though, with a string of jokes and details justifying itself by its own audacity. He takes the time to tell a compelling story. The basic thriller plot is just fine, but the characters are much more textured than typical thriller characters. Each of our three main characters has at least one dark secret, and the dynamics to how they hide and reveal themselves is fascinating. Also, Ruff has a surprisingly sober appreciation for the idea of faith and mystery. Individual characters vary in their levels of religious devotion, in a way that feels deeply respectful on Ruff's part. On a more abstract level, as the book progresses to its climax, Ruff slips quietly away from certainty into a surprisingly perfect ending that answers very few questions but hits exactly the right thematic notes to complete the story. I sympathize with readers disappointed in the ending, but I loved it as proof that this novel is something special. It's bigger than a "here's some plot, and here's some more plot" paperback thriller, it's bigger than a "here are arbitrary reversals of your familiar pop culture" satire, and it's bigger than a "let me tell you what you should believe about this culture" essay. It incorporates those elements, of course, but Ruff has crafted a near-masterpiece that transcends its component parts. I recommend it for anyone.

(I think I'm supposed to mention here that I received a free copy through the Amazon Vine program.)

Michael says

The *Mirage* is more than an alternate history novel. It's a thought-provoking inversion that turns the world on its head, portraying a contemporary world in which the United Arab States—the UAS—is the dominant economic and military power, while North America is merely a collection of squabbling territories often divided along socio-religious lines. One of these states, the Rocky Mountain Independent Territories, is home to the World Christian Alliance, a terrorist organization responsible for the November 9, 2001 attack on the Tigris and Euphrates World Trade Towers in Baghdad.

I was fortunate to hear Matt Ruff discuss his book at the Tumwater Timberland Library. It was originally a television pitch commissioned by HBO. While they felt it was potentially brilliant, the likelihood of it being a hard sell to American TV audiences caused it to be shelved. Ruff parlayed his idea into a novel that is both inventive and gripping. The narrative follows a trio of detectives from Homeland Security whose investigation of a team of suicide bombers results in a surprising assertion: The terrorists all believe that what the detectives view as reality is in fact a mirage.

As the agents embark on their search to uncover the origin of these rumors—and the mysterious artifacts lending credence to them—the story accelerates, gradually metamorphosing from its thought-provoking premise into an action-filled finale. While this keeps the reader engrossed, it's somewhat disappointing after such a high-concept premise.

Some revisionist histories try to deliver a heavy-handed message. However, I've always felt the genre works best when it's merely a setting. Ruff successfully does this, resisting the urge to turn the book into a parable,

though he does provide a scathing critique of religious partisanship. He wows with wicked creativity, filling the world with a number of clever details, and provides necessary background through a series of wiki articles entitled the “Library of Alexandria.” There is just enough to satisfy, even if you may not want to peer too closely at the details. This works to the novel’s advantage; the rules for building an ephemeral world are necessarily different than those trying to convince us of a hard-set alternate reality.

Ruff shows a deft hand with his subtle and nuanced portrayal of UAS societal dynamics, and his detectives are sympathetic and relatable. At times, though, his own cleverness turns into indulgence. Ruff fills his novel with several well-known characters; while some, like Saddam Hussein, have prominent (and plausible) roles, towards the end of the novel the amount of cameos shoehorned into the plot becomes overbearing—and somewhat cartoonish. Add a dollop of confusing metaphysics, shallow caricatures, and nebulous motivations, and the plot collapses under the weight of greater expectations.

Still, don’t let that dissuade you--*The Mirage* is definitely worth reading. It doesn’t open perceptions by superordinating the US or UAS, or placing anyone on a pedestal; instead, it depicts everyday people with everyday concerns. Even when forced to comprehend that the world may not be as it seems, they seem utterly and beautifully normal. In our post-9/11 world, we’ve been force-fed perceptions and rhetoric. This novel reminds us that no matter what religion, society, country, or region, there are not only plenty of extremists, but also plenty of regular people just trying to live their lives.

William says

The best parts of Matt Ruff’s alternate War on Terror world are when the story seems like a waking dream: characters sense their version of events is not quite the reality, yet the scenes are infused with details too vivid to be anything less. These parts, especially during the first half of the novel, open the reader’s eyes to new perspectives on what Americans must think of as an unchangeable cultural moment. But, also as with a dream, the longer the novel goes on, the more gaps appear to make the story less effective, less believable, and less magical. It plays games with wild pairings that work only to make the characters whose world we wanted to believe in seem less believable themselves. The ending effectively explains “the mirage,” but the second half of the book disappoints on a promise: that even a broken mirror can, through inversion and distortion, show us exactly who we are.
