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A Thousand Nights

by E.K. Johnston

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From the Publisher: "A story threaded with shimmering vibrance and beauty, A Thousand Nights will weave its spell over readers' hearts and leave them captivated long after the final tale has been told." -Alexandra Bracken, New York Times best-selling author of The Darkest Minds series

Lo-Melkhiin killed three hundred girls before he came to her village, looking for a wife. When she sees the dust cloud on the horizon, she knows he has arrived. She knows he will want the loveliest girl: her sister. She vows she will not let her be next.

And so she is taken in her sister's place, and she believes death will soon follow. Lo-Melkhiin's court is a dangerous palace filled with pretty things: intricate statues with wretched eyes, exquisite threads to weave the most beautiful garments. She sees everything as if for the last time. But the first sun rises and sets, and she is not dead. Night after night, Lo-Melkhiin comes to her and listens to the stories she tells, and day after day she is awoken by the sunrise. Exploring the palace, she begins to unlock years of fear that have tormented and silenced a kingdom. Lo-Melkhiin was not always a cruel ruler. Something went wrong.

Far away, in their village, her sister is mourning. Through her pain, she calls upon the desert winds, conjuring a subtle unseen magic, and something besides death stirs the air.

Back at the palace, the words she speaks to Lo-Melkhiin every night are given a strange life of their own. Little things, at first: a dress from home, a vision of her sister. With each tale she spins, her power grows. Soon she dreams of bigger, more terrible magic: power enough to save a king, if she can put an end to the rule of a monster.

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What We Say

Author E.K. Johnston must have feasted on sand when writing her debut novel: it feels completely at home in the desert. Ideas and imagery, the metaphors and stories characters employ, the world they inhabit is all clearly and convincingly rooted in an Arabian world of long ago. While Johnston's book uses elements from the tale of Scheherazade, it is not a "reboot" or retelling. You soon forget the source it drew upon. A young woman lives in a land where a cruel king takes a new bride and after a day or a week or at most a month, kills her and takes a new one from another village. Since times are good and the king otherwise rules well, men go along. Not our heroine. Everyone knows her sister will be chosen when their time comes but instead she arranges to be taken instead. Back at the palace with the king, what should be a terrifying night becomes an odd battle of wills. The new queen doesn't pacify him with a series of tales ending in a cliffhanger à la the Scheherazade of our youth. The simple fact that she doesn't appear afraid of him intrigues the man. Magic is present in this telling and slowly the battle for her life becomes a battle for the king's soul once she suspects a demon has taken hold. The novel tells the tale from both the perspective of our heroine and in certain passages the demon that occupies the king's body. In a bold gambit, most of the characters are unnamed; our heroine is just that, and her sister is called her sister and her father is called her father. These people often come alive as individuals but the lack of naming gives the story a fable-like quality that makes the magic seem perfectly natural. It climaxes smartly and satisfyingly if rather neatly. "A Thousand Nights" doesn't quite hit greatness but it's solid in ways that bode well. One has the sense Johnston is just stretching her muscles here. We're not left with a cliffhanger, but nonetheless she impatiently leaves the reader wanting more. -- Michael Goltz

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