

The Couscous Chronicles: Stories of Food, Love, and Donkeys from a Life between Cultures

Azzedine T. Downes

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Azzedine T. Downes's memoir *The Couscous Chronicles* moves across cultures, continents, languages, and time, embracing personal and global transformations during the 1980s and 1990s.

Downes begins his story with his time in the Peace Corps. He was first stationed in Fez, Morocco, where he tried to navigate centuries-old streets that spanned no wider than six feet, forming warrens across neighborhoods and then the entire city. He later moved across countries and continents, visiting the US, Yemen, Bulgaria, Romania, and Israel. Once a Christian, he became a Muslim; he got married, and he became a father.

Downes delighted in exploring the places where he landed—both in professional terms, through his Peace Corps and government work, and in terms of coming to understand their cultures. Tight storefronts, ancient cities, and local people and customs are rendered in great detail, from the cargo-carrying donkeys of Fez to the pickling fixations of post-Soviet Bulgarians. His descriptions are redolent and sensory, and his prose is wry and self-deprecating.

Moving across three decades, the book's linked vignettes do a fascinating job of elucidating global conflicts. Downes recalls events like the murder of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the aftermath of September 11, 2001, and the war in Yemen. His perspectives on these events are compelling and impactful, showing what it was like to be, respectively, a resident of Jerusalem, a Muslim living in the US, and a professional tasked with helping to get trapped Peace Corps volunteers out of Yemen at those times.

Filled with anecdotes, travel tales, and history lessons, *The Couscous Chronicles* is a memoir that revels in immersive cultural experiences amid powerful personal and global changes.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (July / August 2023)

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