

## The Fiancée Rode in on a Donkey

**Vénus Khoury-Ghata**

**Teresa Lavender Fagan, Translator**

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In immersive and lyrical prose, Vénus Khoury-Ghata's novel *The Fiancée Rode in on a Donkey* illuminates the life of a forgotten figure from French-Algerian history.

When a rabbi rides into the Jewish community of Banu Qurayza, every girl in the tribe hopes to be the one he chooses to restore the dignity of their people by becoming the wife of the leader of the Algerian resistance. Yudah, chosen by the rabbi because of her name, believes she is leaving her family behind for this great destiny. However, when she arrives in the city, she finds herself in a military encampment full of strangers who look upon her with disdain. And when the Emir is forced to flee the country under threat of death, Yudah is exiled to a remote island. There, she begins a long and treacherous journey across continents throughout which she encounters strangers both violent and benevolent as she navigates the shifting tides of identity, love, and loss.

The people whom Yudah encounters include a young nun, a heartbroken artist, and a revolutionary theater director. Each interaction takes the story in new and surprising directions. The plot is fast-paced and dynamic, culminating in an explosive final scene that veers into the territory of the mythic.

Yudah's story is as poignant as it is astonishing, and the novel's innovative use of mysticism and imagination are welcome departures from the genre conventions of historical fiction. The language is poetic and enchanting; the narration oscillates between closeness and distance to Yudah's experience, allowing for a sense of both expansiveness and detailed focus.

Touching on themes of colonization, religious persecution, and gendered violence, *The Fiancée Rode in on a Donkey* is a haunting novel about a girl's quest for survival and self-determination.

BELLA MOSES (November / December 2023)

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