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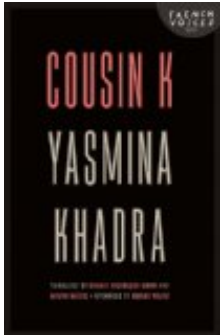
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## May 2013

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**Cousin K by Yasmina Khadra, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith and Alyson Waters**



Who, exactly, is Cousin K?

The character for whom Algerian author Yasmin Khadra's [novella](#) is named flits in and out of this story, appearing at certain points in time to taunt, tease, mock and enrage its unnamed narrator, her cruel barbs finally pushing him to a point at which he can think of nothing other than wreaking the most brutal kind of revenge on her.

But is Cousin K real? Does she exist, or is she a figment of the narrator's imagination, a creation conjured up by an empty mind in an empty house on a hot summer afternoon somewhere in the Algerian countryside? Is she really a beautiful and captivating nine year-old from the city -- one capable of twisting adults around her little finger and in whose mouth it would seem butter wouldn't melt -- whose words nevertheless wield the power to hurt the unnamed narrator? Or, is she some kind of inner demon, a "she-devil" who comes out from the narrator's own mind to haunt him in his weaker moments?

It's hard to tell, for "Cousin K" feels something like a disjointed, fragmented nap on a summer afternoon. Its narrator seems to slip in and out of a disturbed sleep in which the boundaries between real and imaginary seem blurred, and to which there seems to be no real beginning and no defined end.

Unfortunately, we don't learn enough about the narrator and what caused his mind to become so twisted. All we know is that he's a young boy living in a remote manor house in Algeria, that his father was brutally killed for

being a traitor and that he wants more than anything else to be noticed by his mother -- a proud, strong, and distant woman who doesn't seem to know her son exists except for at certain brief moments in which his clumsiness inadvertently draws her attention, but serves to do little more than highlight his faults, enrage her and make him feel worse about himself.

The boy's mother lives only for her older son, an official in the Algerian army whose occasional visits to the manor are like a bright flash of light that cuts into and brightens up a lonely, dull and painful existence -- a light that underscores yet again the narrator's flaws (although he loves his brother and vice versa) and exacerbates his feelings of inadequacy. And even as the mother's fascination with her older son borders on unnaturally obsessive ("My mother could not contain herself.... Her suffering was even greater now that he was here. Her eyes bespoke childbirth; her joined hands recalled the praying Virgin."), Cousin K pops up to remind the narrator that yes, he is indeed unworthy of love and affection. "Hee hee hee."

Although he ultimately does away with Cousin K (and no one really seems to question her death), her presence continues to haunt the boy and the guilt of having killed her wracks him. When the occasion to redeem himself presents itself to him in the form of a young girl the same age as Cousin K who gets pushed out of a passing car, he seizes it and brings her back to his house.

From there on, everyone else disappears and there's only the boy and the girl and the oppressive heat of the empty manor house. The girl is completely at his mercy but his intentions toward her are unclear and he's unsure what to do with her. He wants to be nice to her, but finds she doesn't reciprocate in the way he'd like her to. Finally and quite inexplicably, the girl reminds him too much of Cousin K, thereby forcing the narrator to do away with her in as brutal a fashion, if not more.

*Cousin K* is a short book (the English translation is only ninety-six pages long, and that includes an afterword) and it's about a moment in time, either real or imagined, a flash in the pan, almost. But even so, it feels incomplete. Although it has a dreamlike quality to it, and the writing is poetic and lyrical, the story seems to happen for little rhyme or reason, leaving the reader to wonder "why" and "what." It lacks context, as characters other than the narrator are either not explained or just drop off. And although the viewpoint and the experience are only the narrator's, a reader still is left wanting something more that would help understand him, his dark thoughts and his grotesque actions, even as Khadra's style and text hint that the protagonist will wake up from his dream or his nightmare as the summer sun sets.

Interestingly, Yasmina Khadra is a pseudonym that the author Mohamed Moulessehoul assumed to avoid military censorship while serving as an official in the Algerian army. So given the hallucinatory nature of this story, one wonders about a man writing as a woman who has created a male character that seemingly hates women, and finally, whether Cousin K and the unnamed young woman who both meet such terrible fates at the hands of the protagonist are just proxies for that other woman, the boy's formidable mother, disposing of whom may finally bring him the peace and salvation he craves.

*Cousin K* by Yasmina Khadra, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith and Alyson Waters

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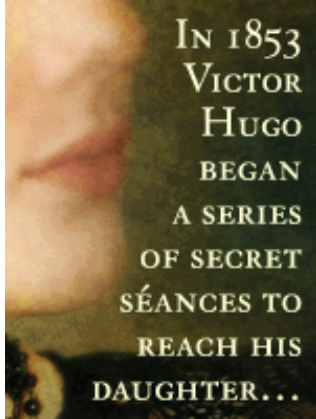
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