



The Terrorists of Irustan

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In this brilliant novel from the author of Sing the Light, a talented medicant defies the rule of men -- and changes the lives of every woman on the planet.

The Terrorists of Irustan Details

Date : Published July 1st 2000 by Ace (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9780441007431

Author : Louise Marley

Format : Paperback 340 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Fantasy, Feminism, Dystopia

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Pat says

Spoiler alert -- broad reference to the outcome of the story

I began this book with low expectations, as it came as part of a rather spotty bundle of science fiction written by women. *The Terrorists of Irustan* was thus a pleasant surprise: a thoughtful, well written novel about an offworld culture's misogyny and a small circle of women's battle against it.

Briefly, the plot centers on a female "medicant" (read: physician) who, along with her circle of friends, goes to extraordinary lengths to protect other women and children from abuse at the hands of the men who hold tremendous power over them. I was initially put off by Irustan's cultural parallels with fundamentalist Islam, as it came across as fictionalized polemic inspired by recent world events. Thus, I was surprised to find that the book was published in 1999--before the events of 2001 that so polarized the US. Hence, although some elements of the Irustan culture are clearly drawn from Muslim tradition, one may feel fairly comfortable reading the book as dystopian fantasy and not political invective.

The book's generally careful and evenly paced plot deals with themes of women's identity and justice in an unjust world, examined through the actions of its central character, Zahra, and the women and men who surround her. Marley is careful to emphasize the diversity and complexity of even the most oppressive societies: On Irustan, not all men are demons, and not all oppressed are women. She also does not flinch from portraying the flaws of her protagonists, particularly the moral dangers of even well placed zealotry. She uses symbolism deftly, particularly with respect to disease, disguise, and physical constraint. The book's final scene is especially moving: character flaws are not forgiven, but they can nonetheless open doors.

Its strengths notwithstanding, the book does have a couple of flaws. Most annoying is the role of Jing-Li, a worker in the Earth-based mining corporation on which Irustan's economy is based. The character is necessary to the plot, but the twists surrounding Jing-Li are not; they often come across as tangential and heavy handed. Some other characters, most notably the members of Zahra's friendship circle are also somewhat two-dimensional. Thus, given the option, I'd give this book 3.5 stars.

Despite its flaws, *The Terrorists of Irustan* is an engrossing and thoughtful story about strength and the lengths to which women will go to resist oppression. Recommended.

Clairissa says

Man this book was so good! I couldn't put it down!!

Desiree says

I don't know if I'm getting old, if I was particularly tired, or just that the book is good, I had actualy tears almost at the end of the book. What a way to go, really really loved it, the setting, the development, the character interaction, the characters, well, the whole deal

Definitely highly recommended from me!!!

Methodtomadness says

Take a far-right, imagined extremist version of Islam, dump it on a futuristic mining planet, add a hefty helping of additional gendered slavery, and season with fed-up female resistance, and you have the strange brew that is *The Terrorists of Irustan*. In Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, there's a line somewhere about how extremist Eastern religions are not that far from extremist Western religions, and *The Terrorists of Irustan* is a little bit what I imagine a faux-Middle Eastern counterpart to Atwood's dystopia would look like.

Obviously, speculative fiction/science fiction writers can use imagined futures in order to work out the social issues of the present, and I see *The Terrorists of Irustan* as Louise Marley's head-scratching over how to go about changing religious-linked oppressive social structures. In Marley's invented world, there's an important catch: women are the only medical professionals in this society, and it's this gendered delegation of all bodily concerns to women that Marley imagines as the key to a complicated lock. Unfortunately, I don't think she ultimately provides much of a hopeful path forward -- other than a kind of "It sucks, it takes a long time, and lots of people will suffer tremendously before things change" message. Which is quite possibly accurate, albeit really damn depressing.

Jaime says

Squarely in the 'sci-fi that's really just here to teach us about our current world' genre, this book has it all. A fantastic, feminist heroine realizes her friends need help only she can provide in a world where women are quite literally nonentities (at least as far as official records are concerned). In helping the few, she starts on a course toward a global revolution. The characters are all interesting, the world-building credible even where it leaves unanswered questions. Certain descriptive fallbacks get a little tiresome, but that's not nearly enough to knock down this riveting story for me.

Kate Page says

I liked this. It's well written, with engaging, convincing characters and plotting. I got it in a book-batch of womens Sci Fi, and it's the best one so far.

Bren says

This book moved my impression of what a 5-star book could be. It has plausible character development, plot on multiple levels, a fascinating setting, characters who are different from one another, and excellent writing. It was so gripping to read about the dystopian aspects of the culture depicted, and such an attractive fantasy that allies would actually help, that it was difficult to tear myself away.

The only thing wrong with it, from my perspective, is that we never find out what becomes of one of the main characters.

Jacob says

I enjoy fantasy and science fiction stories which pull setting material from cultures other than western Europe and the U.S., since I feel like I learn a bit about those cultures and the unfamiliar feel of the setting makes the story feel fresher (books that come to mind in this category include *Enchantment*, later entries in the *Ranger's Apprentice* series which start with *The Ruins of Gorlan*, *The Blue Sword*, and *The Thief*). If you couldn't tell from the cover, this is another of that sort, although I would have enjoyed it more had it communicated even more of the desert-Muslim culture it's directly drawn from.

There are some really good ideas in here about male-female relationships in a society where the genders are treated very differently from one another, and about dealing with things outside your control in general. In the second half, the main character finds a way to use the predominant prejudices to favor herself, and that kind of adaptation is intriguing and fun to read. Unfortunately, the author was too eager to focus on the female disadvantage in such a society, and most of the picture is painted too black-and-white for my taste. It ends up shutting out most of the opportunities for adaptation and finding ways to achieve your goals in such a society. The main character feels only the lack of freedom she doesn't have and repeatedly ignores things she can do to improve her lot. I suspect this is a fundamental flaw in the perception of anyone trying to write about living in a male-dominated society who doesn't actually live in one. The main character also exhibits extreme and self-destructive behavior, and as far as I can tell this is never depicted as anything other than noble and necessary in a "the end justifies the means" kind of way. It can be hard to tell whether this is just the character or whether it's a blind spot on the part of the author, especially since there are also a number of opportunities for the main character to improve her lot in a more normal way, and she seems almost to realize it. However, those avenues are always dropped and never really pursued.

For storytelling that includes so many pages dedicated to self-reflection and inner monologue, I suspect the above is a weakness in the author's view, or some of the story's analysis would have acknowledged the missed opportunities. The fact that only the more extreme of the main character's friends are detailed enough to have personality reinforces this. The author may simply have been too focused on getting her point across and accidentally overdone it. I won't bother complaining that all the men in the book are oppressive morons, and the only two who aren't are excluded from being men one way or another. This is not the kind of book that is interested in other kinds of men. And the ending is kind of hokey wish-fulfillment, which is one of my pet peeves. Also, the chapters begin with quotes from a "Second Prophet", and I restate that I have never read "excerpts" included in a story that didn't detract from the overall story more than they contributed (and yes, that includes *Dune*).

A friend of mine who read this wrote the following in her review: "In a setting that favors Earth's Middle East both in lands and customs, the struggle for women not to just survive but thrive somehow in a male dominated society can be a touch and go tangle of subtlety." That is a great statement and exactly what I was hoping for, but I felt this book skipped most of the touch-and-go subtlety. If the primary characters (all female) had been a little more nuanced, I would probably have given this four stars ("openly recommended to anyone") instead of three ("worth my time to read").

Rose says

The writing is excellent, but what a horrible world: where women are chattel, subjugated, and abused by men. An entire planet where this is the law of the land. I don't think I can go there right now.

Rainbowgardener says

Like Handmaid's Tale, a terrifying portrayal of how theocratic totalitarianism can enslave women. This is a society on a far planet in a time with frequent space travel. The society mirrors the worst extremes of Taliban style Islam and Sharia law. Women are veiled, are the property of their father or husband, and have no rights.

The writing is good, the characters have depth and subtlety. Within this extremely patriarchal society, a range of male-female relationships are portrayed. There are husbands who kill their wives (not a crime). There are husbands who beat their wives. And there are husbands who truly love their wives and try to do their best for them. But even these husbands are so constrained, that they do not see that their best is infantilizing or denigrating. The central marriage relationship is shown changing over time, gradually being diminished as the wife gets more restive under the restraints, and then being redeemed.

One of the strengths of this book is that it does not just portray Islam style society as bad and Western society is good. One of the other main characters is from Earth and came to Irustan to escape the lack of freedoms on Earth.

It is not a cheerful book though and it suggests that violent revolution is the only way that these women can change their lot.

Sarah says

I quite enjoyed this book. It was a pleasant little feminist queer surprise in a genre heavily populated by straight white men. Especially considering that I just picked it up rather randomly as the library was closing.

That said, I'm troubled with the use of the veil as a symbol of women's subjugation. It's not the main subject of the book, but it is used as dramatic effect to symbolize and reinforce the fact that the women are powerless and confined. I suppose that is the historical meaning of the veil for many women, and it's certainly true for the women in this book, however it's an easy trope and somewhat irresponsibly used. It's easy for white western feminists to create the image of the veiled woman (read: Muslim woman) as the powerless, exploited Other without examining any other meanings the veil may have for that woman.

Anyway, thankfully the book focused much more on the systematic subjugation of the women and their struggle for justice, instead of hitting you over the head with veil=bad. And I don't think that it created a myth of "eastern" society = bad for women, "western" society = good for women. We see that women are treated poorly in both the offworld colonies, as well on earth. I'll have to read it again more slowly so I can appreciate it more fully. I'd be interested in seeing a sequel set on the same planet 50-100 years later.

And yay for unexpected queer themes!

Sineala says

I didn't think they wrote feminist SF like this anymore. Okay, I know this book is not particularly recent, but it feels like it should be from the 80s. Not that I am complaining. It's a *Handmaid's Tale* sort of dystopia, one that in this case is a fictional future far-right take on Islam. With, yes, veiled women. Our heroine, Zahra, is a "medicant" (please note, in case you have done the same thing, that I read this as "mendicant" about five times; no, that would be a different sort of book) who is, basically, a doctor -- but one less well-trained than the doctors they have on Earth. Because here on this colony planet Irustan they have basically: mines, and a nasty prion disease that comes from breathing in dust in the mines. Also health care is, in Irustan's culture, exclusively the province of women.

The novel devotes a lot of time to showing how much the culture hurts Zahra and her apprentice and her friends; it's slow-moving, but still a compelling read that kept me up past my bedtime. The women don't manage to completely break Irustani society by the end of the book, but they sure try; you can see it coming from a long way away, but this is the kind of book where it doesn't really matter. Also, I should point out that it ends about as happily as possible in a book where the theme is basically "the patriarchy crushes everyone, let's kill it" -- which is to say, not very. There are also some hints at queerness, which, given the resolution, is more poignant than anything, but I am always happy to see same-sex themes in my reading.

Overall, I really liked the author's style, and I can't believe that somehow I missed this entirely the last time I was reading my way through feminist SF. I will definitely have to read more of her books.

Becky says

2.5. I loved some elements of the worldbuilding, particularly the central idea of medicine being "women's work" and taboo for men, and I cared enough about the characters to keep reading. Alas, I found the story predictable and lacking in nuance. Many of the scenes did a better job telegraphing the political views of the author than telling a good story.

As far as this being a very second-wave feminist, white-lady take on a conservative Muslim-inspired culture, well, it could have been worse. That said, I was very sad not to see any portrayal of female spirituality. Most of the women in this book seem totally alienated from their own religion, and I don't think that's a fair portrayal of conservative Muslim women at all.

Ryandake says

this is my third or so read of this book, so, not a first impression...

this is a maybe uncategorizable novel--it has SF elements, certainly (civilization on a distant planet), dystopian ones (a society in which women are veiled, largely uneducated, pretty much property although not called slaves), feminist ones in droves, and social commentary up the wazoo. so what is it?

i don't know, but it's unique, and it's heartbreakingly beautiful, and it will remain on my shelves forever.

as i read through this time, i kept up a running argument in my head with a young man of my acquaintance who resists fiercely the observations of feminism. *that would never happen here*, he says in my head. *not possible, the legal system would never permit it*, and so on. but many of these things have happened here, do happen here, will happen here.

tales like this and The Handmaid's Tale are often dismissed as a form of literary hysteria--a collective female nightmare erupting into print. but women who pay attention will hear Irustani whispers in the daily news, in learned screeds, in voices both international and local. the issues the book covers, despite the Irustani setting, are endemic wherever there are humans.

some day i hope that this book will truly be an artifact, an anachronism.

i'm not holding my breath that it will happen in my lifetime.

Phil says

How many times in your life do you get to read an unforgettable book that makes an impression on you? As a lifelong reader, I've read and forgotten more books than I could count. Only a precious few end up on my "recommend to the book club ladies" list. I made them read this one and they agreed it was a marvelous choice for discussion.

In a setting that favors Earth's Middle East both in lands and customs, the struggle for women not to just survive but thrive somehow in a male dominated society can be a touch and go tangle of subtlety. Our heroines have little to call their own. Some act misguidedly using their womanly feelings of hate or motherly protectiveness. Some others are more deliberate in trying to shape the system to a better vision for their daughters. Naturally, a heavy price is paid when the women are discovered.

Read this book! Understand how women need to voice their opinions and be part of the community leaders and vote in the political process. Never forget that in America, at least, we have our voice! And our voices matter for many, many reasons.
