

THE MARRAKESH ONE-TWO / *Richard Grenier*

by Marian Kester Coombs

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Richard Grenier was one of those exuberant chaps whom it is impossible to imagine departed, the sort so thoroughly *interested*, in the sense of being a party to cultural and historical events, that he still seems to be at the party despite his sudden death in January 2002.

All of his youthful 76 years Grenier role-played with relish -- New Englander, part Jew / part French Canadian, Naval Academy midshipman, Harvard man, Hollywood insider, Left Bank *flaneur*, and conservative wild man, among other roles.

At Grenier's Arlington Cemetery memorial service, his old friends James Woolsey and Daniel Patrick Moynihan both recommended that we all read (or reread) his novel "The Marrakesh One-Two," published by Houghton Mifflin in 1983. Doing so only heightens the sense that the author is still very much among us, gleefully skewering our Muslim antagonists and their tragic, toxic pretensions.

Grenier's wife, the writer Cynthia Grenier, recalls the book's genesis back in the early 1980s, when she was assigned by *The Los Angeles Times* to cover production of the film "Mohammed, Messenger of God," starring Anthony Quinn, on location in North Africa. Richard came with and got a novel out of it, which went on to Penguin paperback before passing out of print a few years ago. Interlibrary loan or Bibliofind (now Amazon) can locate you a copy, but Houghton Mifflin ought to reprint it; the market for "The Marrakesh One-Two" is now bigger and better primed than it was 20 years back.

Plot-wise: Burt Nelson, a movie man who moonlights as a CIA agent, is in Marrakesh as screenwriter of an oxymoronic biopic based on the prophet Mohammed -- He Who Must Not Be Portrayed. Burt also operates as a sidekick to Omar, an obsessed Lebanese-Christian, opportunistically-turned-Muslim movie producer from Beverly Hills. Additionally there is Sandor, an ancient but still lascivious Hungarian

refugee director; and Mouna, a hysterically “liberated” English-educated Palestinian-Christian Arab fanatic.

The tone of the book is uniquely Grenier’s, maintaining a nifty balance of chutzpah and lovable-roguish self-deprecation, but sharing affinities with the dead-on “ethnic profiling” of Evelyn Waugh and V.S. Naipaul and the crazy-casual yet scathingly moral tone of Tom Wolfe. It is a tribute to Grenier’s elfin spirit that one emerges from the book truly hating no one, not even the lunatic Mouna.

The film production is bedeviled at all times from all sides. The director is forced to “shoot around” Mohammed and his entire family and all his descendants. The first of many catastrophes is a very bloody coup attempt against the King of Morocco at a St. Tropez-themed garden party. Grenier understood that true diversity involves, nay *demand*s a fascinated horror at others’ customs. The more a culture diverges from one’s own, the more exotic it appears at a distance, and the more alien it is close up.

Many Arabs try (and fail) to explain to Burt the perfection and absolute truth of the Muslim faith. As Burt negotiates with various contacts, he begins to feel that a profound difference in temperament underlies the inability of Islamic and Western peoples to comprehend each other:

“[Arabs] were touchy devils, always getting their feelings hurt about something, always jealous, always expecting treason. You say I am your friend but am I your *favorite* friend? Mustafa tells you he is your friend but he schemes against you behind your back; only *I* am your true friend. You spent ten more minutes with Abdullah than you spent with me. You’d give me an aircraft carrier if you *really* loved me.”

Arab treatment of women is also observed and often commented on: “A great national hero in Egypt is a soldier who heard his sister had become a prostitute, tracked her down, and killed her. He’s alive and happy today, celebrated in song and legend, kind of an Egyptian Audie Murphy. *When a man’s tree grows into another man’s garden he must cut it off.* Women were these trees that grew into other people’s gardens. You tried to hold this down in advance of course by cutting off part of the woman ... Great nauseating subject. Great unreported subject by Westerners because it’s so disgusting they can’t bear to think about it.”

Then Burt gets kidnapped and held in a very unhumorous chicken-wire cage until he can be ransomed by "Hollywood." After creatively freeing himself, Burt rejoins the film crew in newly oil-rich Tripoli, where they're desperate to get Libyan backing now that Morocco's gotten too hot politically:

"When you looked close the streets were filled with sand and dead cats and antique garbage and Coke bottles and condoms. Street sweeping hadn't been invented yet. ... Every hustler and industrial con artist in the world had hit the Libyans for some project or other. Someone had built them a glass factory and when the keys were being handed over at the end said, 'It's too bad the sand you have here isn't right for glass.' And somebody else built them a brick factory and said at the end, 'It's too bad the clay you have here isn't right for bricks.'"

After knocking heads with Moammar Gadhafi and being burnt out in Benghazi, the gang must take its show on the road yet again. Iran becomes the next futile port of call, where Burt tries to make some sense of Islamic politics in hopes of finding a sympathetic ear:

"First of all the Shiahs were still in a rage because Ali, their man, Mohammed's son-in-law, got shafted out of the Caliphate by these mangy Omayyad Sunnis. They stabbed him to death, actually. This happened in the seventh century, you understand, a little dynastic squabble, but the Shiahs were still foaming at the mouth over it. *Ali! Ali!* It was as if I was still sore because Andrew Jackson beat John Quincy Adams in the election of 1828 and was going around screaming *Adams! Adams!*"

Omar and Burt wangle an interview with one of the mullahs, Ayatollah Shirazi, who informs them:

"I do not condemn everything from the West. There is much I can accept. Until now you have kept the good things mostly for yourself, such as your wealth and economic progress. But we are not afraid of your science, of your technology, of your machines. We accept your atomic power plants, your aircraft, your telephones, your air conditioners. We accept all that. But it is your evil thinking we fear, and against which we must protect our people."

“It was the evil thinking that was producing the air conditioners,” muses Burt. Besides, “[we were] asking what Islam had to give, but the Ayatollah was saying what Islam wanted to take.”

The homeless film crew’s inevitable flight from Tehran to last-resort Baghdad is taken over in mid-air by three different sets of hijackers -- another operation, like the failed Moroccan coup, that is actually semi-intended by U.S. intelligence. It underscores for Burt that “the world [is] filled with suppressed homelands.” As the book ends, he is setting up a young woman to set up the Shah to avenge the Iranian set-up of the Kurds.

Mrs. Grenier reports that her husband left a manuscript ready for publication entitled “First-Rate Women,” a Jason and Medea fable set in Eastern Europe. Richard Grenier is dead -- long live Richard Grenier!