

Q&A with the Author (cont.)

translator for the Spaniards, the man who made it possible for them to communicate with indigenous people. Yet he was not allowed to testify to the Spanish authorities about the expedition. And Cabeza de Vaca's travelogue mentioned only one indigenous person and no women at all. These silences intrigued me; I wanted to explore them in the novel.

Q: Why was it important for you to tell Mustafa/Estebanico's story?

A: The narrative possibilities that opened up for me when I read Cabeza de Vaca's account were impossible to resist. There are many moments in his travelogue where you feel that Cabeza de Vaca is holding back from saying what truly happened out there, in indigenous territory. (This is not surprising; he was writing at the time of the Inquisition.) I wanted to say the things that Cabeza de Vaca left unsaid.

And there was, too, the fact that Mustafa/Estebanico had been denied his place in history. The silencing of this slave's perspective seemed modern to me. I see it every day when I open the newspaper or turn on the television. The views we read about and the voices we hear are those of the powerful, not the powerless. The novel gave me an opportunity to explore those discrepancies.

Q: Why did you choose historical fiction, as opposed to non-fiction, to tell Mustafa's/Estebanico's story?

A: Historical fiction gave me greater freedom to create a fully-fledged character and have him be the master of his own story. Mustafa/Estebanico gets a chance to speak in the first person about what really happened to the Narvaez expedition and to him. And he is such an intriguing character! The more I read about him, the more it seemed to me that he was perhaps the first global man. He had his Moroccan culture, but he had to make himself at home in Spanish culture and in Indian culture. He was also a witness to imperial invasion and its attendant violence, both of which were justified and excused by the supposedly more civilized party. So even though the book is historical, in some ways I felt that I was writing about things that were happening right now across the globe.

2015

ARAB AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

The Arab American Book Award is a literary program created to honor books written by and about Arab Americans. The program, managed by the Russell J. Ebeid Library & Resource Center at the Arab American National Museum, generates greater awareness of Arab American scholarship and writing through an annual award competition and educational outreach. Learn more about past and present winners at arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward.

The goal of the Reading & Discussion Guide project is to increase the audience for Arab American literature and stimulate discussion about the winning books' themes and topics.

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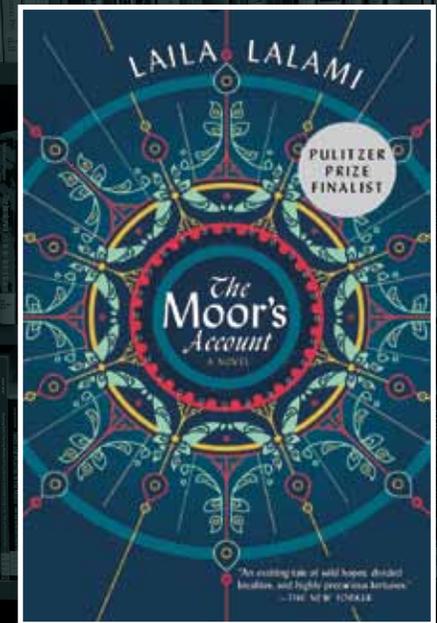
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Fiction Award Winner

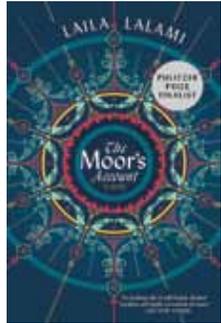


READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE



2015
ARAB AMERICAN
BOOK AWARD

Fiction Award Winner



The Moor's Account

by Laila Lalami
Pantheon Books

SUMMARY

In this historical novel, readers encounter slavery and conquest through the eyes of the Moorish slave, Mustafa al-Zamori, as the Spanish attempt to establish settlements throughout Florida. Born the son of a notary in Azemmur, Morocco, at the end of the 15th century, Mustafa had been an educated man and successful merchant before becoming a slave at the age of 25. Renamed Estabanico as a slave, he found himself traveling with his master, Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, on the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition of 1527, inadvertently becoming the first African explorer of North America.

Within a year of landing in Florida, only four individuals remained from the hundreds who sailed on the ill-fated Narváez expedition – three Spaniards and the Moroccan slave, Estabanico. For the next seven years, these four men would travel together westward across the continent, throughout Indigenous lands that would eventually become the United States and Mexico.

Lalami's *The Moor's Account* tells the story of these four travelers, imagining the expedition and its aftermath through the eyes of the one survivor whose account remains absent from the historical record – the slave, Estabanico.



Map of Mustafa/Estebanico's travels

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **The Moor's Account** chronicles a hero's journey into the unknown. In what ways does this journey follow the conventions of the epic genre, and in what ways does it subvert them?
2. What role do stories—in all their forms, from rumor to legend to fairytale—play in the novel?
3. How would you describe Estebanico's voice? What stylistic choices did the author make to give him a distinctive sound?
4. Is the time period of this novel one that you were familiar with before you read this book? If so, did you learn anything new? If not, do you now have a greater understanding of what this particular time and place in history was actually like?
5. What role does Estebanico's trafficking in slaves play in the story? How does it complicate his view of the Indians as well as our view of him?
6. Is Estebanico a fully reliable narrator? Which parts of his account seem reliable and which do not? Why?

About The Author



LAILA LALAMI is an award-winning novelist and essayist. In addition to *The Moor's Account*, which was selected as a finalist for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, She is the author of the short-story collection, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and the

novel, *Secret Son*. Her essays and opinion pieces have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, the *New York Times* and in numerous anthologies. She is the recipient of the Fulbright Fellowship, the British Council Fellowship, and the Lannan Foundation Residency Fellowship. Most recently, Lalami was awarded a writer's residency at the Yaddo colony for artists. Follow her on Twitter @LailaLalami

Lalami currently resides in Los Angeles where she is a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside.

Q&A with the Author

Q: What inspired you to write *The Moor's Account*?

A: Some years ago, I was reading Anouar Majid's *We Are All Moors*, a scholarly book about the historical connection between attitudes toward immigrants today and the perception of Moors in the seventeenth century. I came across a mention of Estebanico, a Moroccan slave who was said to be the first African to cross America. He had been part of the Narváez expedition of 1528, which ended in failure. The survivors, among them the famed Cabeza de Vaca, trekked across the continent, looking for a Spanish port. I was vaguely familiar with Cabeza de Vaca, but I had never heard of Estebanico. I thought I would find out more about him in Cabeza de Vaca's account of the Narváez expedition, but that travelogue only inspired more questions. For example, the other survivors were all aristocrats, men who typically received better rations and rode horses. Somehow, this slave had managed to survive as well. He quickly became the

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