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 Vacas 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 Vacas account were impossible to resist. There are many moments in his travelogue where you feel that Cabeza de Vacas 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 Vacas 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.

The 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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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 to 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 Estebanico as a slave, he found himself traveling with his master, Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, on the Pánfilo de Nárvaez 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 Nárvaez expedition – three Spaniards and the Moroccan slave, Estebanico. 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, Estebanico.