

ON BRIAN KITELEY

DESPITE ITS SLIM SIZE, Brian Kiteley's second novel finds time to let its characters sit in cafes and think—nay, *muse*—about foreignness, about mistranslation and misapprehension, about writing and storytelling and *subjective truth*, for God's sake.

It is Ramadan in Cairo; the faithful fast all day, feast all night, and shamble distractedly through the wreckage of their sleep cycles. Kiteley captures this place and time in all its logy chaos, its pervasive and fitful fuzziness of mind, with prose that is rigorously lucid, wondrously clear. He creates a Cairo at once vividly available to the senses and steadfastly elusive to reason.

Before continuing, though: that title. "I know many songs, but I cannot sing" is a phrase translated from the Armenian which, despite its unfortunate, rather purplish tinge, ends up figuring largely in the narrative; one of the characters uses the phrase to begin the bedtime stories he tells his daughter. In context, rest assured, it sounds no more stiff and grandiloquent than does *Once upon a time*. . . .

It's even fitting that the novel's title should intimate storytelling, particularly nighttime storytelling, because its central conceit are the stories and rumors told and re-told over the course of one particularly hectic night near the end of Ramadan.

We join Ib, our phonemically named protagonist, an American who has lived in Cairo for years, just fifteen minutes before sunset. The streets are rapidly emptying—everyone who can be is home with family, waiting for the cannon to sound, signaling the end of the daytime fast. Ib is alone and wandering, his thoughts and memory muddled by jet-lag and hunger. He is just back from America, where he has buried his stepfather, and we come to meet the city through his singular viewpoint, which is and will remain quite foggy indeed. The narrative is thereby neatly imbued with a central mystery, a sense that, at any given moment, something frightfully portentous is taking place somewhere along the periphery.

I Know Many Songs, but I Cannot Sing, by Brian Kiteley. Simon & Schuster, 1996. 192 pp.

Kiteley depicts the shadowy streets, the genial diffidence of the people, but what sets his prose apart is the purchase it affords the reader on Ib's perceptions. In spare, economic language, he establishes Ib's uneasy mixture of familiarity and bemusement, his affection for—and frustration with—his world. We come to intuit the sense of hesitant isolation afflicting his life; he is at once home and not-home. Despite his years as a resident, he is forever a foreigner in a city of inscrutable mystery.

The author chooses to demonstrate this in a way which seems, at first, rather counter-intuitive—by doling out the expository stuff in an almost miserly fashion. We see Ib only at a great distance, through the scrim of his confusion and his (quite considerable) memory lapses; even at novel's end, we know very little about him, and what little we have come to know derives almost exclusively from his dealings with others. So, for example, when he meets Gamal, an Egyptian actor who teases him by playing various practical jokes over the course of the night, assuming different disguises and spreading rumors about Ib's past, the reader gets the unmistakable impression that Ib is also creating a character—himself—with every word he speaks. The fact that this doesn't matter, that we implicitly give ourselves over to Ib long before we know very much about him, is testament to Kiteley's deft, humane characterization.

At some point in the past, Ib may or may not have had an affair with a Muslim woman he worked with, which may or may not have caused her to be beaten and jailed for impropriety. Over the course of the night, he discovers that this rumor has attached itself to him indelibly. Early in the evening, to his new and merrily sinister friend Gamal, Ib tells his version of events—in which he merely took the woman out for a cup of coffee, once.

Later on, however, "Ib replays his story and finds it truthful and accurate, which surprises him because he felt at the time that he was telling a pack of lies. But a few of the details are not quite right. . . . He never took the woman out for coffee. Even coffee in a public, outdoor café would be enough to condemn him in Egypt. . . . He cannot remember her name. Indeed he is not even sure whether she was beaten up or he misunderstood a stray remark. It might have been her appendix."

Over the course of the night, more such stories are told, many of them passing just beyond the edges of Ib's comprehension. He writes a few of them down, augmenting them with details and characters from (we must suppose) his own past, and we find ourselves drawn suddenly in to what would otherwise be some pretty murky post-modern waters, particularly when Ib idly begins to suspect that the people around him are constructs themselves. Kiteley, however, keeps a clear head, and cares about his characters too much to let them be so easily, if cleverly, dismissed.

That affection is most easily seen in the creation of Gamal, a man of warm insincerity and affected speechifying, who is perpetually slipping on and off various roles, personae, voices, accents. He emerges as frustrating and as he is fascinating; Ib never quite trusts him, and neither do we.

And that, finally, is the triumph of this novel; that these characters manage to brush up against some pretty large abstractions like foreignness and narrative truth without compromising their roundedness and vitality. This is not, luckily for the reader, merely a novel of ideas. Kiteley's people are simply too well wrought, too expertly achieved, to let themselves sit passively by, mouthing stories and theories and thought experiments.

And that's important, because Ib's Cairo is, after all, a dire, intriguing place. Trusted guides vanish, only to reappear with different names. Strangers accuse each other of dark crimes. Personal histories come into doubt, truth is mutable. Thankfully, "I Know Many Songs, but I Cannot Sing" has at its wise heart a cadre of strong, believable characters who remain compelling against even so exotic, and wondrous, a setting.