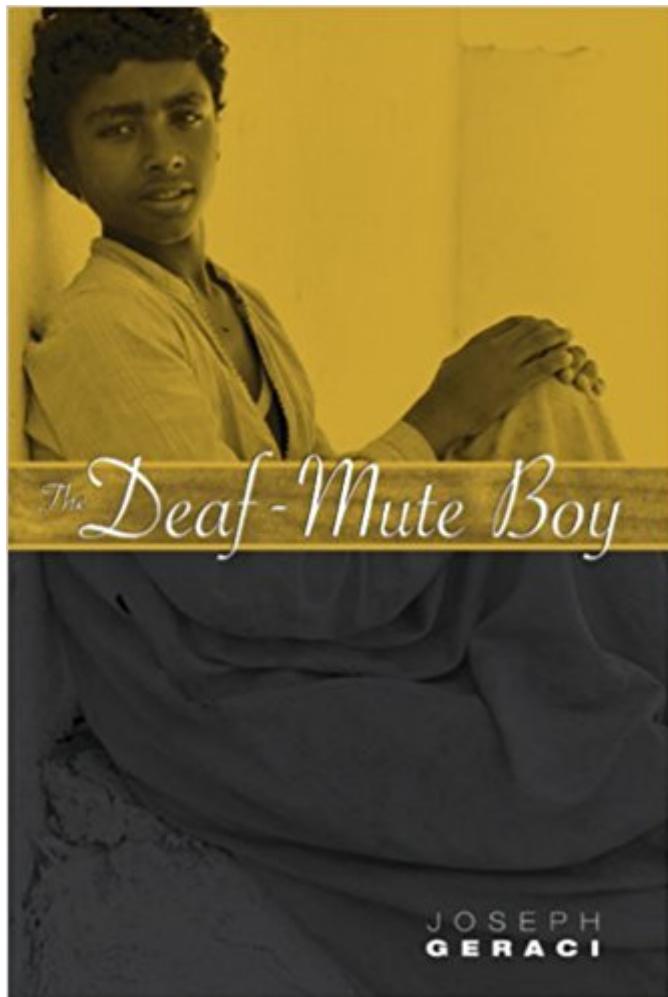


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The Deaf-Mute Boy



Synopsis

The Deaf-Mute Boy is a multi-layered narrative that weaves together a travel story, a love story, and a powerful confrontation with the Muslim world. It is the tale of a gay American professor immersed in a North African society. Maurice Burke, an archaeologist, is invited to speak at a conference in the bustling port town of Sousse, Tunisia. At first disillusioned by its rampant tourism and squalid commercialism, Maurice becomes intrigued by his surroundings after meeting a local deaf-mute boy. While exploring a vibrant souk, Maurice encounters a religious leader who guides him on a fateful introduction to the boy's family. As Maurice's involvement with the deaf-mute boy intensifies, he finds himself drawn into a maze of Tunisian politics, culture, and religion.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

West meets East and rich meets poor in this thin story of the ill-fated friendship between a gay Columbia University professor and a teenage Tunisian deaf-mute boy. Maurice Burke, in Sousse, Tunisia, to speak at an archeology conference, meets Nidhal on the beach and shortly thereafter becomes bent on helping the boy after seeing him bullied. Maurice turns to a local imam for help and is warned that matters are too complicated. Maurice doesn't heed the warnings and continues to pursue what he believes are the boy's best interests. Unfortunately, Maurice's powerful sense of obligation to the boy remains mysterious and muddled, and though Geraci (Loving Sander) does an excellent job of capturing Tunisian medina life, his portrayal of political unrest and violence is vague. The climax, which takes place during a riot, makes the novel feel like a morality play. (Nov.)

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"I was powerfully moved and haunted by The Deaf-Mute Boy. Joseph Geraci's deft and emotionally nuanced seduction of the reader" •even as our protagonist is enchanted by Tunisia" •struck me as truly remarkable." •Tim Miller, author of 1001 Beds"Once Tunisia was the land of Gide and de Montherlant" •eroticized, romantic, 'oriental'" •but that was then and this is now. Overrun by tourists and fundamentalists" •post-colonial, melancholic and inexplicable, threatened and threatening" •it is still seductive. The Deaf-Mute Boy is a devastatingly accurate portrayal of the reality behind the modern tourism facade." •Peter Lamborn Wilson

One of Joseph Geraci's tremendous skills as an author is the accessibility of his writing. The inevitable downside of this is the tendency for his work to be severely underestimated. Reviewers have variously observed that 'The Deaf-Mute Boy' is a travel story, a love story, or a cautionary tale about the imposition of one culture's values onto another's. At its core, the novel is none of these things. Rather, it witnesses the psychological deconstruction of a man, the blurring of the boundaries between his conscious and unconscious mind. This man is Maurice Burke, an archaeology professor at Columbia University, invited to give a series of lectures at a conference in Sousse, Tunisia. His home in New York is clearly a protective cocoon of banality; his life is busy, planned, and routine; revolving primarily around his work and his partner Eddie's daily struggle with AIDS. While in Sousse, he meets Nidhal, a 13 year old deaf-mute Tunisian boy, and it is then that the link with his life in New York begins to crumble. The signs were already in place. Maurice's career path was unconventional; when young, he was heavily entrenched into life as a Jesuit; later, he studied comparative religion and theology, before coming to archaeology. These background elements clearly indicate a man who is searching for something he has either lost, or has never had. Even within archaeology he is somewhat on the fringes: his recently published book was entitled 'Spirit of Place', in which he applied various Jungian theories in understanding the geographical siting of ancient cities and temples. Thus, before arriving in Sousse, Maurice already has indefinable questions about his existence; aware that within him there is a "deeper streak of angry wildness being held in check", yet at this stage he is unable to pull together these muddled flashes of self-awareness. The town of Sousse itself impacts upon Maurice's (already thin) superficial layers; as he tries to explain to Dobbs, a fellow professor from England, "the range of instincts is closer to the surface here, whereas we bury them more". But it is Nidhal who is responsible for initiating the destructive avalanche of Maurice's levels of consciousness. Being deaf and mute, Nidhal's bond

with Maurice is an innate, intensely emotional one, and with Maurice he feels a deep psychological connection, as well as warm protection from the fear of his daily life. Equally, Maurice feels an immediate identification with Nidhal; his very first glimpse of him is of "a lone figure stood at the water's edge looking out to sea". Soon, as "the relief of silence" gives Maurice more time to listen to his inner voice, he becomes aware that he is "hopelessly conditioned and dependent for everything on words spoken or heard" and now, "after years of not seeing myself, I am again". A poem constructed by Maurice around Nidhal's 'shadow game' at the water's edge, together with his dreams, illustrate the Jungian battle that is being fought between his conscious and unconscious mind. The dilemma is: where does he go from here? How can he communicate at an unconscious level with people who are burdened by 'civilized' methods of communication? Of all the other characters in the novel - his partner Eddie, his writer friend Henri, a local Imam - none has the capacity to understand the tortuous transformation that Maurice's mind is undergoing; Dobbs - Maurice's only possible guide - does have the capacity, but fearing the risk of the unknown, has consciously rejected such a search for authenticity (and equality). Consequently, Maurice is utterly alone; overwhelmingly lost and confused, he can no longer trust his instincts ("are my motives really so pure?"). The only viable pathway is through Nidhal, but if Maurice is to follow that path, he would become "the blind man being led by the deaf-mute boy". A review cannot begin to capture the vast array of substantive layers of this novel; but this review's object is an attempt to convey that the deceptively simple story of 'The Deaf-Mute Boy' masks fundamental struggles of human nature as profound as any in, say, Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men', or Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'. Joseph Geraci has created a work of sheer brilliance; stark, tortured, and expertly crafted. It is therefore hoped that his outstanding novel will receive the recognition that it clearly deserves as an enduring and extraordinarily powerful work of literature.

On vacation from his archeology professorship at Columbia University, Maurice Burke is in Sousse, Tunisia to lecture at and attend a conference in that North African city. Concerned about being separated from his lifepartner, Edmund, who is fighting HIV, Maurice is impatient for the conference to be over, until he meets Nidhal, a local deaf mute boy who claims to be 15, with whom he develops a strong emotional, though strictly platonic, friendship. Trying to find out more about the boy, he explores the poorer areas of the local town, which are usually avoided by tourists as dangerous. He meets a local iman (religious teacher) and is discouraged from asking too many questions about the boy's family or how he got the bruises Maurice noticed when he was swimming. In time, Maurice becomes obsessed with the boy's situation, and postpones his departure after the

conference, hoping that arrangements can be made to become a guardian of sorts for Nidhal, who has shown skills as an artist. The book is a well-written, colorful novel that is part love story but moreso a study into how a man's priorities can change, as well as a look at the poverty, violence, and political unrest in that country. The climax of the book is somewhat unexpected, and rather unsettling, leaving matters as muddled as they are throughout much of the book. I give it four stars out of five.

Perhaps one can say that being intangible is one of the qualities of a good book. Being hard to define leaves room for many possibilities, subtleties, projections. You are no longer sure whether you are reading the book or it is reading you. It is like that with "The Deaf-Mute Boy." It is the kind of book that will have as many descriptions as it has readers, each one seeing in it what he brings himself to the reading. This reader brings a jaundiced view of modern culture, Eastern as well as Western. Not surprisingly, the book rewards such a reading. It throws, if you like, a scathing look upon maniacal Eastern religious fundamentalists, upon the all-too-materialist (and sexist!) gay culture of the West, and upon the "straight" matrix against which it is profiled. Under attack from all directions, the protagonists escape into vulnerability and humanity. I'd like to say that in the end they are successful, but that too is my own reading - another reader may disagree completely.

Regardless, Geraci has produced a work that exposes a great deal, in itself, the author, and the reader. If you let it.

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