

The Mamur Zapt and the Return of the Carpet

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One benefit of having a child with learning disabilities is that our family has started enjoying books on tapes. My son gets books for school and for fun from the Library for the Blind in Seattle and gets textbooks from the library for the blind and dyslexic in New Jersey. Both my husband and I have enjoyed some of our son's taped books and have started checking some out of our local library system for our own enjoyment.

I hope that this will be the first of many reviews of books that are somewhat related to our art form and/or to the regions from which it hails.

The Mamur Zapt and the Return of the Carpet by Michael Pearce ©1988 ©1992 –  
Recorded Books. Recorded book/shelf #92416 (5 cassettes/7.5 hours)

This fictional story is set in Cairo in the "heyday of British rule" – shortly after the turn of the century, about 1908, although it appears to me that British rule is waning during the story. As nearly as I can tell, it is fairly accurate in its portrayal of the time and place. It is ostensibly about an assassination attempt on an Egyptian dignitary. The main character is Captain Gareth Cadwallader Owen who is the Mamur Zapt, a position which is dedicated to the nebulous concept of 'security'. He has authorities that the police lack and functions sometimes in a civil capacity and sometimes in a police or army capacity. He and an Egyptian police official, Mahmood, attempt to 'get to the bottom' of the assassination attempt. It's a wonderful 'Whodunnit', weaving the interrelations of a variety of people: Who's related to whom, who's protecting who, who's indebted to who and so on. It gives you a feeling of the type of relationships that existed in the time and place.

The story deals with clashes of cultures, as well as the occasional melding of cultures. The country, of course, had been ruled by the French and the Turks, among others. All have left their influence on various parts of society. The truly cosmopolitan nature of Cairo comes through as you listen to the names and origins of the characters. Some are Copts, Greeks, Sudanese, Berberine. Owen is actually Welsh, which helps him find a common ground with Mahmood: Owen lets him know that he understands the feelings of a country that is ruled by another, as Wales is by England.

Anyone who's spent time in a foreign country or culture will laugh and nod in remembrance at some of the scenes, as I did when listening to the one in which Owen is returning from the opera late (by our standards!) one evening. He's walking along lost in his own thoughts, passing a café, when a group of students sitting at the café hurls epithets at him. Without thinking, he responds in kind. He hears their footsteps approaching him and realizes that he may have gotten himself into a bad situation and that the British government frowns on its officials becoming involved in street brawls. It turns out that the students wish to apologize to him – he ends up spending the evening with them at a party where it turns out he knows the host and a couple of the guests. The

café scene reminded me of one time when I was on a very crowded bus in Sevilla, in Southern Spain, where I went to the University for my Junior year of college. A man made some very lewd comments and I responded with something to the effect of “consider doing that with your mother.” This was a totally normal response to what he had said to me and he apologized profusely! He’d had no idea that I understood, much less could respond in kind, in Spanish.

There’s a delicious description of the hammam (Owen and Mahmood go there to catch a criminal). You get a true understanding of the ritual nature of the hammam, the chatting, the visiting, the towels, hot water, sudsing and of course, the finishing touch of coffee. The architecture of the hamman also is described so beautifully that you feel you’ve been there.

I’d recommend this book to anyone who’s interested in the interactions of varying cultures. It’s quite true to life. I hope to listen, next to the sequel: *The Mamur Zapt and the Night of the Dog*.