

The Mamur Zapt and the Men Behind

Reviewed by Kashani of Mas- Uda Dancers

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The Mamur Zapt and the Men Behind by Michael Pearce ©1991 ®1994 – Recorded Books. Recorded book/shelf #94330 (6 cassettes/8 hours). This book is the fourth in a series of Pearce's 'Mamur Zapt' books.

The year is 1909 and a bookkeeper from the customs office is shot at by 2 men who have followed him. They missed. He and his little donkey end up careening through the market place and being covered with smashed tomatoes. The customs office is one of the lowest ranking offices, so it is a surprise for him to have been the focus of an attack.

The political situation is more restless than usual in Cairo since the Coptic Prime minister has fallen from favor and a replacement has yet to be appointed. There are many reports of government officials being 'followed' by two men, but most of the 'victims' can't describe the men who follow them – can't even say whether the men wore western garb or galabeyas. Captain Cadwaller Owen, the Mamur Zapt (head of Cairo's Criminal Investigation Division) doubts the 'following' episodes are even real until he himself is followed. He feels the 'prickly feeling' of someone behind him, but is able to lose his followers by ducking into a narrow doorway and finding his way along alleys. He is unable to get a good look at the men.

As with Pearce's previous Mamur Zapt books, the characters are explained in enough detail to establish them in the minds of first-time readers, but they are not so over-described as to bore those who've read the previous Mamur Zapt books. The ability to do this is a trait I really appreciate in an author.

The British had come to Egypt to reinstate financial stability so that their loans would be re-paid, but they had remained long after financial stability was returned. This caused some resentment amongst various political groups in the country and nationalism is on the rise. There is a nationalist party as well as fringe 'societies' known for unorthodox ways – demonstrations and in some cases, bombings.

Owen takes a visiting official to the area below the citadel, the quarter where the Ghawazee gypsies reside as they provide the 'best dancing girls in the country' and the official appears to be interested in dancing girls. He then takes the official to the brothel district, since this is what the official is more interested in rather than the 'finer points' of the Ghawazee dancers. At the brothel a plump girl does a belly dance for him. The comment is made that she can move the four quarters of her abdomen independently. While the official is off with one of the 'dancers', Owen is approached by a young Ghawazee. He is surprised as they aren't usually found in that part of town. She says the money is better there. She is, he says, strikingly pretty with long dark hair, aquiline face and with a saucy boldness that is very attractive. He speaks to her in Egyptian Romany, which he says is not pure Romany, but rather a form of Arabic, so distorted as to be unrecognizable by the native Egyptian. It is partly of Persian and Hindu origins and

interests Owen. The girl is surprised to hear him speak her language. Even though they appear to get on well, Owen guards his wallet as even the young girls of the Ghawazee people were known to pick pockets. He seems to run in to her more and more often as the mystery proceeds.

There are also references to the crowded market area – the Khan el Khalil and you can almost imagine wending your way through the various stalls complete with a variety of sounds and the scents of the goods for sale and of the city itself.

According to The London Times, quoted on the cassette case: “Pearce’s cultivated pen re-creates a long-gone era with engaging wit, tracing colorful arabesques of greed, history and mystery.”

This is the first of Pearce’s books where I haven’t “bought” the ending – it just didn’t quite make sense to me. All of the previous books in the series have left me with an “AHA” feeling and all of the story fit together well. I did, however, stop listening to the book about half way through to go out of town for awhile, so I may have lost the thread somewhere. I hope that the next book in the series The Mamur Zapt and the Girl in The Nile brings back that “AHA” feeling.

At the end of the book, Owen is seen with the Ghawazee girl, Soraya, and he looks up to see his Egyptian girlfriend approaching. We know there will be fireworks, as Zeinab (the girlfriend) is always jealous. Pearce leaves us to imagine how Owen might get himself out of this particular situation.....