



The Moor's Account: A Novel

By Laila Lalami

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A Pulitzer Prize Finalist

A New York Times Notable Book

A Wall Street Journal Top 10 Book of the Year

An NPR Great Read of 2014

A Kirkus Best Fiction Book of the Year

In this stunning work of historical fiction, Laila Lalami brings us the imagined memoirs of the first black explorer of America—a Moroccan slave whose testimony was left out of the official record.

In 1527, the conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez sailed from the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda with a crew of six hundred men and nearly a hundred horses. His goal was to claim what is now the Gulf Coast of the United States for the Spanish crown and, in the process, become as wealthy and famous as Hernán Cortés.

But from the moment the Narváez expedition landed in Florida, it faced peril—navigational errors, disease, starvation, as well as resistance from indigenous tribes. Within a year there were only four survivors: the expedition's treasurer, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca; a Spanish nobleman named Alonso del Castillo Maldonado; a young explorer named Andrés Dorantes de Carranza; and Dorantes's Moroccan slave, Mustafa al-Zamori, whom the three Spaniards called Estebanico. These four survivors would go on to make a journey across America that would transform them from proud conquistadores to humble servants, from fearful outcasts to faith healers.

The Moor's Account brilliantly captures Estebanico's voice and vision, giving us an alternate narrative for this famed expedition. As the dramatic chronicle unfolds, we come to understand that, contrary to popular belief, black men played a significant part in New World exploration and Native American men and women were not merely silent witnesses to it. In Laila Lalami's deft hands, Estebanico's memoir illuminates the ways in which stories can transmigrate into history, even as storytelling can offer a chance for redemption and survival.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Tremendous and powerful, *The Moor's Account* is one of the finest historical novels I've encountered in a while. It rings with thunder!”

—Gary Shteyngart

“Laila Lalami has fashioned an absorbing story of one of the first encounters between Spanish conquistadores and Native Americans, a frightening, brutal, and much-falsified history that here, in her brilliantly imagined fiction, is rewritten to give us something that feels very like the truth.”

—Salman Rushdie

“A beautiful, rousing tale that would be difficult to believe if it were not actually true. Lalami has once again shown why she is one of her generation's most gifted writers.”

—Reza Aslan, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Zealot* and *No God But God*

“A novel of extraordinary scope, ambition and originality, Laila Lalami has given voice to a man silenced for five centuries, a voice both convincing and compelling. *The Moor's Account* is a work of creativity and compassion, one which demonstrates the full might of Lalami's talent as a writer.”

—Aminatta Forna, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and Hurston Prize Legacy Award-winning author of *The Memory of Love*, *Ancestor Stones*, and *The Devil That Danced on the Water*

“Laila Lalami's radiant, arrestingly vivid prose instantly draws us into the world of the first black slave in the New World whose name we know—Estebanico. A bravura performance of imagination and empathy, *The Moor's Account* reverberates long after the final page.”

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, Harvard University

“¡*Qué belleza!* Laila Lalami has given us a mesmerizing reimagining of one of the foundational chronicles of exploration of the New World and an indictment of the uncontainable hubris displayed by Spanish explorers—told from the point of view of Estebanico, an Arab slave and Cabeza de Vaca's companion in a trek across the United States that is as important as that of Lewis and Clark. The style and voice of sixteenth-century *crónicas* are turned upside down to subtly undermine our understanding of race and religion, now and then. *The Moor's Account* is a worthy stepchild of Don Quixote de la Mancha.”

—Ilan Stavans, author of *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* and general editor of *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*

“Lalami has created an unforgettable drama of wonder out of the gaps and silences in the master narratives of colonial conquests. She gives name to the unnamed, agency to the sidelined; she takes them from footnotes into the footprints that make up the pages of this remarkable novel. Lalami gives voice to the silences of history.”

—Ngugi wa Thiong’o

“[An] exquisite piece of historical fiction.”

—*Winnipeg Free Press*

“[An] ambitious historical novel.”

—*New Yorker*

“Mustafa, one of four survivors of a crew that originally numbered six hundred, spins an exciting tale of wild hopes, divided loyalties, and highly precarious fortunes. His account also communicates a sense of the power and the privilege of storytelling, and Lalami develops this thread with great finesse.”

—*New Yorker*

“The novel is a fascinating saga of the many native American tribes they encounter, without whom they would not have survived as well as the importance of other cultures and races in the exploration of the New World. ... There is so much modern readers still don’t know about this period of history in the Americas—and that we many never know. *The Moor’s Account* feels true to the lives of real human beings.”

—*Toronto Star*

About the Author

Laila Lalami was born and raised in Morocco. She attended Université Mohammed-V in Rabat, University College in London, and the University of Southern California, where she earned a PhD in linguistics. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Nation*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Daily Beast*, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of a British Council Fellowship, a Fulbright Fellowship, and a Lannan Foundation Residency Fellowship. She is currently an associate professor of creative writing at the University of California at Riverside.

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8.

The Story of Seville

All around me, voices rose and fell. Shackled slaves spoke in an overlapping multitude of languages, this one asking after an uncle, this other comforting a child, and yet these others arguing about a piece of moldy bread, their cries periodically interrupted by the bleating of goats from the animal stalls. But for a long time, I kept to my silence, wrapping myself in it like an old, comfortable cloak. I think I was still trying to apprehend the consequences of what I had done. For hours on end, I revisited the long sequence of events that had led me from the soft divans and rhythmic guenbris of my graduation feast to the timber bench and jangling chains of the caravel *Jacinta*, sailing with frightening speed toward the city of Seville. I had played my part in these events—I had made my decisions freely and independently at each juncture, and yet I was stunned by the turn my life had taken. The elders teach us: give glory to God, who can alter all fates. One day you could be selling slaves, the next you could be sold as a slave.

The hunger I had felt so keenly in Azemmur was tamed now, if not satisfied, by the hard bread the sailors distributed once a day, though it was quickly replaced by a renewed acquaintance with all of my body’s other

senses and needs. My head itched from the lice my neighbor, an old man with pockmarks dotting his face, had given me. My soiled clothes stuck to my skin, because I could not bring myself to use, on command and with little notice, the bucket that was passed up and down the gallery twice a day. My limbs grew stiff from sitting in damp and narrow quarters. My throat hurt, my feet swelled, my wrists bled. Above all, my heart ached with longing for my family.

My family. They had, all of them, learned to accept their fates. Without complaint my sister had spent her girlhood watching over our twin brothers, and without protest she had returned home after her divorce. My brothers went to school every day hoping to fulfill my father's dreams, dreams I had cruelly broken and then bequeathed to them. My mother had left her beloved people and her distinguished hometown in order to follow my father to Azemmur.

As for me, I had made a habit of defying my fate. Perhaps I could do that now and find a way back to my old life. I thought of the elder al-Dib, my employer in Azemmur, who had been born to a slave woman, but had earned his freedom as a youth. Perhaps I could do the same. Perhaps my talent would be recognized by my master, who would let me purchase my freedom; or perhaps my misery would touch the heart of an Andalusian Muslim, who would free me from bondage in order to earn the favor of our Lord. To overcome my fear, I shackled myself with hope, its links heavier than any metal known to man.

Having convinced myself that my condition was temporary, I set about trying to survive it. I taught myself to ignore the stench of excretions, the moans of delirium, the sight of private parts. I learned to push back into my throat the rising taste of vomit. I tried to watch out for the rats. I slept only when my exhaustion overpowered my discomfort. And I passed the time by listening to the stories the women told their children, after the guards had left and the doors were locked for the night. In the darkness of the lower deck, the women brought to life a world entire, a world where sly girls outwitted hungry ghouls and where simple cobblers saved powerful sultans, so that at times it seemed to me I could see the ghouls' sharp teeth or the sultan's embroidered slippers.

Then, early one morning, the anchor was dropped, its tug faintly resonating through the varnished wood under my feet. I listened to the footsteps on the upper deck. Did the customs officer come aboard to greet the captain? Was that the stevedore inquiring about the merchandise? Then at last the deck door was flung wide open. A rush of cold air blasted into the lower deck, where it met with the suppressed heat and terrified silence of two hundred slaves. Row by row, we were unshackled and led up the stairs.

When I reached the upper deck, the blinding white light made me recoil in pain and I staggered like a drunkard, but after three weeks in closed quarters I was so hungry for the untainted smell of open air that I took my hands off my face. Seville reeked of fried fish, but its air was not briny, and there was a whiff of smoke coming from somewhere in the port. The morning chill gave me goose bumps and I put my arms around me, all the while steadying myself on my feet. Finally, I opened my eyes.

All around me were men whose faces were covered in brightly colored kerchiefs, with openings for the eyes. They carried long sticks, with which they prodded me to the way out. As I went down the ship's rope ladder, I saw that I was on a wide river. It ran fast, just like the Umm er-Rbi', and yet its sound, the particular melody it made as it rumbled beneath the ship, was different. Later, when I would learn that this river was called the Guadalquivir, the Arabic name would at once delight me with its familiarity and repulse me with its reminder of my personal humiliation. The city of Seville did not have a pier like the one in Azemmur, so we had to be taken by rowboat to the riverbank. The sky above was a turquoise blue, cut through by the black masts and white sails of the ships around us.

On the shore, a man whose face was hidden behind a yellow kerchief was separating the healthy from the lame, the sturdy from the weak, the young from the old. He jabbed me with a stick, and then pointed me to the first line. All around me, the port hummed with the sounds of sailors, officers, porters, and scribes, each hurriedly going about his business. Two men standing next to a tall stack of crates were having a loud argument, I remember, and one of them seized the other by his collar. Beyond the port, the city's white, square homes were slowly rising from their slumber. Carts creaked on the cobblestone. Horses clopped in the distance. Somewhere, I knew, a father was sitting down for a morning meal with his family. Somewhere, a child was receiving her bowl of milk. Somewhere, a brother was closing the door of his house behind him as he went to work. And I was here, at the port, ready to be sold once again.

A man with a red kerchief grouped a dozen of us together, the way farmers collect their eggs or bakers their loaves, tied our hands to one another with thick rope, and led us away from the port. It was a long and painful walk, because we were all weak from hunger and idleness. Periodically one of us fell and had to be helped up, but our wretched procession drew no stares of interest or curiosity from the many people we passed. Each one went about his business without the slightest pause. At a bend in the road I caught the first glimpse of an imposing tower, which looked very much like the minarets at home. What is the name of that tower? I asked the man with the red kerchief. La Giralda, he said without turning. I had heard of La Giralda years earlier—it had been built by the Almohad sultans as a replica of the Kutubiya in Marrakesh—and I had even fantasized of seeing it someday, but never under these circumstances.

Around the corner from La Giralda, we stopped in front of a tall edifice, with large wooden doors and an imposing facade. As we ascended the marble steps, an older man in our group slipped and fell and we all tumbled in a pile over him. The slave merchant clicked his tongue at the delay we were causing him—his long day, already filled with labor, was made more difficult by our clumsiness. The fallen man stood up, his palm over his broken tooth and bloodied lips, even as the merchant pulled roughly on the rope and led us toward the entrance.

We were brought before an imam of the Christian faith, a man of freckled complexion and colorless eyes, who spoke an ancient tongue I did not understand. I could detect no pattern to the words that poured like a river out of his mouth, but I listened nonetheless, to distract myself from my thirst and my hunger. He wore a robe of immaculate white, with carefully embroidered edges. Behind him, a stained glass window colored the morning light in various shades of red, yellow, and blue. Though I had been taught to distrust pictures of the human form, I could not help staring at the white woman with a babe in arms and the brilliantly attired men gathered around her. They seemed removed from our untidy and disgraceful world, engaged in their own story, unconcerned about the scene unfolding beneath them.

Being the tallest man in my family, I was used to lowering my head when I passed through the doorway of our house and to seeing my knees stick out when I sat on my heels next to my uncles. Yet here, in this high-ceilinged church, I felt small and helpless. My hands were tied together and bound to the slaves on either side of me. If one of us moved his hands or feet in order to find a more comfortable stance, the slave merchant pulled on the rope to force the insurgent back in line. With a snap, the priest closed his book and laid it carefully on a table beside him. He nodded to the merchant, who nudged the first in our group forward, a woman with wide, protruding eyes. The priest's fingers traced a cross in the air, over her face and chest. I looked at him unblinkingly, all the while wondering what the action meant and why he repeated it with each one of us. It was not until much later that I understood the significance of the sign on our bodies. I had entered the church as the servant of God Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori; I left it as Esteban. Just Esteban—converted and orphaned in one gesture.

The slave merchant led us out of the cathedral. He pulled his red kerchief back up over his nose to protect himself against the smell of his charges. Walking with the swiftness of a man determined to make the most of his day, he led us back to the port and to a holding pen guarded by dogs. In truth, there was no need for them since we were all so tired and hungry we would not have had the power to run far. The four women in our group went to huddle together on the far side of the holding pen. I had trouble speaking to them, on account of the fact that they spoke a different variety of Tamazight than I did, but by and by I gathered that they were the daughters of farmers who had suffered great hardship during the drought. Two of the men told me they were from Guinea and had been sold on the slave markets there, then transported to Azemmur, and from there to Seville. Just before nightfall, a man brought us bowls of cold soup. We called the name of God over our food, each in our own language and custom, and ate hungrily.

I lay down on the pallet that, by the following morning, would give me a terrible rash, and tried to go to sleep. But sleep eluded me. In the distance, I could hear the Guadalquivir, and my thoughts drifted to Yahya, who, despite my repeated efforts, had not learned how to swim. He had never been able to conquer his fear of water long enough to wade into the heart of the Umm er-Rbi'. How Yusuf would tease him! I tried to protect him from the taunts of the other boys as they swam in the river, but he always ended up in tears. Sometimes, during the mating season, a shad would fly out of the water, and I would try to catch it so that Yahya, seeing my feat, would finally want to leave the safety of the shore. But the fish were always too slippery for me and I was never able to pull off the trick. Would Yusuf teach him what I had not been able to?

Despite the faint sound of the river, this strange city filled me with dread. I tossed and turned for a long while before I realized why it felt so quiet and so empty—I had not heard the call for prayer. In Azemmur, I had heard it five times a day, every day of my life. The morning prayer woke me; the noon prayer told me that it was time to eat and rest; the afternoon prayer refreshed me after a long nap; the dusk prayer delivered me from my workday and to my family; and the evening prayer commended my soul to God. Now I was alone in the world. All I could do to contain the tears that welled in my eyes was to lie in the dark and call silently upon God until I fell asleep.

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From reader reviews:

Jeff Puckett:

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