# Bridging East and West

## A Review of *Samarkand* By Amin Maalouf, Translated by Russell Harris

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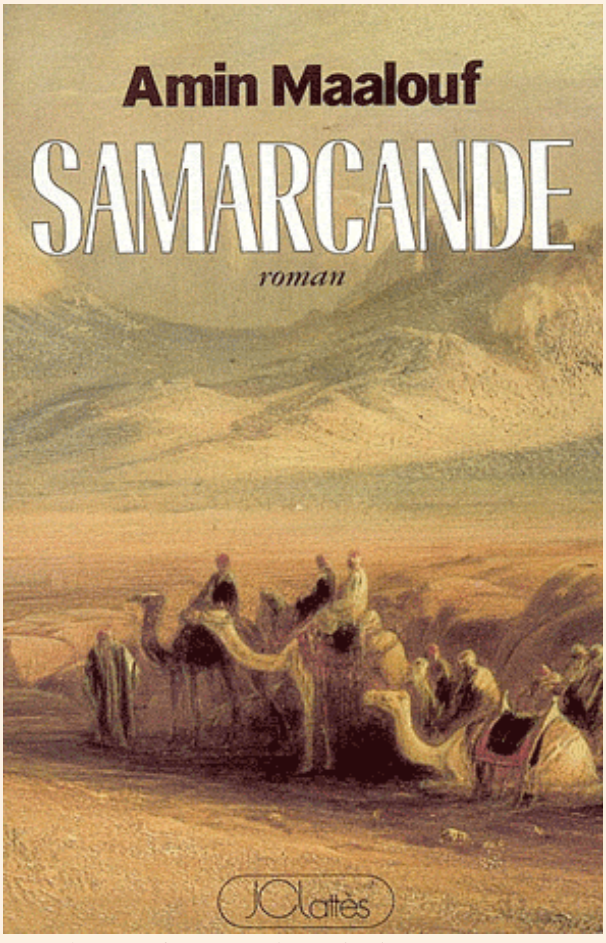
Lord Tennyson wrote in Ulysses, "For always roaming with a hungry heart / Much I have seen and known…" It is this spirit that fills the pages of Amin Maalouf's *Samarkand*, translated by Russell Harris. The second novel by the Paris-based Lebanese author, it is now one of many erudite stories of historical fiction that he has published over the past three decades. In each work, Maalouf imagines a rich narrative filled with historical figures and real events, of which most of the actual details have been lost to time.

In *Samarkand*, Maalouf paints the story of one of Persia's most famous poets, Omar Khayyam. In the novel, upon Omar's arrival to Samarkand (now in present-day Uzbekistan), he is brought by local townspeople before the qadi, or local judge, for being a failasuf, or philosopher. The admiring magistrate gives him the following advice: "The Almighty has granted you the most valuable things a son of Adam can



Original cover art for 1988 novel *Samarkand*.

have–intelligence, eloquence, health, beauty, the desire for knowledge and a lust for life, the admiration of men and, I suspect, the sighs of women. I hope that He has not deprived you of the wisdom of silence…"(13). In addition to this counsel, Khayyam is presented with an empty book to fill with words he should not speak, lest he blaspheme. The manuscript, which comes to contain some of Omar's most famous lines, becomes the protagonist of the story.

Omar Khayyam was a real 11th-century philosopher, theologian, astronomer, proto-scientist, and man of letters. He is perhaps best known for his poetry, specifically his rubaiyat, or quatrains. While Omar Khayyam was prominent in the Persian public consciousness for many centuries after his death, his work only became widely read in the West when the English Victorian poet Edward FitzGerald produced a translation, titled "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam." While the faithfulness of translation and the provenance of the quatrains in FitzGerald's work are disputed, the effect of the publication was profound. Khayyam became one of the most popular non-English poets in the English-speaking world. It is with this context in mind that Maalouf creates his imagined origin story of Omar's Rubaiyat.

In addition to the tale of the Rubaiyat's genesis, the novel weaves in a second, interconnected story, that of the fictional adventurer Benjamin O. Lesage—the "O." for Omar. A half-American, half-French orientalist from Annapolis, Lesage is beckoned to the East by the pull of destiny after a conversation with his cousin in France. Lesage's cousin asks him, "If you were certain that such a manuscript existed, would your interest in Omar Khayyam be reborn?" To which he replies, "Naturally" (168).

From Paris to Istanbul to Isfahan and finally to Samarkand, Lesage stumbles into many of the major historical events at the turn of the last century. All the

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while, he seeks to find and read Khayyam's lost manuscript containing the original Rubaiyat. Through Lesage's journey, Maalouf deftly tells the story of American involvement in Persia at the sunset of the Qajar dynasty. Given the current context of Iranian-American relations, it is a refreshing reminder to the contemporary reader that a young American once died a martyr's death in the name of Persian democracy and that another used his financial acumen to help Iran's young government defend against the territorial ambitions of great powers.

At one point in the novel, Benjamin Lesage's news editor says, "Just yesterday, abroad did not exist for us. The Orient stopped at Cape Cod. Now suddenly, under the pretext of the end of one century and the start of another, our peaceful city has been laid hold of by the world's troubles" (213). This sentiment resonates today as a reflection the cyclical nature of American isolationism, illustrating to the reader that the "rediscovery" of the world by the United States is not new.

Amin Maalouf, winner of the 1993 Prix Goncourt. Claude Truong-Ngoc/Wikimedia Commons

While *Samarkand* was published two decades ago, its depiction of an oft-forgotten history remains relevant today. As the story evolves, the reader witnesses the odyssey of the fictional Rubaiyat manuscript. At times the language seems dated—words like "Orient," "Occident," "Persia," "Constantinople," and "Providence" appear often—but it simply reflects Maalouf's grasp of the period's lexicon. As this edition is a translation from the original French, credit is also due to translator Russell Harris for the accessibility and fluidity of the English.

There is perhaps one major shortcoming to *Samarkand*. On the first page of the novel, the story of the RMS Titanic takes center stage. In a post-Leonardo-and-Kate world, the device of the voyage of the great White Star ocean liner comes off stale. This is not Maalouf's error but rather the evolution of popular culture. Even so, it does unfortunate damage to the tale—and is an intriguing example of how, through no fault of its own, literature does not always age well.

Ultimately, this novel demonstrates the power of the narratives, both real and imagined, that we tell ourselves as we find our place in the world. When done well...oh, how beautiful it can be. ✦