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Hell on Earth: A Review of *Stoning the Devil*

Garry Craig Powell. *Stoning the Devil*. Skylight Press, 2012.

Dubai is a place of excess and conspicuous wealth in the popular imagination. It's an emirate and a city built on sand and oil, with neighborhoods thrust like manmade fingers into the Persian Gulf, and skyscrapers lit brighter than fireworks against the flat coastal terrain. Garry Craig Powell's *Stoning the Devil* takes us down to eye-level with the teeming international community who live, work, and clash in Dubai and the surrounding United Arab Emirates (UAE). *Stoning the Devil* is a novel in stories with revolving characters trapped in an economy of obscene consumption that, notwithstanding the title, makes devils of humans.

The epistolary first chapter reveals the character of Badria, a fifteen-year-old Emirati girl from Dubai, who writes to her cousin of being isolated and raped by her father, a lascivious monster whom she subsequently murders during a ritual stoning of the devil at the annual Hajj, or pilgrimage, to the plain of Arafat. Traditionally, pilgrims throw stones at three pillars in order to declare enmity to the devil, but during the emotional annual ritual, the raped and surgically repaired Badria feels "a force bending [her] arm" and she flings stones instead at her father, striking him with one between the eyes and causing him to fall "like a horse with a broken leg."

If readers believe that the death of Badria's father is the end of the economy of sex and violence represented in the collection, Powell's vivid depictions of other lives in Dubai soon disabuse us. We meet the rapist's son, Sultan, who steps into his father's shoes to maintain the status quo of *wasta* that makes rape a pardonable offense. *Wasta* is one's power based not only on nationality, gender, and profession, but also on who you work for and who you know. Powell explores the ruthless nature of *wasta* and its effects on a range of characters, including Badria, who is in her early twenties in the final story; Colin, a British professor of English at the women's campus of the national university; Palestinian refugees; a Polish émigré prostitute; a Russian waitress; and a Sri Lankan hotel worker who provides the collection's clearest moral center.

As intriguing as the main characters are, the stories of peripheral characters are often dynamic, even poignant, as is the case with Mohammed, a young immigrant worker from Bangladesh who provides security at the university. His job includes keeping the girls

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in and the world out, an impossible task in his dealings with Alia, an Emirati student obsessed with Hollywood notions of love and romance. Alia's *wasta* is superior to Mohammed's, so she threatens to accuse him of touching her if he does not have sex. Poor Mohammed shows up for the deed with garlic breath, unzips, grunts, and leaves. It's a relief when his character doesn't appear in the text again because it means he's escaped the consequences of violating an Emirati girl whose highest value is virginity and its illusion of purity in a corrupt society. In the devilish world represented, the consequences would have been dire for Mohammed: at the very least dismissal and deportation, and more likely torture, mutilation, and murder.

The characters in Powell's collection rarely get off lightly, though the final story, "No Free Lunch," offers some hope for the violent and misogynistic culture represented. Randa, one of the Palestinian refugees, travels with her lover to a sheik's compound. She is sequestered with a group of Emirati women watching an Egyptian televangelist who says, "The Holy Qur'an makes it clear that in God's eyes women are as important as men, and the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, did his utmost to insure that they had equal rights." New ideas circulate and new choices are possible. Badria is now twenty-two and a soldier. Her example inspires Randa to also change her life.