

## *A Testament To A Born Story-Teller*

“Puissent les conteurs arabes de plein air, qui jouissent actuellement d’une audience inaccoutumée, se créer pour un jour prochain des émules sur nos places d’Amérique, d’Europe. Et que partout l’imagination, si honteusement canalisée, aille son cours!” André Breton, "Lumière noire" *Arcane 17*, 127

*Revue CELAAN Review* will, periodically, profile Maghrebian authors who, for no reason other than lack of curiosity, have received, undeservedly as this issue will clearly show, little or no critical and academic attention, especially on this side of the Atlantic. It is no coincidence that we inaugurate this initiative with a testament to the most neglected but, assuredly, the best talent of all, the Algerian poet, essayist, novelist and inveterate story-teller : Rabah Belamri (1946-1995). As to be expected, the issue includes several survey articles that should have particular value and relevance for those unacquainted with the life and works of Belamri.

Until his untimely death at the age of 49, Belamri was slowly but surely making a name for himself both in French and Maghrebian literary circles. Known for his extraordinary versatility and resourcefulness, Belamri was a tireless creative mind who wrote exquisitely and penetratingly in every conceivable genre. He penned some twenty books that reveal splendid craft and unabashed veracity. Alas, only one book of his, *Le regard blessé/ Shattered Vision* (translated by Hugh A. Harter), is available in English. This volume remedies somewhat this injustice by offering a sampling of his poetry in English. But if fiction and poetry won Belamri praise and prizes, it is his short-stories and particularly his storytelling that earned him the strongest acclaim. Indeed, Belamri, a gifted *conteur* with an arresting way of telling a story, is a master of the tender but grave “parole” and of the “short” but poignant text, We will not be too far off in asserting that his love of storytelling has, in a large measure, predicated his own writing vocation. For this innate storyteller was profoundly steeped in the lore of his beloved Sétif region as well as in traditional and oral narrative techniques and material. As the essays in this volume show, Belamri displays and applies a considerable resourcefulness and sophistication of technique to traditional storytelling material. Indeed, he is to be counted one of those prime “conteurs arabes” (according to Breton) whose unhinged imagination followed its natural course.

Although they mostly deal with regional concerns, specifically Algerian, Belamri’s writings are also universal in scope His rich phantasmagoria encompasses such cherished themes as innocence and experience, the sacred and the profane, tradition and modernity, heralding, not their harsh and alienating clashing, as is often found in the works of his Maghrebian contemporaries, but their smooth and playful interlacing. From the distillation of his own personal, sometimes even intimist experiences, whether actually lived or imagined, there arises both a sense of unrecoverable loss and maliciously playful delight.

This volume is not only a testament but also a testimonial. Rabah Belamri will be remembered for the high quality of his work as well as for his humanity and kindness. His warmth and generosity coupled with his political courage won him legions of friends and admirers. Against the grain, he advocated, a rarity among the writers of his generation, for a hospitable, multi-ethnic Algeria, finally reconciled with its colonial past. Admittedly, by focusing on Rabah Belamri, it is our sincere and ardent hope that this volume will stimulate interest in the work, and translations, of one of the most compelling writers of his generation.

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