

ICWA LETTERS

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FRANCE**

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The Good Immigrant

By K.A. Dilday

APRIL 17, 2006

PARIS, France—Belleville is a small neighborhood on the right bank of Paris, in the 20th arrondissement, just on the southern border of the 19th. A little bit out of the way, earthy and affordable, Belleville has traditionally been a neighborhood popular with immigrants to France. It once had a predominantly north African population and was sometimes called, “A taste of Tunis”. Now it has a large Chinese population, an outpost of the Chinatown across the Seine in the 13th arrondissement. Belleville doesn’t look like Paris to me, at least not like the Paris of legend and postcards. The architecture, which is mostly the large modern buildings that Parisians so disdain, hint of what is to come as the 20th arrondissement borders several of the poorer banlieue whose vast modern housing projects are largely regarded as virtual prisons and a failure of urban planning.

I have been to Belleville once, but this past month I have been walking around the neighborhood with a resident, Abdellah Taia, who lives just on the border of the 19th. Our walks were during the height of the protests over the CPE, but Belleville is a world unto itself, and it was as if the students and their concerns were far, far away. Life was usual—people bustled around selling Chinese vegetables and painted porcelain dishes, North African men sat in cafés drinking thick coffee and arguing in Arabic under a cloud of smoke.

My companion on these walks, Abdellah, is a writer. I met him at a book festival of Maghrebian authors, on a panel discussing modes of expression in Moroccan literature today. Like most of the panels I attended on Maghreb topics, all of the participants were men. On this particular panel, Abdellah was the youngest person by about 15 or 20 years. Slight and delicately handsome, he looked like the



Belleville



Abdellah Taia in Buttes Chaumont Park

boy who would be bullied. And he was, in a manner of speaking.

Abdellah made two points that caused other writers to disagree aggressively. He refused to join in a general condemnation of racism in France, because while he agreed that there was indeed racism in France, intense classicism in Morocco, Abdellah insisted, is equally oppressive.

In Morocco, Abdellah said, he would never have been able to publish a book. "I didn't come from the right family, I didn't have the connections." Other writers vehemently disagreed, and Abdellah didn't press the point, but it was obvious he had not been swayed.

The other moment arrived when writers commented on freedom of the press under Morocco's king since 1999, Mohamed VI—the new king to the rest of the panel since his father, Hassan II, had ruled before him for 38 years. Abdellah said he still found the situation in Morocco restrictive: speech was freer, but it was still not free.

The others, with a clear memory of the previous king's repressive regime, disagreed again. "It's so much better," was their answer. Since he had spoken his piece, Abdellah again fell into a pregnant silence, this time one that said, "Not good enough." It was an impressive bit of individualism on his part, particularly as he was on the panel with Abdellatif Laabi, one of the grand old gentlemen of Moroccan letters in France, a poet and former dissident who spent nearly ten years in prison in Morocco for his political activity.

Abdellah differed so distinctly from the others that

I took his phone number after the panel and we have since become friends. His most recent book, *L'Armée du Salut*, has just been released. It is published by Seuil, a prestigious publisher and Abdellah hopes that this placement will help him find an American or English publisher who will have the book translated. He invited me to a book reading and I was impressed by its quality; he had a stage presence that is rare for many writers, but perhaps not for a lover of film.

The reading was at a gay bookstore in the Marais, the quarter of Paris that was once the Jewish quarter and is now gay and trendy. It was on the eve of the Salon des livres in Paris, France's annual book fair, so a lot of lovers of literature were in town and it was well attended. Instead of reading from his book, Abdellah read from handwritten condensed versions of the stories in his book. When questions came afterwards, one of the first was:

"Why do you write in French?"

"When I came here I was in love with cinema and French was the language of film to me. I wanted to perfect my French."

During subsequent months, as winter has turned to spring and the grey cloud that colors Paris relents a little, we have spent afternoons walking around his neighborhood. I have learned more of Abdellah's story, and I suspect at least one other reason why Abdellah was so keen to perfect his French: It is the language of the educated class in Morocco. When Abdellah first tried to come to film school in Paris he was told his French was not at an acceptable level. He came to Paris anyway, and resolved to stop speaking or using Arabic until he spoke French perfectly. To be part of the Moroccan or French intelligentsia one must command French or be considered provincial. Without perfect French, he would always have been considered the poorly educated Moroccan or the obvious immigrant. As an Arabic language writer he would have been at a disadvantage, although there are more Arabic speakers than French speakers in the world, there are fewer Arabic readers; anything written in French will reach a wider audience than a book written in Arabic.

Abdellah and I have spent many hours as flaneurs, the traditional occupation of the poor and curious. We have climbed to the highest point in Buttes Chaumont park, which he tells me was once a mine. We've walked into the caves. We have wandered down the rue de Belleville, stopping in little Arab shops.

As he discusses the political situation in Morocco, Abdellah describes a tiny middle class, a larger aristocratic class, and then the vast mass of the extremely poor. "Are you from the middle class?" I ask. "No," Abdellah says emphatically, stopping to look at me, wondering how I came by this strange impression. "I come

from the lower class. I lived with my family of nine in one room.”

Abdellah did well in school and made it to the University of Mohamed V in Rabat where he was first in his class for his entire five years. As his time there was drawing to an end, university administrators came to him and offered him a fellowship to study in Geneva. “I would never have applied, I had never heard of it.” Geneva was a little quiet, he said, but he harbors affection for the city because with his flight to Geneva he accomplished what he says is the dream of every young person of his social class in Morocco—leaving.

“For where?” I ask.

“It changes. When I was much younger it was France, then it was Spain. Now, because of the lottery for green cards, it is the United States even though the chances of winning are one in a million.”

After Geneva, Abdellah came to Paris in 1998, one of about 20,000 Moroccans who arrived that year, according to France’s National Institute of Statistics and Economics. He came to become a filmmaker and then began a doctoral program at the Sorbonne. In the process, he became a writer, writing a novel and a memoir of growing up in Sale, his small hometown just outside Rabat, Morocco’s capital city.

For the first two years Abdellah lived in Paris, he did not return to Morocco. He was very poor and whether they have achieved success or not, Moroccans returning from Europe must come bearing gifts as a symbol of their prosperity, so as not to disillusion the others hoping to leave. Finally, at the request of his mother, he went home, taking a bus to the end of Europe and a boat across to Morocco, carefully tending his gifts.

Abdellah is fascinating because he is a cross-current of the type of *beur* (North African) living in France. Fairly young—30 years old—he has just passed through the youth culture that so plagues French employment statistics and is so angry at its inability to share fully in the fruits of the French republic. But he is also a first-generation immigrant and thus is thankful for what France has to offer. In France, he says, he learned to express himself, to become an individual, to argue and stand on his opinion.

He has the new immigrant’s appreciation of a country that has social mobility. One can argue about the degree of racism that may hold a *beur* back, but it is undeniably true that a person who follows the prescribed path can make it into the “grand ecoles” that produce the people who run France.

Abdellah is just old enough to remember how difficult that climb was in Morocco under the old regime, yet young enough to believe that Morocco can change and

become something like a liberal Western democracy. He is also young enough to be in the wired generation, to be in the class of Moroccans that has seen the failure both of the colonial mentality—a hierarchy of skin color and a veneration of the western occupier, and the failure of the oppressive leveling of forced communist equality. He is, well... disdainful, isn’t the right word because Abdellah doesn’t like to devolve into toxicity, but he is filled with a healthy skepticism.

What I like best about Abdellah is that he is able to think outside himself, something I don’t find common among Parisians, at least not yet. As we were walking around the Belleville and talking about the life of an immigrant, Abdellah swept his hand in a great circle. “Look around,” he said. “There are thousands of Chinese immigrants in Paris, but the media don’t seem to know they exist.” And it is true. Just as talk of the European Union always comes back to the Polish plumber, talk of immigration in France is always, at heart, about Africans.

A famous nightly television show in Paris, *The Puppets*, satirizes the news of the day with clay figures. Interior Minister (and presidential hopeful) Nicolas Sarkozy introduced his immigration bill at the end of February, and early in April I watched a show that featured a game called “New Immigrant.”

Clay figures of President Jacques Chirac, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Sarkozy sat at a table,



Kids in Buttes Chaumont Park



Rally against Sarkozy's immigration bill- Square for the Rights of Man- Paris

interviewing prospective immigrants and voting on whether or not to admit them. The joke was that, regardless of their answers to the questions, anyone with dark skin was rejected, while a family of Swedes was immediately presented with French passports. I remember specifically one candidate was asked only his name, and he said "Abdullah." Immediately the Sarkozy doll said, "Pour moi, non!"

It was like all good satire, amusing in a bittersweet kind of way. Yet when Mr. Sarkozy talks of selective immigration, this Abdallah is exactly who he wants. He enjoys and appreciates the freedoms of a liberal democracy and when he questions, he questions in the intellectual tones of traditional French debate—not in the car-burning or angry rap songs that people associate with young beurs. He will continue to thrive here.

I have wondered if it is, in part because of his homosexuality that he has thrived in France. That's what another North African friend says when I comment on Abdallah's success and appreciation of the freedoms of French culture. And it is a common theme in discussions of the absorption of Muslim communities into Western Europe that the elements of Islamic culture most egregious to the West are those that oppress women. And I myself sometimes wonder if I feel so comfortable with Abdallah and drawn to him, not only because he is smart and kind and clever, but safe. I don't worry that he will interpret my behavior the wrong way. I can ask him if it is true, as people say, that people think a woman traveling and dining alone in Morocco is a prostitute. I can ask him all these questions, comfortable in the knowledge that because of who he is, his sense of propriety cannot come from what is traditional in Moroccan culture, even as he is well aware of what is possible.

Abdallah has been in France for eight years, long enough to become a citizen. I ask him, "Will you?" Like some of the other immigrants I know, he wants it to be clear that he is not clamoring for French citizenship. "I probably will. It will be easier, not to have to go to the prefecture all of the time." I have no doubt that he will be easily approved.

Abdallah left for Morocco a few days before I began writing this newsletter.

He went bearing gifts even though he is still not wealthy. But it is expected, and he does not want to disappoint. After all, for the people in his old neighborhood who do not have his intelligence or his drive, the illusion is all they have. □

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Author: Dilday, Kay
 Title: ICWA Letters (Europe/Russia)
 ISSN: 1083-4273
 Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
 Material Type: Serial
 Language: English
 Frequency: Monthly
 Other Regions: South Asia; East Asia, The Americas; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4273) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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