
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

KINGDOM OF
STRANGERS

a novel

by

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Zoë Ferraris's playlist for
Kingdom of Strangers

It's odd writing a playlist for a book about Saudi Arabia, a country where music is technically forbidden. You can sing, of course. Isn't that what they do from the minarets five times a day? (Okay, it's chanting.) A little percussion is acceptable. But no pipes or stringed instruments, thank you. At the same time, Saudi has a flourishing underground music scene, including rap, punk, and pop. Jeddah and Riyadh have sponsored outdoor concerts—from heavy metal to teenage boy bands. Yet you're still not allowed to study music in school. Totalitarian? Tolerant? Even Saudi doesn't know what it is, which is part of its charm.

Thanks to being an army brat and a nomad in general, I grew up listening to music from all over the world. My books were inspired by a hodgepodge of influences. While writing them, I followed the advice of the Prophet Mohammed, who said: "Seek knowledge, even in China."

"Under Her Feet" by Illmiyah and
Arableak (aka Desert Heat)

I wanted to capture what Jeddah is like today, in particular the way tradition clashes with modernity. And there's nothing like a little Arabic rap to put me in the right frame of mind. Hip-hop sounds conjure images of East L.A., not the stifling heat of the desert. But the fusion is an excellent reminder that Saudi Arabia is not as traditional as the clerics would have it: the country has been saturated with foreign influences since the Prophet Mohammed worked the

spice routes. Today, Saudi sponsors millions of guest workers, who bring cultural influences from all over the world. Most of the characters in my novel have some connection to other countries even as they call Saudi Arabia home.

This Dubai-based group's debut album was banned in Saudi Arabia (unlike the albums of some of the local rappers, which do get produced in that country). The song "Terror Alert," for instance, offers a journey inside the mind of a suicide bomber. But this track is an homage to family and a reference to the Islamic saying that "paradise lies under the feet of mothers."

"Vivi Davvero" by Giorgia

There is of course the other end of the attitudes-about-women spectrum. When I'm writing about the fierce determination of my female characters, who are up against all manner of discrimination, it helps to have some powerhouse female vocals playing. I've never seen an official translation of this song, but I have one in my head. It's an exhortation to be true to your thoughts and desires.

Giorgia's parents named her after Ray Charles's "Georgia on My Mind," and although her music is influenced a lot by jazz and blues, she's good for the powerful pop hit as well. Her music has become so interwoven with my images of Katya, my female protagonist, that I almost couldn't write her without hearing "*Questo è il prezzo che . . .*"

*This is the price
These times impose on us.
Living life too quickly
A woman eats of the fruits of sin,
And I want a piece of the pie.*

“For the World” by Tan Dun

I really wish Saudi Arabia had its own Tan Dun, someone to make an orchestral wonder out of that region’s traditional sounds. Melancholy so pervades Tan Dun’s music that it transcends place, for who does not have his share of sadness? But the other tracks on the *Hero* album also have a good dose of defiance, and for me that’s an electric combination. Most of my characters oscillate between states of despondency and a rebellious urge to change the way of the world, so I find this music very fitting.

“Sampa” by Caetano Veloso

Everything from his early album *Caetanear* seems simple and light, but this song has a particular quality of hangdog self-pity and longing for love that sometimes pervades the mood of my main character Nayir. I probably played it more than I should have while I was writing him.

“Rock the Casbah” by the Clash

As a teenager, I completely misunderstood this song. I just assumed the band was singing about ugly Americans dropping bombs on the Arabs. Of course, blame the Americans. At some point I realized that they were singing about the oppression of Sharia law and in particular how it stifles music. I think the song is saying that the people of the Middle East will overcome the oppression and *rock*.

Rhabaouine by Gnawa Halwa

It seems like a sacrilege to pick a particular song from this album. Gnawa music isn't supposed to play in five-minute cuts. I'm a huge fan of trance music—both the dance-floor kind and the real I'm-in-a-religious-trance kind. For me, trance music brings on a kind of ideal writing state: relaxed but mindful, my ears open to the whispers of the universe.

“My Love Is” by Little Willie John

This song so vividly evokes a scene in *Lone Star* when Sheriff Sam is driving alone in the dark, facing a secret he doesn't really want to know about. I can't help but want to hear it when I'm writing Nayir—another man trapped in his pursuit of love.

“Alf Leila” by Oum Kalthoum

“A Thousand Nights and a Night” is quintessential Oum Kalthoum. It always sounds to me like a camel caravan jangling through the desert, with an opera singer in the lead, pouring her sixty-minute epic into a moon-filled night. But over time it has come to evoke the hours and hours I've spent sipping tea, listening to stories, eating cookies and dates, and generally idling around someone's living room to escape the intensity of the Saudi heat. This song forms a basic backdrop to my writing when I need to return to the Middle East, if not in body, then at least in soul. It even makes a brief appearance in one of my novels.

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Questions and topics for discussion

1. Ibrahim's son and daughter-in-law are having a difficult time procuring the divorce they both want (pp. 15–20), in part because Saffanah's father refuses to take her back. What do you think is Saffanah's best option? Was she right to hide her past from her husband? Do you think that even in Western countries divorce still carries a stigma? Are there compelling reasons to stay in an unhappy marriage?
2. Katya is concerned about a new fatwa "saying it was sinful for women to work in public positions where they might come into contact with men" (p. 14). Why do you think religious leaders in Saudi Arabia are so concerned about this? Can even mundane daily interactions, such as paying a cashier for purchases, take on a sexual tone? Why or why not?
3. The novel's title refers in part to the role immigrants play in Saudi Arabia's labor force (p. 53). How does the Saudi attitude toward immigration compare to that in the United States? What do you see as the advantages and drawbacks of the Saudi policy?
4. Katya worries about how she will balance her professional ambitions with her personal life. She fears that getting married will mean being "boxed in, overworked, dreams slipping through the cracks of a fractured life" (p. 217). Despite the differences in social and religious environment, do you think American women face any similar concerns? What advice might you give Katya in this situation?

5. Ibrahim and his brother disagree about the effectiveness of Saudi's penal code. Omar believes that harsh punishments, such as "chopping off a hand" for theft or capital punishment for murder, are successful deterrents to crime. Ibrahim thinks that "honesty came from the impulse to please others" (p. 71). Who do you think is right? What do you think is the best way to deter criminal acts?
6. Discussions of veils or burqas often focus on the restrictions they impose on women's lives. Are there any instances in the novel in which Katya or other characters find these garments to be advantageous? Some women choose to wear head coverings even in countries or cultures where they are not required. Can you think of why they might choose to do so?
7. The Jeddah police are "quite proud of not having a specialist in serial killers on hand. It was, in fact, a matter of national pride that they didn't need one" (p. 34). Instead, they seem to believe that serial killers are a peculiarly American phenomenon. Do you believe this is the case? Why or why not?
8. Compare Ibrahim's relationship with Sabria to that with his wife, Jamila. What does each reveal about Ibrahim's character? Are the differences due entirely to the personalities of the two women, or does their upbringing or station in life contribute as well?
9. Sabria's activities are eventually revealed to have been both dangerous and illegal. Do you feel her actions were justified by her past history or her positive intentions? Was there any other way for her to accomplish what she set out to do?

10. Ibrahim observes that “any investigation into a missing woman, no matter how earnest, was always going to come down to the woman’s virtue” (p. 188) and Katya later reflects on the difficulties Saudi women face in proving a rape charge (pp. 277–78). To what extent do you think these obstacles exist in other cultures as well? What steps might a culture or legal system take to ameliorate them?

11. After years of failed medical treatment, Ibrahim’s daughter Farrah visits a religious healer for an extreme ritual that does seem to alleviate her back pain (pp. 69–70). To what do you attribute the apparent success of this treatment? How does this therapy compare to forms of alternative medicine practiced in the West? Are some more effective or humane than others? Where do you draw the line?

12. On their visit to Kandara, Ibrahim and Katya witness the terrible living conditions of exploited foreign workers. Do you think there is an analogous underclass in the United States? If so, how is their situation better or worse than that of immigrant workers in Saudi Arabia? What are the key differences between the conditions in which these groups find themselves?

Also by Zoë Ferraris

CITY OF VEILS

A novel

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