THE most fabulous geological event since the explosion of Krakatau surely was the discovery of oceans of petroleum beneath the stark and backward Muslim realms of the Persian Gulf. Sheikhs whose wealth was previously measured in horses and camels soon ranked with the world’s richest men; dusty remotenesses like Kuwait and Bahrain and Saudi Arabia became, with scarcely a dent in their national revenues, to shower all the blessings of an advanced welfare state upon their sparse populations. According to the World Almanac, the highest per-capita income on the planet belongs not to the United States or Sweden or Japan but to Qatar. The Western view of this global caprice is expressed by our resentful caricatures of dollar-gluited sheikhs and by our nervous protective naval presence in the Persian Gulf. The Arab view receives less publicity; “Cities of Salt,” a novel by Abdelrahman Munif (translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux; Random House; $18.95), performs a needed service in dramatizing the impact of American oil discovery and development upon an unnamed Gulf emirate in the nineteen-thirties. It is unfortunate, given the epic potential of his topic, that Mr. Munif, a Saudi born in Jordan, appears to be—though he lives in France and received a Ph.D. in oil economics from the University of Belgrade—in insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel. His voice is that of a campfire explainer; his characters are rarely fixed in our minds by a face or a manner or a developed motivation; no central figure develops enough reality to attract our sympathetic interest; and, this being the first third of a trilogy, what intelligible conflicts and possibilities do emerge remain serenely unresolved. There is almost none of that sense of individual moral adventure—of the evolving individual in varied and roughly equal battle with a world of circumstance—which, since “Don Quixote” and “Robinson Crusoe,” has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle; “Cities of Salt” is concerned, instead, with men in the aggregate. Its focus might be described as sociological, and its sociological point as the single, insistent one that Arabs are discomfited, distressed, and deranged by the presence of Americans in their midst. In over six hundred pages repeated illustration of this point wears thin.

The book begins by evoking the oasis of Wadi al-Uyun, “an outpouring of green amid the harsh, obdurate desert.” It is, for most of its residents, a kind of Eden: “Wadi al-Uyun was an ordinary place to its inhabitants, and excited no strong emotions, for they were used to seeing the palm trees filling the wadi and the gushing brooks surging forth in the winter and early spring, and felt protected by some blessed power that made their lives easy.” Births and deaths, the arrival and departure of caravans, the seasons of rain and drought make a rhythm of events that is timeless; when three white foreigners, escorted by two marsh Arabs, camp on the edge of the village, curiosity runs rampant, and the strong emotion of dread enters the breast of Miteb al-Hathal, a patriarch of the Atom tribe:

He sensed that something terrible was about to happen. He did not know what it was or when it would happen, and he took no comfort in the explanations offered him from all sides. The very sight of the foreigners and their constant activity all day, the instruments they carried around, the bags of sand and stones they had amassed after writing in their notebooks and drawing symbols on them, the discussions that lasted from sundown until after supper and the writing that followed, the damned questions they asked about dialects, about

“Oh, good. Here comes Daddy, to bring us to our senses.”
tribes and their disputes, about religion and sects, about the routes, the winds and the rainy seasons—all these caused Mieb's fear to grow day by day that they meant harm to the wadi and the people.

He confides to his son Fawaz, "They said, 'Wait, just be patient, and all of you will be rich!' But what do they want from us, and what does it concern them if we get rich or stay just as we are... They're devils, no one can trust them. They're more accursed than the Jews." His unease drives him to address the emir: "By God, Your Excellency, we were as happy as could be before those devils came along. But from the first day they came to our village life has been camel piss. Every day it gets worse." Mieb is foremost but far from alone in his agitation: "Fear gripped the wadi. The men grew more rash and nervous, and Mieb was considered indispensable—if he abandoned himself from the wadi a single day to sleep in Zahra the people missed him acutely; only he was capable of saying everything, of expressing their innermost thoughts." Increasingly, the oasis dwellers feel blighted by this lawless visitation from the outside world. The American oil prospectors sunbathe in their shorts in view of the women fetching water; the affront is hardly greater when, a little later, the entire village is bulldozed into rubble. Mieb al-Hathal takes to the desert to wreak some ill-defined vengeance, and Fawaz, who has been itching to leave the oasis anyway, goes to work for the oil company as it builds its port in the seaside town of Harran.

In Harran, there is more of the same: on the American side, construction and revelry; on the Arab, puzzlement, depression, and hard labor. The cruellest cut seems to be that the American houses have fences and swimming pools, or that the emir becomes obsessed by such devils’ toys as a telescope and a radio, or even that the American bosses drive the Arab workers right through the heat of summer, but that, occasionally, like a voluptuous mirage, a white boat appears offshore, laden with nearly naked white women.

"The women were perfumed, shining and laughing, like horses after a long race. Each was strong and clean, as if fresh from a hot bath, and each body was uncovered except for a small piece of colored cloth. Their legs were plump and bare, and stronger than roads. Their faces, hands, breasts, bellies—"
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but they remain indistinguishable. Mith al-Hathal stays out in the desert, a mere rumor of redemption from the demon. The Arabs in the foreground are rarely seen from within but live mainly in the gossip of others and the author’s gossip, regretful voice; they are not so much persons as reputations. In a village, no one needs to be described since everyone is known. Only slowly, as the novel settles into Harrran and the town becomes more corrupt and crowded, does Abdelrahman Muni attempt to give us what we can recognize as characterizations, with physical descriptions:

His face was like that of a child, with its bold eyes, loud, innocent laugh and large, gleaming white teeth, and his slim, lanky body seemed carved from smooth stone or wood.

But such visualizations, and portraits of such outsiders as the truck driver Akhok to the Armenian, begin to clarify the picture too late: the novel’s people and events are seen as if through a sandstorm, blurred by a hopeless communal grief and sense of affront. Some authorities, too, were evidently affronted: the jacket flap tells us that “City of Salt” has been banned in Saudi Arabia. The thought of novels being banned in Saudi Arabia has a charming strangeness, like the thought of hookahs being banned in Minneapolis.

ANTON SHAMMAS, the author of “Arabesques” (translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden; Harper & Row; $15.95), shows no lack of sophistication in the ways of the literary West; his novel about Palestinians is intricately conceived and beautifully written, with epigraphs from Clive James, George Bernard Shaw, and John Barth. A crisp, luminous, and nippy mixture of fantasy and autobiography, it has not one but two heroes called Anton Shammas and a number of scenes set in Iowa City, during a session of the International Writing Program. Yet this elegant example of postmodern baroque, like Abdelrahman Muni’s long and muffed quasi-oral tale, repels our attempts to enter it wholeheartedly; we feel we are not getting out of the book nearly as much emotionalized information as the author put into it. Something gets stuck. Is the stiffness to be blamed on our lack of familiarity with the Arab world? Muni’s Muslims seemed, until the demonic modern world scared them to their souls, familiar: they were the noble cuffed savages admired by T. E. Lawrence, Wilfred Thesiger, and other doughty British travellers. Shammas’s people are of a type we rarely hear about: Palestinian Christians. Shammas himself is a walking paradox: a non-Jew who considers himself an Israeli, a poet in both Arabic and Hebrew, and a columnist in two Hebrew-language newspapers. He has told the Times that he feels he has more in common with the average Israeli than with the average Palestinian or Arab living in Jordan. One wonders how long he can maintain his balancing act in a land where, as of now, Palestinian Arabs are assassinating officials who are perceived as collaborating with the Israeli authorities. Already, for having presumed to chide the beloved mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, in a newspaper column, he has received death threats, and graffiti spelling “Arab vermin” have appeared on his apartment building. At present, Shammas—in his book-jacket photograph a stolidous-looking young man pensively scratching his ear—resides in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he has a Rockefeller Fellowship in Middle Eastern literature; a note on the translation tells us that he helped Vivian Eden produce this smooth English version of his “very allusive and layered kind of Hebrew with equally complex Arabic resonances, especially in the rhythm section.”

We expect, perhaps, a Palestinian novel to be about the present Palestinian problem, much as some foreigners feel that an American novel has a duty to grapple with race problem or the horrors of capitalism. But “Arabesques” is fundamentally nostalgic: its most affecting scenes render the narrator’s childhood experiences in the small Galilean village of Fassuta, and its principal narrative thrust is toward the past, toward the unravelling of the tangled past lives of the boy’s parents, aunts, and uncles. There is war in the background, but much of it is the war to drive out the British before 1948, and some of it is the old and still continuing civil/religious war in Lebanon, where Anton’s mother comes from and her family, the Bitars, still live. There is scarcely a Jewish character in the book, nor is Jewish clout felt until the elopage, wherein an Israeli demolition expert is called in, by Uncle

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