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# Where life overwhelms fiction

Terry Hong

Never mind its faults. "Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail," by Malika Oufkir and Michele Fitoussi is going to sell well. It's already a runaway bestseller in France, where it debuted in 1999 as "La Prisoniere."

As far as memoirs go, this one is sensational - literally. It's got fairy-tale royal life. It's got a political coup. It's got deprivation and suffering during a decades-long prison sentence. It's even got film written all over it (Talk Miramax is the publisher, after all).

The book opens with a preface by co-author Fitoussi who waxes about seeing this mysterious, beautiful woman from afar at a Paris party. They become friends, Oufkir needs to get her story out to "exorcise the painful past" so Fitoussi drops everything to transcribe it for her. Thus, "Stolen Lives" begins.

Malika Oufkir, whose first name means "queen" in Arabic, was presciently (and later, ironically) named. As the first child of a powerful and affluent family, she was indeed the "little queen" in the eyes of her father, General Muhammad Oufkir.

At age 5, she was unofficially adopted by Morocco's King Muhammad V to be raised as a companion and virtual equal of his favorite daughter, Lalla Mina. Two years later, in 1961, the king dies unexpectedly and both Princess Lalla Mina and Oufkir become the new King Hassan II's wards.

Royal life, in spite of its many privileges, is a gilded cage for Oufkir, who longs to be reunited with her own family, especially her beloved mother. At 16, she finally returns home where she greedily adapts to the life of a "normal" teenager, albeit one filled with limos, movie stars, and couture houses. The respite does not last long, as her father, General Oufkir, mounts a coup d'etat against Hassan's corrupt regime, fails, and is executed.

In further retaliation, Hassan banishes the general's family: Malika, her mother, and four younger siblings, the youngest only 3, plus two servants (one a distant cousin) who insist on following the family. Over the next 20 years, the family is subjected to a series of imprisonments, each worse than the former.

At first the family is allowed access to their designer luggage, their books, and records. After five years, they are sent to the prison barracks of Bir-Jdid, where for 10 years, they survive hellish conditions. Using only hands, a spoon, and a tin-can top, the family miraculously manages to dig an escape tunnel, and Oufkir with three of her siblings finally tastes freedom again, only to be recaptured five days later.

Once reunited, the family is sent, this time, to live in relative luxury: While they are no longer denied any physical comforts, they remain heavily guarded prisoners. When they are finally released in 1991, adjustment to their new life of so-called freedom is a challenge itself, yet another kind of struggle to survive.


With such a sensationalist story, looking at "Stolen Lives" as a literary work pales in comparison. However, while the story is strong because it is the truth - at least as its author remembers it - the book could have used better editing throughout.

The first half, for example, with all its description of luxury and privilege, mixed with Malika Oufkir's constant complaints about her gilded lot is tedious itself

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Indeed, Oufkir herself ironically comments: "My destiny was already mapped out: marriage to a wealthy husband at twenty, a life of luxury and boredom, of sleeping around, infidelities, frustration and dissatisfaction drowned in alcohol or drugs.... At least my ordeal has spared me that miserable fate."

But then again, such technicalities seem trivial next to the ultimate story. Granted, Oufkir is no Frank McCourt of "Angela's Ashes" fame, but her tragic story endures. And that her book will undoubtedly sell well, will be, in some small way, a part of her healing process.

Terry Hong is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

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