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A letter on a journey

IT IS THE STORY OF A LETTER narrated by Abbas Khider, an Iraqi author, now 40 years of age, who, after a long escape, found a new home in Germany and also writes in German. It is the story of a love letter written by Salim, a Muslim, to Samia, a Kurdish Christian. Salim, who spent a short time in prison in Iraq for reading banned books before managing to flee, lives in the Libyan port town of Benghazi. It is 1999, four years prior to Saddam Hussein's downfall, still a time when nobody can envisage the Arab uprisings. Two years have passed since Salim's escape but he thinks about his beloved in Baghdad every day. Sending her a letter by post is impossible. It could fall into the hands of the censors and put Samia in grave danger.

Salim's problem is that of many refugees, and resourceful people have long since found ways of getting letters into Iraq – into the Aubergine Republic, as the Iraqis themselves call their country because aubergines were the only things that were always available in abundance during the trade embargo. Like the smugglers who sneak refugees across the border, the couriers also make their money from people's fears and yearnings. They slip letters past the censors in return for large payments. In Café Tigris in Benghazi, Salim hears about Malik, who – for a fee of two hundred dollars – agrees to pass the love letter to the first courier, the Egyptian taxi driver Haytham. In Cairo, Malik's business partner takes charge of the delivery and sends it on a tour bus to the Jordanian capital of Amman. From there the letter is taken by the lorry driver Latif Mohamed across the Iraqi border to Baghdad.

Each person through whose hands Salim's letter passes temporarily becomes the main character. In seven chapters, six additional characters besides Salim recount episodes from their lives. This provides an insight into everyday life in the Arab world shortly before the outbreak of the revolutions. Khider masterfully switches between tragedy and comedy in his

narrative and underlines just how much reality is shaped by perception. The characters are at the same time both victims and beneficiaries of the dictatorial regimes.

"Brief in die Auberginenrepublik" ("A Letter to the Aubergine Republic") is Abbas Khider's third novel. His first novel "Der falsche Inder" ("The Village Indian") was published in 2008, and his second "Die Orangen des Präsidenten" (The President's Oranges) in 2011. Khider in-



corporates many of his own experiences into his novels. He knows the yearnings and fears of refugees, the fatal dangers, the countless risks, the sense of restlessness and the hope for peace and a better life while also appreciating the significance of serendipity. He uses the often sarcastic sense of humour typical of the region mixed with melancholy and opens up a world for readers which these days is almost only ever associated with negative stereotypes.

BARBARA ENGEL

ABBAS KHIDER, "Brief in die Auberginenrepublik". Edition Nautilus, Hamburg 2013. 160 pages. CHF 25, EUR 18. An English translation of "Der falsche Inder" ("The Village Indian") was recently published by Seagull Books. The translation of "Brief in die Auberginenrepublik" is in progress.