

Mightier Than the Sword

For Elif Shafak, the novel is both a path to freedom and a form of political activism

BY DAVID ADAMS

In 2006, British Turkish novelist Elif Shafak stood trial in Istanbul for the crime of “insulting Turkishness.” What that meant, exactly, was anybody’s guess.

The charges carried with them a maximum three-year prison sentence and were based not on something Shafak said or did but on words spoken by a character in her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, who refers to the Ottoman Empire’s massacre of Armenians during WWI as “genocide.” Though dozens of historians and journalists had been prosecuted under the same article of the Turkish penal code, it was the first time such charges stemmed from a work of fiction. Shafak’s ordeal lasted nearly a year, until she was acquitted the day before she gave birth to her daughter.

“During that whole time, there were groups on the streets, burning E.U. flags, spitting on my pictures, calling me ‘traitor,’ ‘betrayed,’” Shafak says over Zoom from her home in London, where she moved not long after the trial. Though she describes these scenes with a wry smile, the hurt in her voice is unmistakable. “I wish I could say it’s been a long time and we’ve made progress since then. But I can’t say that. I think it’s become more and more difficult for writers.”

Indeed, 13 years after Shafak faced prison over *The Bastard of Istanbul*, she was investigated by Turkish prosecutors for “crimes of obscenity” related to depictions of sexual violence and child abuse in her novels, including the Booker-shortlisted *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*. As Shafak pointed out in a 2019 *Guardian* interview, the irony was that Turkish courts were not taking action to prevent sexual violence against women and children. “Instead, they’re prosecuting writers,” she told the paper. “It has become like a witch-hunt.”

Given those circumstances, it comes as little surprise that Shafak has not been back to Turkey for almost eight years. But the intimidation she’s faced has not prevented her from speaking out against president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s nationalist policies. Nor has it kept her from visiting the country in the pages of her books, including her latest, *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (Knopf,

Aug.). Like her 10 previous novels, it weaves serious political issues with a transportive story of love, longing, and the wonders of art, science, and nature.

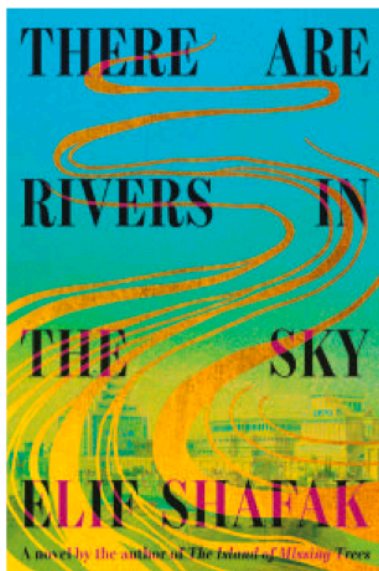
For Shafak, who describes herself as “a storyteller without any adjectives,” there is no line to be drawn between her political activism and her fiction. “Where I’m from, if you are interested in the stories of women, minorities, people who are not necessarily in positions of power, you have to dig deeper,” she says. “You have to look at what has been excluded, forgotten, abandoned, and sometimes systematically suppressed and silenced. So, it is the art of storytelling that takes me in that direction. It’s not some rational decision that I make in my mind.”

Shafak credits her vocation in part to her “unusual” and “very lonely” upbringing. Born in 1971 to two Turkish parents in Strasbourg, France, she moved with her mother to Ankara following her parents’ separation. Though Shafak says most Turkish divorcées would have been immediately married off by their families to older men, her mother went back to college, leaving Shafak in the care of her grandmother. “This is a woman,” Shafak says, “who would be reading coffee cups and burning lead to ward off the evil eye.”

From her grandmother, Shafak inherited a connection to the region’s oral tradition. “But most importantly,” she says, “I thought my life was incredibly boring. And it was books that showed me there were other worlds. Still, to this day, if you ask me what literature means, for me, it’s freedom.”

Distinguishing between herself and writers “who start from a more autobiographical point of view,” Shafak says she’s “more interested in becoming someone else—and then someone else and then someone else.” That might serve as an especially concise description of *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, which links the story of a 19th-century British Assyriologist to the tales of a Yazidi girl on a trip from Turkey to Iraq in 2014 and a hydrologist in 2018 London.

Of course, as Shafak herself admits, every story contains echoes of its writer’s life. Squint and you’ll find traces of Shafak in the character of the Yazidi girl, Narin,





work ethic. From there, he travels to Nineveh (in modern-day Iraq), in search of fragments missing from the Flood Tablet, a kind of holy grail for Victorians probing the origins of man and the history of world religions.

Though Arthur's talents expand his horizons in nearly miraculous ways, he remains a man with "immense loneliness in his heart." Talking with Shafak, who comes across as both gracious and guarded, one senses that Arthur's melancholy is not entirely unfamiliar to his creator. With shelves of hardcovers arranged behind her like a fortress wall, it is not hard to picture the lonely girl in Ankara, who sought in literature both a means of escape and protection against forces beyond her control.

But as dear as Arthur may be to Shafak, *There Are Rivers in the Sky* did not start with him. Aware of the devastating threat that water scarcity poses to the Middle East and North Africa, and especially to the women, children, and minorities of those regions, Shafak says she "kept coming back to this thought of building an entire novel on a single small drop of water." In the book's opening pages, the drop in question falls on the head of King Ashurbanipal, whose vast library housed the clay tablets on which the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was inscribed, in ancient Nineveh. From there, it evaporates into the atmosphere, returns to Earth as a raindrop, and eventually ascends to the atmosphere again, starting a cycle that will see the same drop of water touch each of the novel's three main characters.

If that sounds like a complex way to structure a story—well, it is. "It was a little bit crazy," Shafak says. "I have maybe eight or 10 notebooks, just full of notes and drawings." But it was based on a simple yet awe-inducing fact. "We tend to assume that when we talk about the River Thames, or the Mississippi River, or the River Tigris, that these are completely separate rivers. But actually, the water that has been circulating inside these rivers is the same. It's the same water that we cry, it's the same water that we drink."

For a writer who has been effectively exiled from land of the River Tigris to the land of the River Thames, that idea holds obvious appeal. But there is a deeper resonance, as well—one that speaks directly to Shafak's project, as she describes it, of "dismantling walls" through the art of storytelling. "We like to have boxes in our minds: this is what East is, this is what West is, this is us versus them," Shafak says. "But when you follow the journey of water, 'us versus them' dissolves." ■

whose grandmother, an "illiterate and innumerate" water dowser, has a parable for every question her granddaughter asks. They are also visible in the story of the hydrologist, Zaleekhah, who leaves her marriage and finds an unexpected new love with a female tattoo artist. (Shafak came out as bisexual in a 2017 TED talk, provoking much online vitriol in Turkey.)

But the deepest resonances can be found between Shafak and her central character, Arthur Smyth, a self-taught expert on cuneiform script who's based on the real-life George Smith (1840–1876), the first person to translate the ancient Mesopotamian clay tablets containing the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In Shafak's telling, Arthur is a character straight out of a Dickens novel. Born on the banks of the River Thames to impoverished parents, he ascends to the antiquities department at the British Museum thanks to his extraordinary memory and herculean