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A former prime minister polishes his memories – Page 28



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Moveable feast ... Shafak commutes "between cultures, genres and languages".

to write not just about my experience but that of other women." Men wrote her letters, thanking her for explaining the syndrome.

"The topic was not discussed in Turkey because motherhood is so sacred here," but also it was not considered a "literary" topic, she says. "It was too physical, too petty. It's an irony that my grandmother's generation was more in

touch with the body than today's. They had wisdom passed down through the ages about not leaving a woman alone for 48 hours around the birth. They tied red ribbons around the room to ward off bad spirits. We might dismiss that as superstition but maybe it helped prevent the kind of anguish I went through."

Magical realism permeates

Safak's fiction, with djinns (spirits) interrupting and influencing characters' thoughts, prompting inevitable comparisons with Isabel Allende. Both embrace superstition as part of their writing routine. While Allende begins each new book on the same day of the year, Shafak always writes hers wearing a pair of purple, fingerless gloves. Around her

neck she wears a small talisman to ward off the evil eye.

Born in Strasbourg as the only child of a philosopher father and a diplomat mother, Shafak remained with her mother when her parents divorced and led a nomadic life growing up in Madrid and Amman. She admits she has found it hard to settle down. "I commute between cultures, genres and languages. The story tells me which language to write it in."

She published her first novel at 24, taking her mother's first name as her pen name (which is also spelt Safak and Shafik). Now she divides her time between Turkey and the US with her husband, a journalist, and two children.

She employed an unorthodox technique in her latest novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, writing it first in English, and then, when it was translated into Turkish, rewriting not only the Turkish version but going back to the English original and reworking it "in a new spirit. I built two parallel books in the same time span."

When it was published in Turkey, *Forty Rules* sold 500,000 copies in eight months ("that's without counting our huge market in pirated books"). She is the country's highest-profile writer after the Nobel winner Orhan Pamuk, with whom she shares the distinction of having been accused of "insulting Turkishness" (an offence punishable with a jail sentence) for her discussion, in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, of the Armenian genocide and her country's unwillingness to recognise it as such.

Although the prosecution against her was eventually dropped, it is still a subject that makes her uncomfortable and today she is clearly unwilling to discuss it. She smiles tightly when I ask her whether Pamuk expressed any solidarity with her but does not reply. For a writer who is so politically engaged, so candid and so committed to ideas, her stance is puzzling but unbending. She stonewalls me at every turn. All she will say is that "I did not expect the accusations but ultimately it was a very positive experience for me. In Turkey today, we are young – the average age of the population is 28 –

and we move on very fast." In the end, I have no choice but to change the subject.

The Forty Rules of Love is imbued with sufi mysticism, which may puzzle Western readers unfamiliar with the teachings of Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet, philosopher and mystic whose followers founded the order of Whirling Dervishes. The novel shifts to and fro between his travels on a spiritual path and the world of Ella Rubinstein, an American Jewish housewife (think of a heroine written by Australia's Lily Brett) who is reading a manuscript about Rumi for a publishing house.

"After 800 years, his voice is still powerful. It expresses a universal, timeless spiritual yearning," says Shafak, who feels, like many writers, that she is channelling stories from a higher power. "I write as if I

'I write as if I were drunk ... a scary, chaotic process over which I have little control.'

were drunk," she says. "It is a process of intuition rather than placing myself above my story like a puppeteer pulling strings. For me, it's a scary, chaotic process over which I have little control. Words demand other words, characters resist me." She has learned to go with the flow, following her instincts. "I write with humour about sadness, to introduce an element of sweet to the sour, a bit like Turkish food."

Of her own spirituality, Shafak says: "For me, writing stories is one way of feeling connected to the universe and God. God is the biggest storyteller and when we create stories, we connect with him and with each other across cultural, religious and gender boundaries."

The Forty Rules of Love is published by Viking, \$32.95

shot at bitchy high society

boy dazzled by New York life ("bad case of Astoritis", meaning Brooke Astor, queen mum of queen bees). Then it's on to "quickie zipper working overtime in the lavatory" and Gus dropping his secret: "I'm writing a novel on Perla's life and the tragedy in Biarritz for lots of bucks." Adele Harcourt, star guest, 104, who's been sent a \$US1000 sucking-up orchid from Perla, grins knowingly. "This woman won't be happy with that bit of news. No thousand dollar orchid plants for you, Mr Bailey."

Establishing Ruby and hubby Elias is a lot of fun. Divorcing him in prison, she remarries him there after failing to nail a replacement (besides, Elias still has \$US1 billion). Realising that Baron de Liagra has no intention of leaving his wife for her, she throws back the ruby bracelet he has given her as a kiss-off present, telling him he is "a

lousy f---, his dick is too little, it tilts sideways, and he came too quickly". Now she is plotting her return to New York society, the book's raison d'être.

Too Much Money belts along. No one can argue with that, though a

Dunne has gone but this bunch of back-stabbing dames will carry on forever.

New York critic complains it is plotless when it is dialogue- and character-led with crackling camp wit. Called camp when straight is a compliment, one character tells another. And Gus outs himself: "So what? I'm beyond 80. Can't die with a secret." Was Dunne, 83,

telling us something? One obit has him "long rumoured to be gay". So what?

Those who say New York society is old hat – it's the latest Disney teen sensation that leads the pack now – miss the point. Dunne has gone but this bunch of back-stabbing dames and supporters will carry on forever with their frantic scrabbling for supremacy on committees and boards. They have heirs, don't they? And money still talks. Actually, money screams, as Lil Altemus tells it. Besides, there's broke and there's rich broke, even in these days of recession.

The problem now is, who will write about their exploits? Dunne never trained anyone. Asked if I could watch him in action, he exploded. "Hell no, no one ever sees me working. I'm private," he said, declining to be photographed lolling on his four-poster bed. So New York society can breathe easy again. And hate it.



Final fling ... Dunne had been skewering his subjects for 25 years.