



Clare Roberts reviews

Whitefly

by Abdelilah Hamdouchi

Translated by Jonathan Smolin

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Crime Thriller, ISBN: 9789774167515.

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Waves of Discontent

Set in modern-day Tangiers, Abdelilah Hamdouchi's *Whitefly* is a refreshing and refined crime thriller. The Moroccan Hamdouchi, also a successful film and television screenwriter, specialises in police fiction, and *Whitefly* is a prime example of his prowess in the field, a case study in the apparent ease with which he can roll off such a story.

Its protagonist, Detective Laafrit, is a grumbling, middle-aged policeman battling with a smoking addiction and a need to solve crime. The reader for the most part warms to him, perhaps after learning of his Achilles' heel: his incessant need to suck menthol lozenges to combat his addiction. Other than his history of political activism as a student and the fact that becoming a policeman had for many years felt like a betrayal of his principles, there is nothing particularly remarkable about him. Conscientious and diligent, he has no time for those who mess him around. He is an experienced cop, with a loyal network of contacts, and he knows how to use them to get what he wants. He also speaks fluent Spanish, a skill rendering him indispensable in the Tangiers police force. Frustrated by lies, and desperate to see through people to the truth, he achieves his goals without too much effort, almost too easily. Laafrit, it seems, is one to avoid emotional confrontation. Hardship, however, encountered by all those with whom he deals throughout the novel, is never far from the surface.

The plot of *Whitefly* is intriguing. An unprecedented agricultural

disaster threatens to wreak havoc nationwide, and cross-country conflict and rife corruption intertwine. The victims, or so it seems, are some of the many who attempt to cross the sea to Spain in search of a better life (rarely to find it), drowned in dangerous waters on their journey. But the fact that one of these bodies has gunshot wounds takes the investigation to a new, unexpected level, especially in a country in which guns are not only illegal, but also next to impossible to obtain.

Whitefly is a true page turner. It is fast paced and, as far as possible with such subject matter, satisfyingly tidy, even if its resolution is almost a little too hasty. Events unfold cleanly, with a sniper's precision. The reader senses that timing is everything, and at no point does Smolin's translation hinder its fast pace.

Despite all this, the reader cannot help feeling Hamdouchi could have dug deeper with *Whitefly*. He does touch on darker sides of Moroccan society, but only briefly. Laafrit's relationship with his wife, which has complex and political origins, is brushed over somewhat superficially. Of course, the whole novel takes place under the shadow of those fleeing to Europe. But such themes are often all too quickly dismissed, along with protests, drugs and police brutality – other themes which are not, somewhat frustratingly, carried forward. The novel opens with two separate demonstrations threatening to spill over into widespread chaos, but the discontent is not carried through, the revolt and ensuing police clampdown cast aside. Detective Laafrit is blinkered in his outlook; he solves one case only to move swiftly on to the next. There is little time to dwell on the dark spaces in between.

Whitefly is an entertaining crime novel, a slice of insight into police culture. However, it is also a subtle hint at some of the most pressing issues tormenting contemporary Morocco, bubbling beneath the surface, and of all that cannot be filed away and put on the backburner quite as easily as a police case.

