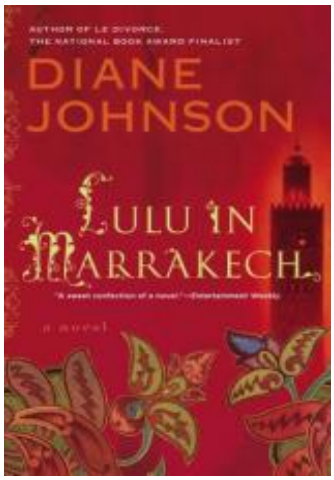
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Lulu in Marrakech

by Diane Johnson



About the Book

The two-time Pulitzer Prize- and three-time National Book Award-nominated author of the bestseller **Le Divorce** returns with a mesmerizing novel of double standards and double agents.

Lulu Sawyer, the heroine of Diane Johnson's captivating new novel, arrives in Marrakech, Morocco, hoping to rekindle her romance with a worldly Englishman, Ian Drumm. It's the perfect cover for her assignment with the American CIA: tracing the flow of money from well-heeled donors to radical Islamic groups. While spending her days poolside among Europeans, in villas staffed by local maids in *abayas*, and her nights at lively dinner parties, Lulu observes the fragile coexistence of two cultures which, if not yet clashing, have begun to show signs of fracture. Beneath the surface of this polite expatriate community lies a more sinister world laced not only with double standards, but with double agents.

As she navigates the complex interface of Islam and the West, Lulu stumbles into unforeseen intrigues: A young Muslim girl, Suma, is hiding from a brother intent on an honor killing; and a beautiful Saudi woman, Gazi, who is vying for Ian's love, leaves her husband in a desperate bid to escape her repressive society. The more Lulu immerses herself in the workings of Marrakech, the more questions emerge; and when bombs explode, the danger is palpable.

Lulu's mission ultimately has tragic consequences, but along the way readers will fall in love with this endearing young woman as she improvises her way through the souk, her love life, and her profession. As in her previous novels, Diane Johnson weaves a dazzling tale in the great tradition of works aboutnaive Americans abroad and the laws of unintended consequence, with a new, fascinating assortment of characters, as well as witty, trenchant observations on the manners and morals of a complicated moment in history.

Discussion Guide

1. Reread the prologue in E. M. Forster?s **A Passage to India**. How did you interpret it before reading the novel, and

how do you interpret it now?

2. On the very first page, Lulu Sawyer discusses Americans? tendency toward gullibility, that ?our ability to fool ourselves is greater than the ability of others to fool us.? In what ways was she describing herself? How did that help or hinder her in her work?

3. Given Lulu?s line of work, trust is a major theme throughout the novel. Who turns out to be most trustworthy? Least? What about Lulu herself?

4. At the bottom of page 47, Lulu confesses that she hates to bargain, probably because of the lying implied in the transaction. How does this jibe with her chosen career? What about her notion of victory and defeat that are embedded within any bargain?

5. Sexism affects all of the women in the novel, in both religious and institutional terms. How is the sexism Lulu faces from her colleagues different than the sexism Suma and Gazi face in their daily lives, if it is in fact different?

6. Lulu seems to be suspicious of Ian almost from the beginning, and yet she falls in love with him. What does this say about her aptitude for her job? How might she have handled things differently?

7. What role do Posy and Robin play in the novel? If they weren?t in this precise setting, do you think Posy and Lulu would be friends? Which would you rather have as a friend?

8. Discuss the character of Colonel Barka. How did he use Lulu, and vice versa? Ultimately, was he a ?good guy??

9. On page 192, Taft lumps Gazi and Suma together. Do you imagine the Muslim men do the same with Lulu and Posy? What is the effect of this stereotyping?

10. How is the way Taft approaches his job different from the way Lulu approaches hers? In what ways is each one?s method more effective?

11. On page 206, Lulu adopts a line from T. S. Eliot as a mantra: ?Prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.? How well does she follow through on that notion?

12. Lulu accepts the notion of ambivalence as being ?built into life in the shadows; even as you hope for unshakable convictions, you feel them drain away? (page 251). How has her experience in Marrakech weakened her convictions? How strong were they to begin with?

13. After Amid?s death, Lulu feels that her guilty conscience is ?not so much a moral qualm as chagrin at having screwed up? (page 265). What does this say about her character? Is she better suited to her job than she appeared to be?

14. Reread the letter from Ian?s father to Lulu on page 266. How did you interpret it when you first read it? Did your interpretation change as you read further?

15. Why does Suma steal the notebook from Khaled? Why does the colonel pass it on to Lulu?

16. After reading Gazi?s letter, Lulu thinks, ?It helped me understand what had gone wrong between her and Ian, if anything had: She was too dumb? (page 306).What makes her think this? Why did Gazi write to her?

17. Lulu imagines herself to be the Ingrid Bergman character in the film *Notorious*, with Ian in the Cary Grant role and Lord Drumm as Claude Rains (page 295). Have you seen the film? Do you think her casting is accurate?

18. 6. Discuss the ending. Was it satisfying to you? In what ways did it surprise you? What questions, if any, do you still have about what happened?

Author Bio

Diane Johnson's life has been at least as exciting as any of her heroines', filled with international travel and critical acclaim in whatever medium she deems worthy of her efforts. Born in 1934 in Moline, Illinois, Johnson's childhood was happy without being uneventful. Johnson's father, a high school principal, lost his job but not his honor when he exposed plagiarism committed by the daughter of the Superintendent of Schools. After high school, Diane attended Stephens, an academy for future airline stewardesses where teachers encouraged her to write, but left school in 1953 for a 'Los Angeles' marriage to a professor of medicine.

Twelve years later, Johnson terminated the union, having gained a Ph.D. in English from UCLA and "four wonderful children." Simultaneously, her first book, Fair Game, was published. Johnson's reputation continued to grow with the 1968 publication of Loving Hands at Home-"my discontented wife novel, about a Mormon family." In 1970, Johnson penned the timely Burning, an incisive novel chronicling the experiences of a staid, conformist married couple thrown in amongst the hippies, drug-addicts, psychiatrists, and firemen of the Bel Air hills. Next, Johnson took a short sabbatical from novels to write the National Book Award-nominated Lesser Lives, a fascinating biography of Mary Ellen Meredith, wife of writer George Meredith, and a poet in her own right, though she often used her husband's name to get her works published. In 1973, Johnson's first short story, "An Apple, An Orange," was included in the annual O. Henry collection of Best Short Stories.

In 1974, The **Shadow Knows** was released, garnering major praise from all sides. Director Stanley Kubrick was so impressed by the novel's taut psychological suspense and depiction of a person dealing with irrational occurrences that he chose her to write the screenplay for his next horror blockbuster, "The Shining." In 1978, **Lying Low** was hailed as surpassing **The Shadow Knows**, with its skillfully rendered atmosphere of foreboding and malice, and its violent and tragic denouement which managed to be surprising even though the events of the book led inexorably towards it. Also in 1978, Johnson spent three months in Iran with her second husband, Dr. John Murray, under a medical school exchange program. Taking another break from fiction, in 1982, Johnson gathered several literary portraits, reviews, and review essays in to **Terrorists and Novelists**, and in 1983 composed another biography, **Dashiell Hammett: A Life**, with the authorization and help of Lillian Hellman.

Johnson used her experiences in Iran as the basis for **Persian Nights**. Drawing comparisons to E.M. Forster's Passage to

India, Johnson depicted, through the eyes of a typical American housewife, the collapse of Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi's regime. In 1988, based on the excellence of **Persian Nights**, as well as the rest of her body of work, Johnson was awarded "The Mildred and Harold Strauss Livings," which consists of a $50,000 yearly stipend to allow its recipients to devote their time exclusively to writing. In 1990, Johnson again used experiences relating to her husband's work in **Health and Happiness**. Set in San Francisco, **Health and Happiness** shows the inner workings of a large hospital complex from the differing viewpoints of MDs, RNs, employees, volunteers, and patients. 1993 brought the publication of **Natural Opium: Some Travelers' Tales**, a collection of short stories narrated by D., who is accompanied by her doctor husband, J., giving a sense that these tales are more than a little autobiographical.

In 1997, **Le Divorce** was published by Dutton and became a national best-seller and a National Book Award Finalist. She now divides her time between Paris and San Francisco, continuing to soak up culture and offer wry observations as a travel writer, essayist, and book reviewer for numerous publications, including **The New York Times Book Review**. Interviewed by **The New York Times** as a consummate example of an expatriate writer, Johnson stands by her purpose, "I'm still writing about Americans for Americans." Johnson's latest work, **Le Mariage** (now a Dutton hardcover), will be published by Plume in paperback in 2001.

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