

The Servant of Dreams

is a novel I've been working on since the fall of 2022. In January I thought it was done, but now I'm in the process of rewriting it. Here's a blurb – click the other link to read an excerpt.

Jordan, summer of 2014.

American archaeologists James and Elle have made their careers excavating the Roman site at Bi'r Mathkour. Like most archaeologists, their funding never matches their dreams; this they share with the villagers and bedouin. Bi'r Mathkour is one of the poorest villages in Jordan, which is a poor country.

James is awaiting Elle's imminent return after three years' absence. In 2011, with Arab Spring and the Syrian War erupting, a new Islamist faction in the village turned on Elle, and asked her to leave a routine village meeting. She left. And she left Jordan, took a leave from her job, and went to California to join her long-distance husband, have a baby, buy stuff for the house, sit on the beach, get fat. But she's coming back now, and everything will be better. Her Arabic is fluent, she's smarter than James about *all kinds of things*, and, of course, he's been in love with her for decades. It doesn't really matter if she doesn't love him with quite the same, well, heat.

Musa, the sheikh of Bi'r Mathkour's scattered population, is poor too. His job is all honor and no glory, and he's tired. Like most of the local men he and his son, Muhammad, have worked on the archaeological site for wages. Musa and James are old friends, and Muhammad has never not known James. So when Muhammad's secret Danish lover in Amman passes him a heads-up about a million-dollar tourism development grant for 'underserved rural areas,' Muhammad goes straight to his father and James. They all wish Elle would hurry up and get here. She will know exactly how they should proceed.

Elle, once she arrives, thinks it's all a terrible idea. The village Cooperative, which would have to apply for the funding, has no experience in tourism, no experience managing a grant, much less do it all in English. But the idea takes on the reality dreams sometimes do, and the Cooperative decides to go ahead. James and Elle agree to help: if the village is going for it, give them a fighting chance.

They recruit Lou, an American development pro whose involvement in Jordan is intimate in every sense. Lou knows everyone, has connections, some of which are mysterious. She brings in Salim, who works for the NGO of Bi'r Mathkour's royal patroness. What none of them know (yet) is that Salim also works for the mukhabarat – Jordan's dread intelligence agency. Salim comes to realize that for some reason American intelligence is interested in Bi'r Mathkour's funding application.

Throughout, `AbdalHalim, the leader of the new Islamist presence in Bi'r Mathkour, staunchly opposes the tourism project. He argues that tourism will pollute the region with materialistic western values and an abrasive cultural

presence. He wants money for a clinic, teachers, deep wells to farm, public transport. He has a following, and they are not quiet – the Salafiyyin, a deeply conservative voice in Islam, is gaining traction in Jordan. Some Salafis oppose ISIS. Some are recruiting. Young Jordanians are leaving to fight in Syria. Jordan's monarchist regime is deeply (dangerously) opposed to Islamism. `AbdalHalim cuts a deal with James and Musa. Salim lets everyone know that a single whiff of extremism will kill any tourism initiative.

Salim wonders what the CIA is interested in. He thinks maybe Lou. Lou figures out that Salim is an informant, and wonders if she is his asset. Meanwhile all south Jordan, Bi'r Mathkour included, is getting sucked into a strange pyramid scheme that is paying out famously – until it's not. Bedouin and villagers alike are mortgaged to the chin to cash in. It's a CIA-backed plot. It's government corruption. It's Iraqi money-laundering. It's funding ISIS. There are eight dozen stories, and no press. When it collapses, government troops move in, freeze the schemers' assets, and everyone loses everything to – whom? The poor have become poorer, and Bi'r Mathkour's poor cling ever more fiercely to their tourism dream. Lou wonders what Salim knows about it all.

Counter to all expectations, Bi'r Mathkour's motley crew survives cut after cut in the application process. USAID sends Muhammad on a mountaineering course. The U.S. Ambassador visits to hike their new trail to Petra, guided by Muhammad (still unlicensed). At a photo op for USAID, however, `AbdalHalim and his cohort mock the Americans, once again imperiling the project. Muhammad's life is endangered.

Over these weeks Elle, ever curious and open, strives to understand the human appeal of ISIS and other militant groups to young Jordanians living in a peaceful country. She becomes more interested in the Salafiyyin, and eventually sympathetic to `AbdalHalim's priorities: water, education, healthcare. Salim warns her to keep her distance, but she doesn't. In her own view she is independent of the various agencies and interests: she funds her own fieldwork, she's American, she can do whatever she wants. She says – *They're misogynists, but they have some good points. This is all academic.*

It's not.

Salim is pulling on threads to unravel the odd knot of interest in Bi'r Mathkour, and he sees trouble coming. Lou is pulling on threads from another direction. As Bi'r Mathkour makes the final shortlist for the million-dollar score, the whole thing comes apart. `AbdalHalim is arrested, Elle and James stand to lose their careers and thirty years' worth of research. Salim and Lou are about to be disgraced and banished to the hinterlands of their professions. Musa's dream of a legacy to his village is vaporizing, and with it the career he planned for Muhammad.

When the dream is finally over, they each find themselves holding something real in hand.