

## West Looks East: The Influences of Traditional Arab Design on Contemporary Western Designers

*The Gullible Thief and the Sea of Stories: Arabic Storytelling Traditions and the West*

LITERATURE

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**A word from the speaker:** Oriental storytelling traditions played an important role in the emerging vernacular literatures of medieval and early modern Europe: from Boccaccio's Decameron, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales to La Fontaine's Fables and countless lesser-known works. Framed narratives in which characters tell stories within stories—of love and heartbreak, of adventure, of riches found and lost, of talking animals far wiser than humans—result in a complex mosaic or *zillij*, in which voices and points of view are juxtaposed, with a sometimes disorienting complexity not unlike the stacked arches of the Great Mosque of Cordoba. Today, the Arabic storytelling tradition maintains a lively presence in children's entertainment, from Disney's Aladdin to Mr. Magoo's 1001 Arabian Nights, but it also remains an important trope for many writers, from Naghib Mahfouz, to Salman Rushdie, to Leila Sebbar, who invoke the familiar themes, characters and literary techniques of traditional stories, while exploring a wide range of issues, from immigration, gender relations, authoritarian governments and the power of stories to renew life and hope.

**Biography:** The colorful and multifaceted presentation we will hear tonight is mirrored by the colorful and multifaceted academic career of our speaker. Lourdes Alvarez received a BA in Neurobiology from the University of California, Berkeley, her MA (San Francisco State University) and PhD (Yale) in Spanish. She has a keen interest in the effects of Arab culture on early modern Spain – Al-Andalus, and focused much of her research and writing on the music, literature, poetry, and mysticism of Andalusian Spain. Her specific interest is in the literary aspects of culture and the manner that stories are transferred from person to person and between generations. She researches and publishes in Arabic and Spanish as well as English. Today she is Assistant Professor of Modern Languages at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, where she teaches senior level courses in Spanish as well as graduate courses on medieval studies.

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