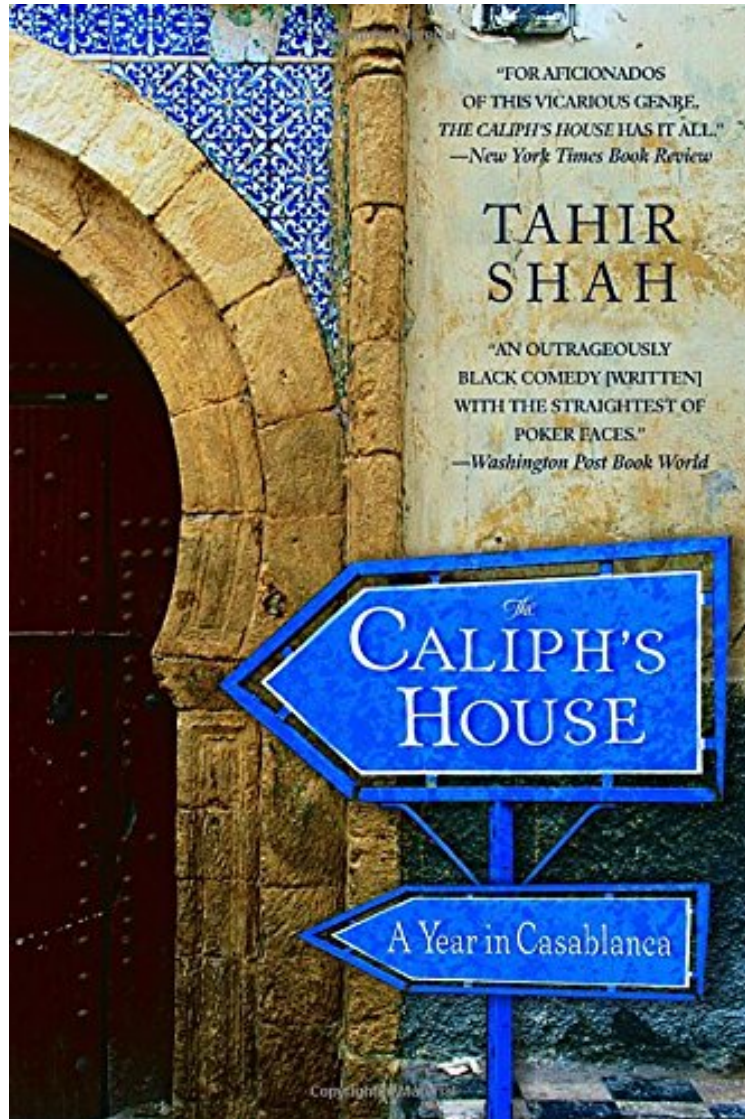


## The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca

Tahir Shah

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#83891 in Books Shah, Tahir 2006-12-26 2006-12-26 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.22 x .64 x 5.50l, .89 #File Name: 0553383108368 pages Bantam Books | File size: 74.Mb

**Tahir Shah : The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca:

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. And You Thought You Knew Morocco! By Elizabeth T. Smith  
A confession: I adore Morocco. It is a place of dreams, beauty and ideas that are foreign and lovely. The food is fresh and fragrant with spices. As a tourist, a people watcher and a scholar, I have studied the place. So when I picked up the Caliph's House, I expected to return to the place of my dreams and spend a week enjoying the book. Instead, I met a new and different Morocco of workers, customs and household djins never before encountered. The story line involves

a Londoner of Afghan descent who moves his young family to a rundown but beautiful estate home just outside a bidonville of Casablanca intending to restore the house to its former glory. Work proceeds, or not, based on a complicated system of beliefs and customs that we learn about through a series of work stoppages, destructions and contractors. As it turns out, the house comes with three longtime resident guardians who have much advice that varies as to usefulness and self-servingness. Some of this is laugh out loud funny and some provides deep cultural insights. I knew nothing about djins before reading this book and the author knew nothing about them before writing it. Nonetheless, if you have djins in your toilets or wells, there is hell to pay. This is a beautifully written book replete with cultural context and human concerns. It evokes a powerful sense of place. It is also by turns hilarious and deeply moving. In the end, it is a delightful book that is also insightful about working class Moroccan life. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting, Humorous and Enlightening By LLBrit This book gave a wonderful, entertaining account of moving from London to Casablanca. The obstacles the author encountered provide the reader with a window into life in Casablanca, with all its checks and balances. Surviving the renovation of The Caliph's House is a nightmare that makes one appreciate the saner, if frustrating issues we western renovator's regularly encounter. Tame by comparison. An interesting, humorous, and enlightening read. 5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Another "domestic" travel book By R. M. Peterson Until fifty or so years ago, the paradigmatic "travel" book was an account of a solo adventurer's trials and tribulations traveling to and through relatively unknown and often moderately dangerous foreign lands, surviving on a shoestring and his or her wits and character. The best of these books made for exciting reading. As the world has gradually become smaller and more westernized, travel books have gradually become tamer and less exciting, so that by now the paradigmatic "travel" book is practically domestic in nature. It recounts a stretch of time, often a year, during which the author, often with family in tow, actually takes up residence in a foreign city or region -- for example, Peter Mayle in Provence, Adam Gopnik in Paris, and innumerable Brits and Americans in Tuscany. The best of these modern travel books are pleasant and many are instructive, but (alas) they never are exciting. THE CALIPH'S HOUSE: A YEAR IN CASABLANCA is another of these contemporary "domestic" travel books, although the setting, Morocco, is more exotic than Provence, Paris, or Tuscany. In THE CALIPH'S HOUSE, Tahir Shah tells the story of moving his family (wife and two very young children) from the U.K. to Casablanca and into a dilapidated, rambling old house and compound (rumored to once have been the residence of a caliph), which he then spends a year restoring. The restoration is complicated immeasurably by what seems like the ten plagues of Egypt, including rats, mysteriously appearing slime, hordes of workmen who seem to want to move in rather than finish their work, and (worst of all) jinns. The book is driven by the recurring cultural clashes and misunderstandings between the rational and efficient Tahir Shah and the Moroccans, with their propensity to blame all mishaps and misfortune in the world on jinns, their absurdly byzantine bureaucracy, and their stubborn adherence to traditional, centuries-old ways of doing things. Rather than relying on his own wits to overcome the obstacles he encounters, Tahir Shah gets by on seemingly inexhaustible financial resources and the savvy of his street-wise Moroccan executive assistant, Kamal. Far from the heroic adventurer, Tahir comes across as a bit of a doofus. The only person of heroic or noble character that we are introduced to is Tahir's deceased grandfather, Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah, a Pashtun Afghan who lived his last years in Morocco after a career as a diplomat, world-traveller, and writer. Tahir Shah's writing is above average, but hardly distinguished. THE CALIPH'S HOUSE makes for a pleasant and instructive read, but nothing more. It did, however, end up coloring my view of Morocco. Before reading the book, Morocco was fairly high on my wish-list of places to go; it is now a few slots lower on the list.

In the tradition of *A Year in Provence* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*, acclaimed English travel writer Tahir Shah shares a highly entertaining account of making an exotic dream come true. By turns hilarious and harrowing, here is the story of his family's move from the gray skies of London to the sun-drenched city of Casablanca, where Islamic tradition and African folklore converge and nothing is as easy as it seems. Inspired by the Moroccan vacations of his childhood, Tahir Shah dreamed of making a home in that astonishing country. At age thirty-six he got his chance. Investing what money he and his wife, Rachana, had, Tahir packed up his growing family and bought Dar Khalifa, a crumbling ruin of a mansion by the sea in Casablanca that once belonged to the city's caliph, or spiritual leader. With its lush grounds, cool, secluded courtyards, and relaxed pace, life at Dar Khalifa seems sure to fulfill Tahir's fantasy until he discovers that in many ways he is farther from home than he imagined. For in Morocco an empty house is thought to attract jinns, invisible spirits unique to the Islamic world. The ardent belief in their presence greatly hampers sleep and renovation plans, but that is just the beginning. From elaborate exorcism rituals involving sacrificial goats to dealing with gangster neighbors intent on stealing their property, the Shahs must cope with a new culture and all that comes with it. Endlessly enthralling, *The Caliph's House* charts a year in the life of one family who takes a tremendous gamble. As we follow Tahir on his travels throughout the kingdom, from Tangier to Marrakech to the Sahara, we discover a world of fierce contrasts that any true adventurer would be thrilled to call home. From the Hardcover edition.

From Publishers Weekly Starred . When Shah, his pregnant wife and their small daughter move from England to Morocco, where he'd vacationed as a child, he enters a realm of "invisible spirits and their parallel world." Shah buys

the Caliph's House, once a palatial compound, now heavy with algae, cobwebs and termites. Unoccupied for a decade, the place harbors a willful jinni (invisible spirit), who Shah, the rational Westerner, reluctantly grasps must be exorcised by traditional means. As Shah remodels the haunted house, he encounters a cast of entertaining, sometimes bizarre characters. Three retainers, whose lives are governed by the jinni, have attached themselves to the property. Confounding craftsmen plague but eventually beautify the house. Intriguing servants come and go, notably Zohra, whose imaginary friend, a 100-foot tall jinni, lives on her shoulder. A "gangster neighbor and his trophy wife" conspire to acquire the Caliph's House, and a countess remembers Shah's grandfather and his secrets. Passers-through offer eccentricity (Kenny, visiting 15 cities on five continents where Casablanca is playing; Pete, a convert to Islam, seeking "a world without America"). There is a thin, dark post-9/11 thread in Shah's elegantly woven tale. The dominant colors, however, are luminous. "[L]ife not filled with severe learning curves was no life at all," Shah observes. Trailing Shah through his is sheer delight. *Illus.* (Jan.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From *Bookmarks Magazine* In the March 2006 issue of *The Atlantic*, Terry Castle faced his addiction to the shelter magazines and furnishings catalogues that drive the "billion dollar business of home improvement." These same addicts put books like Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* and Frances Mayes's *Under the Tuscan Sun* atop the best seller lists. Travel writer Tahir Shah (*In Search of King Solomon's Mines; Sorcerer's Apprentice*) possesses the same idealistic (and some critics say nave) pursuit of greener grass through domestic upheaval. While critics compare his book with the aforementioned classics of the genre, it is Shah's dark humor and skillful depiction of Casablanca that distinguish *The Caliph's House*. Though less intrepid souls might not care to live there, reviewers insist a few nights at Dar Khalifa in the company of such a talented writer is time well spent. Copyright 2004 Phillips Nelson Media, Inc. From *Booklist* Afghan writer Shah uproots his family from the comforts of London and moves to Casablanca. There he purchases not just any house but the abandoned residence of the caliph. Undeterred by suicide bombers, jinns, and innumerable job applicants, Shah installs his family in the decrepit house and begins to restore its walls, its gardens, and its fountains. Reconstructing the house immerses Shah in Moroccan everyday life. He has to deal with plagues of rats, swarms of bees, and the ever-threatening prospect of organized crime. Shah's picture of Moroccan society, its deeply held Islamic faith, its primitive superstition, and its raucous economy makes for endlessly fascinating reading. Particularly telling is his encounter with the realities of Ramadan, which seems to bring out both the best and worst in people's characters. Shah is cautious not to judge a society different from Western expectations, and he never makes fun of the odd characters who pepper his narrative. Shah's own heritage as both Afghan and Briton blesses him with a unique and penetrating point of view. Mark Knoblauch Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved