

Murder, Magic, and Moorish Muslims

Dorman, Jacob S. *The Princess and the Prophet: The Secret History of Magic, Race, and Moorish Muslims in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2020. 311 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-080706726-0.

Madeline Steiner

University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC, USA

doi:10.1017/S1537781421000335

Jacob S. Dorman's new book, *The Princess and the Prophet: The Secret History of Magic, Race, and Moorish Muslims in America*, details the fascinating life of Walter Brister, or, as he was also known, Noble Drew Ali. Brister/Ali was a Black theater and carnival magician who became a religious leader and, in 1925, founded the Moorish Science Temple of America, a group that was in many ways a precursor to the Nation of Islam. Dorman's evidence suggests that Noble Drew Ali's account of his own life was false, and that Ali was actually a former child Broadway star turned "Hindoo magician" who took to the road with traveling amusements, faked his own death, and reemerged in Chicago as Noble Drew Ali. Ali's real-life story, with all its twists and turns, provides Dorman a vehicle for exploring the connections between several overlapping issues of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history: Black religious movements, Orientalism, popular culture, political corruption, and global antiracist movements. Readers will be drawn in by the captivating story of murder, faked deaths, polygamy, and carnival magic but stay for the astute historical analysis.

Although the book is structured chronologically, each chapter has a clear theme and uses Brister/Ali's story to discuss a broad range of topics from the global history of Islamic mysticism to the development of the Shriners to political corruption in Chicago. While it would be impossible to describe every one of the book's numerous sub-arguments here, *The Princess and the Prophet* may be roughly divided into two parts, corresponding to the two identities of Walter Brister and Noble Drew Ali. In the introduction, Dorman describes how he initially set out to explore representations of Blacks, Arabs, and Muslims in the circus and discuss how "the packaging and reevaluation of Orientalist knowledge, frequently by African Americans assuming an Oriental identity themselves, had an unmistakable political spin as a critique of imperialism, materialism, racism, and the West" (10). Dorman accomplishes this in the first half of the book, analyzing Walter Brister's transformation from the child star of a plantation-themed Broadway show and leader of a "pickaninny" band to the circus sideshow magician Armmah Sotanki, a "Hindoo magician." In Gilded Age sites of amusements, Islamic people of African descent were typically depicted in a romantic and generally positive light, whereas characters of African origin were portrayed as subhuman savages. The racist traditions of Blackface

minstrelsy still infected representations of Black Americans. This, Dorman argues, helps explain why Islam and a “Moorish” identity appealed to many Black Americans during Jim Crow.

In the second half of the book, Dorman explores how Orientalist images from popular culture took root in the theology and rituals of the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA). This group did not follow standard Islamic beliefs. The group’s founder, Noble Drew Ali, claimed to be guided directly by Allah and presented his followers with a holy text that contained no quotes from the Qur’an, but was instead a mashup of two books of esoteric wisdom. Ali taught his followers that they were not “Negroes,” but Moors. This was a challenge to Jim Crow and, like the contemporaneous Garveyite movement, linked Black people in the United States with peoples of African descent around the world in a global antiracist movement. Noble Drew Ali was also deeply intertwined with the politics of Chicago’s South Side, and Dorman spends several chapters discussing Black urban politics in the 1920s. Power struggles within the MSTA ultimately led to the murder of one of Ali’s rivals, a crime so poorly investigated that it hinted at possible bribery and political corruption. Dorman spends several chapters discussing the political and social climate in Chicago, which is important contextual information for understanding the MSTA, but perhaps this might have been condensed, as these chapters, while enlightening, divert from the book’s main subject.

A major premise of *The Princess and the Prophet* is that Walter Brister faked his own death in 1914, before, after a stint posing as his half-brother Thomas Drew, reemerging in 1925 in Chicago as Noble Drew Ali and founding the Moorish Science Temple of America. While this is a compelling story, Dorman’s conclusion that these were all the same person hinges on photographic evidence. Dorman bases this argument on two photographs, one of Brister as Sotanki and one of Noble Drew Ali. The men in these pictures, which are included in the book, do resemble one another and they do have a mole in the same place, but is this enough to definitively conclude they were the same man? Ultimately, readers must decide for themselves. However, whether Brister and Ali were the same person or not, Dorman makes convincing arguments about the significance of each of these personalities and *The Princess and the Prophet* therefore adds much to the literature on both popular culture and religious history. The book’s analysis of the ways in which Orientalist performances and Islamic traditions (both “authentic” and fictionalized) complicated the racial landscape of turn-of-the-century America adds a layer of nuance to popular understandings of Jim Crow. Furthermore, Dorman’s argument about the impact of representations of Islam in popular culture on Black Muslims in America is enlightening, and Dorman skillfully illustrates the MSTA’s connection to the wider history of Black liberation movements. *The Princess and the Prophet*, with its wide range of subjects, will appeal to readers both in and out of the academy and would make an excellent addition to the syllabus of any seminar course on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Painstakingly researched and masterfully written, *The Princess and the Prophet* is both an exciting and titillating story that makes for a compelling read and an informative addition to scholarship on Gilded Age popular culture, religion, Black liberation movements, and urban history.