# Review of *A Master of Djinn*, by P. Djeli Clark

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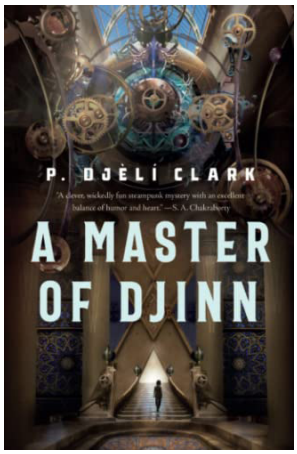


Clark's debut novel won the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 2021, and in 2022 won the Compton Crook Award for Best Novel and the Locus Award for Best First Novel. It was also nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2022. The work depicts an alternate steampunk-esque Cairo of the 1910s, where the technical innovations are the work of the djinn or the result of their influence. There are many social innovations, as well, more on which below. The timelines split in the 1870s, when in our world Egypt was nominally independent but in practice dominated by the British and French: the proximate cause of this was Egypt's vast indebtedness to those countries, partially due to the cost of the Suez Canal. In Clark's world, a mystic going by the name al-Jahiz was able to open the door between our world and what Clark refers to as the Kaf, the world of the djinn. The irruption of mystical force into the world enabled Egypt to leapfrog the Western powers both technolgically and socially; this irruption spread to other colonized lands, enabling those societies to throw off their Western oppressors via their cultures' particular sorts of sorcery and magical beings.

This alternate history provides the background for a police procedural that becomes an epic struggle for power through control of the djinn. Fatma el-Sha'rawi is a senior agent with the Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments and Supernatural Entities, which is itself part of a highly modernized and efficient Egyptian government. When a British man with ties to the colonial past, who is also the leader of an esoteric brotherhood devoted to al-Jahiz, is murdered along with his whole brotherhood in a clearly sorcerous manner, Fatma is called in to solve the mystery: her main companions in this quest is her new partner, Agent Hadia, and Fatma's lover Siti, whose heritage proves crucial. The McGuffin here is the Seal of Solomon, which has the power to bind the djinn in service: a villain cosplaying as al-Jahiz returned needs to re-open the gateway between worlds in the service of their own will to power. *A Master of Djinn* builds upon a previously-published novella and novelette, whose events are summarized in the text of this work. I should note that I have not read these earlier works, on the premise that the novel should be understood as a thing unto itself.

The novel has much to admire. Its world is vivid and particular: Clark has a good picture of Cairo and uses it to his advantage in structuring its steampunk alter. The world is also internally consistent. The novel is quickly-paced and an easy read. The central plot is well-structured, even if its sudden reveal is telegraphed much too clearly. Its version of the 1910s is startlingly modern in terms of social mores, above and beyond the overturning of colonialism: most contemporary readers will appreciate its feminism, queer relationships and other details.

What *A Master of Djinn* best represents, however, is the hollowing-out of the publishing industry and the vast disservice this does to both writers and readers. Clark is a first-time novelist, and it shows: there are clunky bits of exposition, even including a couple of instances that verge on "As you know, Bob," and minor infelicities of language here and there. A caring editor would have had him cut down the number of descriptions of clothing, spaced out the introductions of some of the characters, etc. For example, *djinn* is the group plural and the name of the race of beings. The singular is *djinni*, yet "djinn" is used in the singular throughout the text; also, there are repeated mentions of *masjid*, which does mean "mosque", but it's singular and the word is consistently used in the plural, where it should be *masájid*. These infelicities should have been addressed in the editing process, but clearly were not. It's a testament to Clark's skill at keeping the story moving and portraying a vivid alternate universe that the novel won the awards it has—but this recognition comes despite, not with the help of, Tor and its editors.

The infelicities are sometimes grating but ultimately trivial—and again, I want to emphasize that my critique here is not of Clark, who's done a great job as a first-time novelist. More problematic is the glaring lacuna that anyone familiar with the literary tradition in Arabic will find at the heart of *A Master of Djinn*: his portrayal of djinn very much goes against their nature.

Structurally, the djinn occupy a space in Muslim culture very similar to that of the fey in Celtic-influenced northwestern Europe. The djinn predate humanity—and often predate upon humanity. They are very diverse in form, and fall into groups based on similarity of form. They have great sorcerous power and live far beyond the mortal lifespan. They are arrogant, lack empathy and are often cruel, but are honorable in their generally Lawful Evil way. They can be bargained with, but will obey the bargain only to its literal word and will do what they can to make those words misleading. Some are more curious than actively malevolent; a very, very few are intrigued by humanity and might even verge on the benevolent. The primary structural difference between fey and djinn is that while Christianity is inimical to the former, the djinn are fully imbricated in the Muslim tradition—though the djinn existed in the cultures of the region prior to the advent of Islam. The djinn were created first, and from fire; when god created humans from earth, he demanded the djinn bow down to the first humans. Some refused, while others obeyed. Some djinn became Muslims, while others did not.

The djinn of *A Master of Djinn* have all the superficial characteristics of the traditional djinn, and many of the powers. They certainly look like djinn: Clark, like many new writers, spends a great deal of space giving us physical descriptions of characters, and the descriptions of the very

different physical forms (and outfits) of the djinn go a great deal toward the vividness of his world. The djinn have the same broad variety and particularity in the novel as they do in the literary tradition. Some of them act like djinn, whether their words and actions be arrogant, oblique, opaque or esoteric.

Yet Clark has *humanized* the djinn, and it takes away from the power and innovation of his world, in a way that might not be evident to readers unfamiliar with the djinn. Partway through the text, Fatma sees an English woman reading from a luridly-illustrated book of *1001 Nights*-esque tales. She responds to this by directly lampshading, anachronistically, the concept of Orientalism, first articulated by Edward Said in 1978, six decades after the novel's setting. Fatma is right to sneer at the book she sees, but *A Master of Djinn* performs the opposite trope upon most of its djinn. The djinn are *not* human, and their djinn-ity is being done something of a disservice by the text. The novel is full of djinn who, despite their baroque appearance and habits, have opinions and take actions that make them seem like 21st-century progressives. Since the advent of the djinn, every hierarchy has been overturned: colonized and colonizers, democrats and authoritarians, men and women. The novel makes it clear that the djinn are the causal factor here: for example, the USA has banned the supernatural, and due to this it remains a backward land drenched in Jim Crow. While I personally am very much on the side of upending hierarchies, there's a real issue of willing suspension of disbelief, here.

When presented with an alternate world, most readers of SF demand to know by what plausible set of circumstances that world arrived at its current state, but how the djinn caused a progressive revolution is the lacuna at the center of this novel. The technological revolution is clearly backstopped: it arises due to the djinn's knowledge and sorcerous power, and this conforms to the nature and role of djinn in the literary tradition. With respect to social issues, however, the nature and role of djinn in the literary tradition is to *preserve* traditional hierarchies. They are for the very most part contemptuous of humans, and deeply resent having had to bow down to us. There are next to no female djinn in the tradition, and the male djinn have no more interest in feminism than do most of the human characters: the *1001 Nights* is full of people of both sexes in drag, and notable female characters like Princess Budur who take on a man's role, but none of it is feminist in the sense of saying that women should have the equal political, economic and social rights as men that they have mostly achieved via the djinn in Clark's Egypt. The text states several times that while things aren't yet perfect in Egypt of the 1910s, women have it rather better than their Western sisters. Yet the Egypt of 1870, before the timelines split, was socially conservative to a degree modern readers could hardly understand.

There was in fact a real-world Egyptian feminist movement in the 1910s, though not in the 1870s: it was instrumental in removing the British from direct rule. One of its chief leaders was Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947), who is best-known for publicly throwing away her headscarf and thereby starting the period between 1922 and the 1990s when Egyptian women of the middle and upper classes did not veil. Fatma el-Sha'rawi is repeatedly said in Clark's text to be from a downscale background and also a Sa'idi: someone from Upper (southern) Egypt, whose people

are darker-skinned, regarded as hayseeds and come under a great deal of racist oppression in the real Egypt of then and even now. It's a strange re-use of a last name, with the implication of making Egyptian feminism not only somehow djinn-driven but also populist as opposed to being entirely driven by a narrow upper class. The sort of reforms the real Sha'rawi advocated for were incremental, nothing like the openly queer relationship Fatma practices. I'm not advocating against feminism or queer relationships in SF novels: I'm arguing that *A Master of Djinn* doesn't explain how any of this happened, and it's a real distraction from an otherwise engaging story. I'm absolutely willing to suspend disbelief about the presence of the djinn in the novel, because it's SF and the novum, and it's cool. But they have to be *djinn*, and this novel for the most part transforms them into progressive humans. While this isn't Orientalism, it is a little problematic to take this very well-documented aspect of another literary tradition and adapt the form but not the function.

Again, I'm not critiquing Clark, who deserves next to none of the blame for any of these lacunae: I'm blaming Tor. It would have taken the bare minimum of professionalism on their part to work with him to edit through the small infelicities, and only a little more to have someone familiar with the literary tradition in Arabic read the manuscript and explain where and how the djinn come across as counter to their nature as expressed in that tradition. Clark is clearly blessed with creative talent: I rather doubt it would have taken him long to articulate how the djinn became progressive and to integrate it smoothly into the novel's additional chapters, and then to perform some minor redjinnification of some of the characters. His story and world are compelling, and I do hope that Clark continues to refine his voice and expand upon what he's created.

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