

## THE SHORT STORIES OF ZAKARIA TAMER

tyrant. In the story “The Beard”, an entire town is destroyed because its male inhabitants are not prepared to have their beards shaved off. The general besieging them is neither bloodthirsty nor rapacious; he simply demands that the men don’t let their barbers starve, and allow them to do their work. But the bearded men remain stubborn and unregenerate, and the general eventually carries out his threat.

In keeping with the classic fairytale tradition, Tamer’s heroes often find themselves being interrogated. They are arrested without being told why, dragged before the authorities, and forced to come up with original and clever answers to the questions asked by their tormentors – a caliph, chief of police or judge – in order to save their skin. But Tamer subverts even this familiar pattern of dialogue, and doesn’t always allow the underdog to emerge as the (moral) victor. Sometimes, things go wrong and the salvation expected at the end of the story is brutally foiled.

In general, Tamer is a master at playing with the reader’s expectations. His texts stimulate his readers’ imagination to continue spinning and altering the story for themselves. And the narration is occasionally so disjointed and crazy that it gives the impression Tamer is trying to twist it until it fits the historical facts – a sure-fire method of mocking history.

However, readers can safely skip over the little introductory texts that preface every story and illuminate the historical background. As Tamer largely ignores the historical facts, this knowledge is not particularly helpful. In any case, you can always read the explanations afterwards for the names of the stories’ sources in literary history.

The short stories brought together in this volume are taken from various collections. Some are translated by Ulrike Stehli-Werbeck and some by Hartmut Fähndrich (who also wrote the very informative Afterword). The translations are brilliant in both cases, and reproduce the literary quality of the original texts wonderfully.

The publisher, Lenos Verlag, deserves thanks for finally introducing this great author, described as the “poet of the Arab short story par excellence”, to a German-speaking audience.

Translated from the German by Ruth Martin