

National Book Award winner *The True True Story of Raja the Gullible (and His Mother)*

James McDonald
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Rabih Alameddine's 2025 National Book Award for Fiction winner *The True True Story of Raja the Gullible (and His Mother)* (Grove Press 2025) is an eminently readable, if uneven, book.

Pleasant in its cranky humor, quite sad in places, *Raja the Gullible* is told in the voice of a 63-year-old Beirut philosophy teacher, whose world weariness and snarkiness as well as his tempestuous relationship with his audacious mother have entertained most of its readers and reviewers. In its best section, however, a 75-page set piece, it is considerably more.

Raja the Gullible takes place in Beirut between 1960 and 2023, its story divided non-chronologically into seven sections, which themselves are given to bouncing between past and present according to the storytelling's demands and the storyteller's consciousness. Because the focus is always on Raja and his experience, the nonlinear structure does not prove to be overly challenging.

The ostensibly central story, which disappears for the majority of the novel only to reappear near the end in a genuinely surprising plot twist, is that Raja has received an email from an organization called the American Excellence Foundation offering him a three-month writing residency in Virginia. Although he had written a book earlier in his life (a walking tour of Beirut, incongruously written in Japanese), he has written nothing in over 25 years. Yet, flattered and in need of money, Raja fails to smell a rat.

The novel's patchwork plot is anchored upon three disasters: the 2019 Lebanese economic crash, the COVID pandemic and the massive 2020 Beirut port explosion. Around these significant events, we follow Raja's self-consciously meandering narrative. Unfortunately for the reader, though, Raja has little interest in matters beyond his apartment living room, where he and his mother conduct their frequent spats and shouting matches.

Raja wants little more than to live quietly and be left alone. His mother, Nalfa, having blossomed after a stifling marriage, has a voracious appetite for life and community. This includes insinuating herself into Raja's work life,

surreptitiously befriending his students, his beloved "brats." Eventuality, in a development that strains credulity, Nalfa begins a mutually obsessive friendship with one of Beirut's mob bosses, Madame Taweel, who controls the city's lucrative diesel-powered electric generator trade.

Rabih Alameddine is an accomplished writer of scenes and sentences, and the reader is carried almost effortlessly through episodes in Raja's childhood and his emerging consciousness that he is gay as well as through events in his adult life between 2001 and 2023.

Alameddine is the author of six previous novels, including *The Wrong End of the Telescope*, which won the 2022 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Born in Jordan in 1959, Alameddine spent his early years in Kuwait and Lebanon, then traveled to the US where he earned a degree in engineering at UCLA. After working for some time as an engineer, he turned to painting and writing.

In *Raja the Gullible*, Alameddine has written in many ways a good book. But it is not a great book. Its finest achievement is in its serious treatment of its theme. While Raja repeatedly refers to himself as gullible, his only real instance of gullibility occurs when he takes the offer of the American writing residency as good coin. On the whole, while he is compassionate, Raja is actually a somewhat closed and suspicious character. He approaches almost every interaction as a potential threat to his privacy, tranquility and sense of order. In fact, *Raja the Gullible* is not a novel about innocence and gullibility. It is a novel about coercion.

Slyly, movingly, Alameddine paints for the reader a mural filled with moments of bullying, wheedling, attempted blackmail and seduction. Even at age 63, Raja regularly succumbs to the will of others, to coercions that are physical, psychological, social, sexual and financial. In Raja, Alameddine depicts with a clear eye the costs of timidity, compassion, weakness of all sorts, decorum and love. Read from this angle, *Raja the Gullible* is a minor triumph. But its flaws must also be mentioned.

First, the reader is asked to overlook too much. Raja is supposed to be a beloved philosophy professor in a high

school, one who has been profoundly changing students' lives for decades. How? We have no indication. What is his philosophy? He wants to be left alone. Apart from a single mention of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in fact, our narrator could as easily be a microbiologist or a carnival barker.

To compound this failing, while one does not want to idealize philosophy teachers, the job does demand a certain erudition and presumes at least a passing curiosity about ethics and structures of power. Yet neither Raja's personal life nor the turbulent events in Lebanon get put under such microscopes. Rather, Raja calls the 2006 Israeli airstrikes on Beirut "Israel's crazy bombing," and the culmination of his political acumen is to kvetch,

Living under avaricious and murderous governments that had replaced other avaricious and murderous governments, bordered by more avaricious and murderous governments, denial of reality became a mode of survival.

While this observation is undeniably true of Lebanon, its fatalism, effacement of differences and concluding escapism are hardly the stuff of a thinking adult's, an eyewitness to history's, thoughts. Yet perhaps neither Raja nor Alameddine is to be blamed for this. Raja's political ken appears to be bounded no more constrainedly than that of the average academic in the 21st century.

It must be noted also that the novel's last hundred pages present a cavalcade of implausibilities, from Raja's trip to Virginia to the caricatures of Nalfa and Madame Taweel getting up to mischief. Even taking into account the book's comic overtones (though it is a far cry from fulfilling the dust jacket's promise of being "wickedly funny"), the book's first third and last third appear to inhabit two different registers of realism. It is in its contrast to these two-thirds of the novel, which are seen through the eyes of the adult Raja, that its central 75-page vignette stands out like its own short story. Here the world, Beirut in 1975, at the start of what would be the 15-year civil war, is seen through the eyes of a 13-year-old Raja. It is here that Alameddine hits his stride, creating two characters, Raja and Boody, who are at once intensely believable and cast into extreme circumstances. Here the theme of coercion is complicated and complicated again, and the psychological tension of the section is wound up to a pitch of trauma. Nothing else in the novel matches it.

Finally, there are the novel's three disasters. About these we learn only that they are devastating. Raja loses his life

savings in the 2019 financial crash in Lebanon, COVID hovers around the periphery of his and Nalfa's lives, and the 2020 Beirut port explosion, perhaps the largest non-nuclear, human-caused explosion in history, does such damage to the city that Raja, out to sweep the streets with many other Beirutis—a genuinely affecting image—weeps uncontrollably.

Each of these disasters took or destroyed lives, each takes a toll on Raja, and each was preventable. That is, each did its damage as a consequence of the irrational logic of capitalism. Yet each of these disasters is passively treated by Alameddine almost as if it were a natural disaster. Even where human agency is undeniable, in the banking collapse for instance, Raja's account is that "[T]he politicians and bankers stole our money." Again, true as far as it goes, but it hardly goes far enough.

To dispense with asking further questions is to signal that such thoughts will get one nowhere anyway. As for COVID, Lebanon initially served as a model of containment of the virus, but as was the case the world over, capitalism soon made its inhumane demands, and thousands died. The port explosion was caused by tons of ammonium nitrate improperly stored, its owners ignoring government warnings.

Raja mentions none of this. While he has compassion for the victims of these disasters, he fails to connect the most glaring dots and, like so many writing and teaching fiction and poetry, withdraws into his subjective responses. It is with a shrug, then, that Raja, and perhaps Alameddine, draws this conclusion from Lebanon's disasters:

Ours is a tale of unrelenting death, violence, and destruction, narrated with apathy.



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