In the late Emile Habiby’s carnivalesque novel *The Secret Life of Saeed*, the Palestinian protagonist repeatedly encounters strange circumstances, one particularly memorable. Saeed, a wise fool, buffoon, and trickster, takes refuge in a footnote and converses hypothetically with his Israeli superior: “You used to assure us, honored sir, that history, when repeating itself, does not reproduce itself precisely. If the first occurrence were tragedy, the second would be farce.” Since Habiby invented it thirty years ago, this axiom has proved extraordinarily accurate. The American tradition of literary hoaxing, for instance, generally entails farcical renditions of tragic historical sequences. Take Norma Khouri’s *Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern-Day Jordan*. It managed to make a farce not only of its own credibility, but also of the credibility of its countless admirers.

That Habiby, a verifiable Arab and venerable Middle Eastern politico, accidentally predicted the ascent and subsequent dishonor of a pseudo-Arab with a knack for con artistry only adds to the irony encapsulating Saeed’s tricksterism and Khouri’s trickery. Khouri nullified the generations of nuance evinced by the activists and creative writers of the Middle East. She transformed the politics Habiby satirized into political melodrama that rendered a farcical carnival an awkward reality. If, to paraphrase Saeed’s formulation, a real oppression of women in the Arab World demands serious analysis, then *Honor Lost* is the farce that followed inevitably. This chapter is an attempt to make some sense of these strange circumstances perhaps too fantastical even for the inventive mind of Emile Habiby.

The attempt begins with an observation that will remain central to the forthcoming discussion: to anybody even slightly familiar with
Jordan, and the Islamic world more broadly, *Honor Lost* is virtually unreadable. It is poorly written with hysterical narration and clichéd description. It is worse methodologically, relying not only on spurious information and falsified data, but also on every imaginable American stereotype of Arab men and women. In a sense, the most interesting question *Honor Lost* raises is not about how myth is interpolated into reality through multiple sociocultural developments, but rather how anybody read the book and actually believed it. I will have to argue that the book’s believability, despite its unbelievable contents, can be attributed in part to its appeasement of a long-standing cultural mythos in the United States and its ability to retroactively justify decades of aggressive foreign policy in the Arab World. *Honor Lost*, in other words, could be believed because its readers had already accepted its contents as true before it had even been written; had they not, it would have been impossible to write.

The story of *Honor Lost* is remarkable, even if its status as a fraud is not unique—or, for that matter, unusual—in the history of American publishing. I intend merely to sketch the broad outline of that story here before analyzing the book and its ramifications. *Honor Lost* was first published in Australia in 2002 under the title *Forbidden Love*. The book, featuring the author and her best friend, Dalia, takes place in Amman, Jordan, where Dalia, a Muslim, fell in love with Michael, a Catholic who frequented Norma and Dalia’s unisex beauty salon. When Dalia’s ostensibly modern family discovered her relationship with Michael they killed her in order to preserve the family’s honor. Khouri, complicit in the illicit relationship and therefore fearful that her own family might kill her, consequently fled to Greece, where she claimed to have written *Forbidden Love* secretly in an Internet café, and then to Australia, which granted her asylum.

In February, 2003, Atria Books published *Forbidden Love* as *Honor Lost* to both critical and commercial success. By mid-2004, the book had sold hundreds of thousands of copies globally and Khouri was in great demand as a speaker in Anglophone nations, where, displaying what she called the slain Dalia’s engagement ring, she reportedly left audiences in tears (an indictment, to be sure, of liberal Western sensibilities when they are directed patronizingly at the Middle East). During this period, however, investigations by *Jordan Times* reporter Rana Husseini, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and various women’s rights groups found that the events described in *Honor Lost* never occurred. In fact, they found that “Dalia” and “Michael” were inventions, as was the beauty salon, and concluded that *Honor Lost* was a fabrication. (Ironically, in *Honor Lost*, Khouri praises the work of