

Intermarriage in Tunis

By **RICHARD ELMAN**

STRANGERS. By Albert Memmi (translated by Brian Rhys). Orion Press. 174 pp. \$3.50.

ALBERT MEMMI'S short novel, "Strangers," affords a rare pleasure to the discriminating reader. The author has dispensed with all the various forms of literary sleight of hand characteristic of much of "serious" modern fiction in order to write a truly serious novel. Memmi's dedication to actuality seems all the more astonishing if one considers his subject matter, a mixed marriage — a subject which so easily lends itself to excesses of sentiment or melodrama. Yet Memmi is throughout amazingly fair; he is intelligent; he can be bitterly frank or funny; and he tells his story economically and with a sense of dramatic consequence.

The locale of this fine novel is Tunisia and its participants are in all instances except one Jewish. Memmi is himself a Tunisian-born Jew. He is not easily swayed by prejudices of birth, however, and, if anything, is most harsh with those who seem most like himself. This becomes

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clear as Memmi discusses in a terse, lucid prose the break-up of a marriage between a man and a woman "who have no past in common."

As soon as the young Jewish narrator describes his long awaited homecoming to Tunis
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with his Gentile bride Marie, one shares in a sense of foreboding. Unnecessarily protective and overly defensive, the anonymous doctor overtly asks that his bride tolerate her strange surroundings and she, in turn, would have him be patient with her; however, they are both seething with different varieties of the same anxiety. A sense of dislocation, of betrayal, a failure to make the unshared commonplace seem valid is what finally drives a wedge between the doctor and his wife. She distrusts what she cannot understand and he cannot understand his wife's distrust and assumes that it reflects upon their relationship, and, finally, upon himself.

PAINFULLY, such a marriage must end in dissolution, the death of love, the squandering of intimacies. But in this case, it happens with a ruthless certitude that does justice to the commonplace neuroses of both parties. Albert Memmi's narrator admits in the end that "violence isn't the only thing that destroys; gradual wearing down can do it too." This is an eloquent statement but what is surprising is that it could be so eloquently demonstrated in a relatively short work of fiction.