

# Calendar

## Love on the Lam

Book Signing/Discussion

**W**hen the story broke, author Jean Sasson says, she learned about it the same way everybody else did. "I read about it in the newspaper." Now Sasson will be an expert witness in the case to be heard in May by the Immigration and Naturalization Service in San Diego.

The major characters are a Bahrainian princess and a U.S. Marine based at Camp Pendleton. Meriam Al-Khalifa and Lance Corporal Jason Johnson met at a shopping mall while the serviceman was stationed in the Persian Gulf in 1998. To say the least, the princess' father, second cousin to the Bahrainian emir (or king), wasn't pleased by his 17-year-old daughter's romantic interest and forbade her to

permitted only to marry among themselves. "It's very taboo to do what Meriam has done. In fact, I know of only one other case, and that woman was forced to divorce and come home [from Europe]. If she hadn't, the Saudis would have killed all her relatives down to the last living nephew."

Las Vegas was the couple's wedding venue; Taco Bell prepared the wedding feast. Johnson was demoted to private after administrative court-martial proceedings and has been referred to as "a former Marine" in recent news stories, such as those publicizing a TV movie about the case, *The Princess and the Marine*, which aired on NBC on February 18. How has Meriam reacted to her new economic status as the wife of a Marine private? Sasson, who met Meriam last month when they both appeared on *Oprah*, reports that the princess seems unbothered by it. "And I found that surprising. After I washed one dish, I'd be pretty mad if I wasn't used to it."

Those who saw the show may agree with Sasson that Meriam is "achingly young and very sweet." Also, "a bit shy." But, the author says, that's typical of Arab women. "If they aren't timid, they are sullen and withdrawn." Or else they exude a cheeriness that's "all fake," she adds. "They would do anything for their husbands, trying to keep them happy so they will not take that second wife. It's a miserable existence for everyone. My first [reaction] would be, 'Honey, I don't like the looks of you. Would you mind taking two or three more wives, so I don't have to see your ugly face every night?'"

Born in a small town in Alabama in 1947, Sasson, who has not lost her Southern accent, says she grew up poor. She isn't anymore. Two nonfiction books, based on the life of the pseudonymous "Princess Sultana," have sold many millions. The third in the trilogy has just been published, and she will sign copies in Mira Mesa on Monday night. She will also talk about Meriam's case.

Sasson's testimony is designed to persuade the Immigration and Naturalization Service that Meriam has a valid asylum claim. "I am convinced that the family



Jason Johnson and Meriam Al-Khalifa, July 2000

or someone very close to the family would kill Meriam if she went back. What she has done is such a stain against their honor, especially because now everybody knows about it. If it could have been kept a secret, there is not the shame." As it stands, the entire country of Bahrain feels it has been scorned. "And the only way that can be erased is with Meriam's blood." Meriam doesn't have any brothers. Otherwise, they would carry out the violence against her. "I don't know if her father would have the heart to do it or if it would be some other relative."

If the United States were to rule in Meriam's favor, Sasson says she doesn't predict a rush of Arab women seeking asylum here. "Who has the plane fare? Even if they could afford it, most wouldn't want to leave their homelands. "These women, most of them, tend not to function very well

without their large family unit. They'd be miserable. They're very entrenched." She does wish that Arab women would start speaking out to secure their own rights. "They are forced into marriages, stoned, or drowned for minor infractions of the 'rules.' It's so primitive. We [Western women] are used to being activists. If we see a wrong, we right it or die trying. Me, with my personality, I'm ready to rumble any time." So far at least, they have needed Western women "to lead the charge."

— Jeanne Schinto

**Book signing and discussion with Jean Sasson**  
**Monday, March 12, 7:30 p.m.**  
**Barnes & Noble,**  
**10775 Westview Parkway**  
**Mira Mesa**  
**Free**  
**858-831-0446**

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Jean Sasson

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