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## Abdellah Taia's "Infidels" was a Turning Point for the Paris-based Moroccan Author



By **Olivia Snaije**  
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*This article is part of a series of profiles of ten Francophone authors who have been long-listed for the [Albertine Prize](#).*



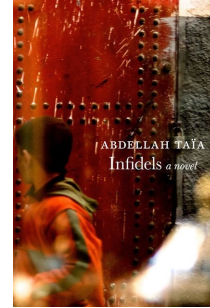
Abdellah Taia is a familiar face on the French literary landscape. The Moroccan author has lived in Paris since 1999 when he arrived to continue his doctoral studies at the Sorbonne. Since then, he has written eight novels, edited a collection of short stories, and shot a film adapted from his book,

*l'Armée du Salut* (Salvation Army).

Taia's beginnings were as modest as they come—a desperately poor neighborhood in Salé, near Rabat. This starting point, his coming of age as a gay man in Morocco, and his relationship with his mother, constitute much of his source material for writing, such as in his autobiographical first novel, *l'Armée du Salut*, and even in his most recent book published this year, *Celui qui est Digne d'être aimé* (He who is worthy of love).

One of his novels, *Infidèles* (Infidels) is perhaps a departure from the others because of the broader and burning hot issues that are present in the world today— Islamic fundamentalism, the West’s relationship with its Muslim immigrants, and secularism versus faith. *Infidels* was, as Abdellah Taia said in a recent interview, “a turning point...it allowed me to take stock of many issues.”

Set in Morocco, *Infidels*, published in France in 2012 and in English in 2016, translated by Alison Strayer, recounts Jallal’s life, the son of a Moroccan prostitute called Slima, who encounters a European-born Islamic militant who, he realizes too late, is a terrorist. The moment of inspiration for the story dates



back to 2000, said Taia, when he accompanied a cousin of his in Brussels to visit a friend who had been hospitalized following an accident. The friend was a Belgian who had converted to Islam, and at the time, said Taia, “we all fell in love with him, he projected a rare form of beauty, of someone who truly has spiritual faith.”

One day, he told himself, he would write about that moment. He created the characters of Slima, the mother, and her son Jallal, in order to be able to describe that moment, back in 2000, when he encountered a moment of purity, in contrast to the confusion about Islam in the West, the growth of religious fundamentalism in Moslem countries, and dogmatic secularism in France that had been developing over the years. Taia said when he created the character of Slima, he had the 8th century Arab Sufi poet and saint, Rabia Al-Adawiya, in mind because of the “inner purity” of both women. *Infidels* is a complex and multi-layered work that is written a little like poetry, but reading between the lines important questions are asked and contrasts are posed: sociological and political violence (as in Morocco) versus submission, religious freedom versus secularism (in France), Muslim faith versus Islamic terrorism, and violence towards women and feminism.

When he wrote the book, said Taia, it was “as if religious freedom could not exist in France.” With the book he wanted to make a space for his fictitious Islamist who, in most respects would be “against him”, but with whom he also has a few aspects in common. As Taia said in a recent interview in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, “Our monsters are like us.”

#### Tags

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