

BENZAKOUR, KHALID. *Le marathon*. L'Harmattan, 2024. ISBN 978-2-336-43886-5. Pp. 130.

Marriages can feel like marathons. Staying committed and hopeful may pose challenges that at times feel insurmountable. Barriers, temptations, and distractions surface unexpectedly, and even the routine of everyday life can pose serious stumbles. Khalid Benzakour's novel, *Le marathon*, offers a unique and fascinating window into the fast-paced, disciplined world, culture, and lifestyle of runners through the initial outside perspective of a dutiful French wife, Éliane, a self-



described non-athlete in her mid-fifties. Her marriage to Kamal, a successful Moroccan education administrator, former rugby player, and intensely disciplined and seasoned marathoner, has faced its hurdles. Years earlier, when the couple relocated from Toulouse to Casablanca, Kamal left behind his tight-knit rugby community. He seemed more uprooted by the move to his birth country than Éliane, whose family is French. For years, Éliane witnessed Kamal's slump into an almost depressive state. Was Kamal's sense of obligation to live close to his family destabilizing his mental health? Furthermore, the intrusion of another woman risked jeopardizing their already stumbling relationship. His discovery of le "Club marocain des coureurs de fond" or CMCF (11), in Casablanca, reinvigorated Kamal with a sense of belonging and purpose. Initially relieved, Éliane adapted herself to her husband's rhythm as she instinctively understood that "Kamal est un marathonien passionné, toujours à la recherche de nouveaux défis pour repousser ses limites" and that "courir est bien plus qu'un simple sport: c'est un mode de vie" (19). Kamal's newfound fixation completely restructured their circle of friends, daily schedules, diets, choice of trips abroad, and priorities. Unrelentingly, Kamal pushes physical boundaries with his training, sometimes under perilous terrain conditions, seeks to convert his family, friends, and colleagues to adopt his passion, and ultimately challenges Éliane to run the 2018 New York City Marathon. Fear, even panic, grips Éliane. A journey of testing one's physical limits as they train on running trails and in semi-marathons in Canada and elsewhere threatens to destabilize the couple. It is as if the monumental task of training for a marathon in New York transformed into a fragile, almost treacherous, yet useful language allowing them to heal years of *non-dit*. At the same time, the commitment to achieve what seems to be an impossible goal can bring them closer together. The magic of this novel is that readers can identify with both main characters. For dedicated athletes, Kamal embodies a philosophy of active being and rigor to achieve wellness and test one's physical performance levels. Others can relate to Éliane, who views sport and movement more recreationally and as an opportunity to explore the outdoors in a community with others. The existential questions that Éliane and Kamal wrestle with in their comfortable Moroccan social milieu on balancing a partner's devouring passion are important. Yet, they reside miles away from the everyday concerns modest Moroccan families encounter. Nevertheless, sacrifice and maintaining the family's unity and health are concerns that dodge all social classes and geographies.

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