The book of The Arabian Nights has become a synonym for the fabulous and the exotic. Every child is familiar with the stories of Aladdin, Sinbad the Sailor and Ali Baba. Yet very few people, even specialists in oriental literature, have a clear idea of when the book was written or what exactly it is. Far from being a batch of stories for children, The Arabian Nights contains hundreds of narratives of all kinds - fables, epics, erotica, debates, fairy tales, political allegories, mystical anecdotes and comedies. It is a labyrinth of stories and of stories within stories and of stories within stories within stories. Widely held in contempt in the Middle East for its frivolity and occasional obscenity, the Nights has nevertheless had a major influence on European and American culture, to the extent that the story collection must be considered as a key work in Western literature. A full understanding of the writings of Voltaire, Dickens, Melville, Proost and Borges, or indeed of the origins of science fiction, is impossible without some familiarity with the stories of the Nights. The Arabian Nights: A Companion guides the reader into this labyrinth of storytelling. It traces the development of the stories from prehistoric India and Pharaonic Egypt to modern times. It explores the history of the translation, and explains the ways in which its contents have been added to, plagiarized and imitated. Above all, the Companion uses the stories as a guide to the social history and the counter-culture of the medieval Near East and the world of the storyteller, the snake-charmer, the burglar, the sorcerer, the drug-addict, the treasure hunter and the adulterer.

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