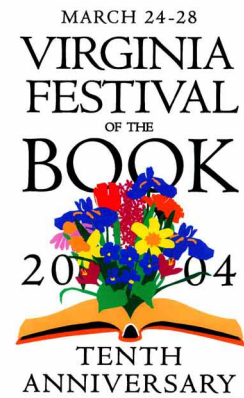


## *Seven Houses* by Alev Lytle Croutier recommended by Katherine Neville

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Katherine Neville—bestselling author of *The Eight* and *The Magic Circle*—recommends *Seven Houses*, and other works by Alev Lytle Croutier. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Alev Lytle Croutier is the most famous female author of Turkish descent. Indeed, she is the *only* female Turkish author whose works have been translated into multiple languages—more than twenty at present.

A resident of America from the age of eighteen, Croutier achieved almost legendary status with the publication of her non-fiction book in 1989—*Harem: The World Behind the Veil*—which was the first modern “insider” look at the comprehensive history of harem life. (As a child in Turkey, Croutier was acquainted with the last of the harem eunuchs; Croutier’s own grandmother was raised in a pasha’s harem.)

*Harem*, filled with lush paintings of harem life, and even richer prose, reads like a *roman à clef*, offering behind-the-scenes, sometimes disturbing, but always fascinating, views into the once mythical realm of Scheherazade. The book has remained a classic for the insight it affords into the hidden world of women who, over nearly a thousand years, had no world outside the “golden cage” built for them by the men who possessed them.

Though *Harem* was not a work of fiction, Croutier was clearly a natural born storyteller, versed in the ancient art of weaving fabulous tales weighted with suspense. Naturally, therefore, the many authors who awaited a return of the lost art of female storytelling—including Isabel Allende, Susan Griffin, Alice Walker and myself—rushed to write citations applauding

her first major work of fiction, *Seven Houses*, the moment it was completed.

But despite its publication in multiple other countries to enormous acclaim, Croutier had to wait for seven years—until after the U.S. publication of her highly successful, exotic historic novel, *Palace of Tears*—before she would see *Seven Houses* finally published here in her adopted country. It was well worth the wait. *Seven Houses* is a tour-de-force (*Publishers Weekly* called it “shimmering prose...a solid success”)—all the more astonishing when one recalls it is a first novel.

The tale is told, surprisingly but entertainingly, through the “omniscient voices” of the seven different houses inhabited by the once-rich and prestigious consortium of silk barons, the Ipekci family.

A sweeping saga spun like an intricate tapestry, *Seven Houses* brings us from the steamy bathhouses of the decaying Ottoman Empire to the war-torn decades of Turkey’s emerging democracy. As four generations of fascinating Turkish women see their private world seem to melt away beneath their feet, they struggle out of their own past—like a silkworm trapped in amber—toward the uncertain future.

For those who have not yet discovered Alev Croutier’s writings, I would highly recommend all three of these marvelous books.