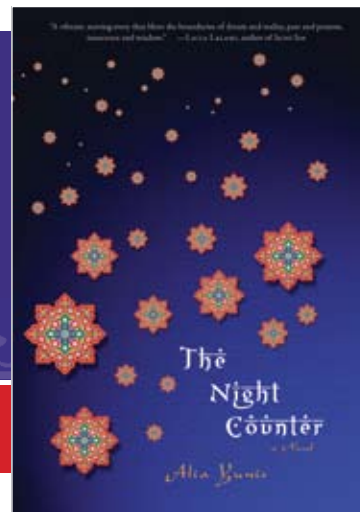


THE NIGHT COUNTER

A novel by Alia Yunis

AUTHOR Q & A



- 1. In *The Night Counter*, the description of the sights and smells of Lebanon are so evocative, the reader feels transported to the Middle East. What sounds, tastes, smells, etc. make you feel transported to that region?**

For every season of the year and for every season of my life, there are smells and sounds and pictures I associate with the Middle East. But there is always the smell of jasmine, the calming, time-setting sound of the call to prayer, and the sad sight of overflowing garbage bins. Within the region, your senses let you know that now you're in Jordan, now you're in Egypt, now you're in the Persian Gulf. Lebanon, whose beauty is literally Biblical, is blessed with spectacular mountains and seascapes, like a petite, delicate, somewhat fragile California. It is where I fell in love with the sea, and ever since, I have not been comfortable living far from the sound of waves.

- 2. At heart, this is a novel about the meaning of family. How did your family shape the story and the writing process? How do they feel about the book?**

As a result of the “troubles” in Lebanon and Palestine, my extended family lives around the world, and I have first cousins I have never even met. So in many cases our commonality is limited aside from a shared love and passion for those places. Some are more liberal than me, others more conservative, depending on the topic being discussed. I think some of them will find certain things in the book offensive or not tasteful, while others will relate to those very things. In fact, I imagine most would have both reactions, depending on what part of the book I was referring to. For example, Amir's homosexuality would make some of my relatives cringe, or in some cases even stop reading, whereas my parents would just shrug and say, “Oh, yet another gay man in her life.” On the other hand, my parents would be so offended by the “foul language” Bassam uses and probably wouldn't read that part.

- 3. How much of the novel is based on personal experience?**

I don't think anything we write, no matter how researched and fact-based, whether fiction or nonfiction, takes its shape without going through the prism of our personal experiences. This is a work of fiction, and I can't honestly point to any character and say “that's my best friend” or “that's my grandmother.” But I know the people in my book very well just the way they came out of my head, and they wouldn't come out my head if they weren't a conglomeration (subconscious and/or conscious) of my reality.

- 4. The oral storytelling tradition is strong in Lebanon, and the power of myth, fable, and story are evident in the shape of the novel. Did you think about these cultural touchstones as you were writing? If so, which ones?**

My mother is a voracious reader—self-help, religion, politics—but she considers reading fiction a waste of time and takes no joy in the unraveling and revelation of characters and their worlds, which makes fiction so great to me. This is highly ironic as I recently realized after meeting a distant cousin for the first time that my mother is the biggest storyteller in my life. That cousin knew almost nothing about me. However, I knew so many stories about him. When my mother came to the United States in her twenties, she had no relatives in North America, and like Fatima, she longed for them. And I think to make up for that longing, she would tell me stories about them, long stories that went off in scores of tangents and involved people who over the years I came to know quite well although I hadn't yet met them. Often the stories were stories her mother had told her about her parents. She was my first Scheherazade, but I have known many in the Middle East, as there has been so much loss and change there in recent generations, and with little recorded history, oral stories are what sustain the memories.

- 5. What aspect/character/moment in your book do you think book groups and other readers will talk about the most?**

This is hard for me to say. At this point, I'm too close to everyone in the book to pick a favorite character or event. I'd be more curious in people telling me what aspects and moments they found interesting.



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