



Teaching Arabs, Writing Self: Memoirs of an Arab-American Woman

Evelyn Shakir

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Evelyn Shakir's witty, wise, and beautifully written memoir explores her status as an Arab American woman, from the subtle bigotry she faced in Massachusetts as a second-generation Lebanese whose parents were not only foreign but eccentric, to the equally poignant blend of dislocation and homecoming she felt in Bahrain, Syria, and Lebanon, where she taught American literature to university students.

In America, growing up in the 1950s and '60s, her world encompassed Boston's Revere Beach (her uncle ran the famous Cyclone roller-coaster) and the world of academia (she has degrees from Wellesley, Harvard, and Boston University and was awarded a pair of Fulbrights). She effortlessly combines personal anecdote with cultural, political, and historical background, and is incapable of stereotyped thinking: one of the book's many pleasures is the diversity she finds among the people she encounters in the Middle East, including not only students, but cab drivers, storekeepers, and the guys who make the spinach pies at the bakery down the street from her apartment.

Perhaps best of all, Shakir is fun to read—and funny! Her tales of the family's pride in the Cyclone (“the brawniest ride on the beach”) are priceless, as are her astute observations on her travels (Victoria's Secret sells well in Damascus). Relentlessly honest, sometimes hard on people (and on herself), she always manages to uncover the humanity we all have in common.

As Shakir explores her own identity, she leads the reader to an appreciation of the richness and complexity of being Arab American (or any mixed heritage) in an increasingly small world.

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