

# Muslim Journeys

## Overview

**M**uslim Journeys, the Wyoming Humanities Council received a grant from NEH for Muslim Journeys and as part of that grant, a book series was created.

## In the Country of Men by Hisham Matar

NEH/ALA-sponsored *Muslim Journeys* held the first of five book discussions Thursday, January 10, 2014 at Laramie County Public Library in Cheyenne. A group of twelve participants met together at 7:00 pm to discuss Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men*. At least one mentioned they had not read the book, but were interested in the discussion. Following NEH recommendations, I presented a 20-minute talk on the cultural, economic and environmental conditions of Tripoli, Libya, the setting of the story. Several members of the group conducted additional research on Qaddafi's regime in the 1970s and the role of stories in Islamic cultures, which added to our discussions. Members of the group were educated and well-spoken, and seemed comfortable addressing many sides of the challenging issues facing the Middle East. Their willingness to engage each other and me allowed the conversation to move in directions they felt were significant.

A main theme several participants kept returning to was bringing political events down to the personal and family levels. While they agreed the book itself was not an uplifting or cheery work, many felt that such a novel portrayed the history of Libya in an easy-to-read, colorful, memorable style. Several mentioned they were surprised at how well they came to know the modern history and culture of Libya through a some-what fictional novel. Members elaborated on how using a novel effectively explores political news and other headlines we don't know much about. A repeated discussion focused on how writing from a child's view both clarifies and clouds large issues.

Other themes readers chatted about, and sometimes deliberated on, were the psychological effects of trust and betrayal on children; different forms of imprisonment, and the influence of the author's own life on his writing. A major theme of the discussion was how the women and children in the book both exercised power and experienced a lack of freedom in male-dominated societies. The group agreed that the largest issue facing countries experiencing political and cultural upheavals was an imprisonment of the mind. Of particular interest to the group were the different relationships the protagonist had with his parents; and how he acted out his frustration at the secrecy in which his mother and father engaged.

I offered a few questions to start the group's discussion, but as it progressed, my input was less necessary and members began asking questions and guiding the conversation. Occasionally, I clarified or answered questions; such as the role of Qaddafi, and influences of the author's own life. Participants kept returning to the theme of how confusing the adult world of arranged marriages, alcoholism, and secret plots for democracy would be for the 9-year old protagonist. Much discussion centered on what it means to be a man for male children growing up in a culture of repression and the role of women in male-dominated cultures. The group agreed that while this was an unpleasant and upsetting book to read, it is necessary in order to address civil rights issues around the world.

-- Clara Keyt, Discussion Leader

Despite there being quite a few rival events in Laramie, about 18 participants came to discuss *In the Country of Men*.

We began with a refresher on the 5 Pillars of Islam, the modesty verse from the Qur'an, and varying reasons that Muslim women may choose to veil themselves or wear a head covering. (This was partly in preparation for going over to the Islamic Center after the book discussion.)

Then I presented information on the author, Hisham Matar. We discussed how the book had a few autobiographical elements and how impressive it is when someone can distill such a painful experience and make a creative and universal work from that experience. I had gathered information on Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year long rule, but I chose not to spend more time on background because we were all eager to dive into the book.

The group was quite lively. They enjoyed the prose style of *In the Country of Men*, saying it was moving and memorable. One person said, "The book was sad, but I was glad I read it. I learned a lot." We discussed how the book represented Libya but also any dictatorship, and how that was a deliberate choice of the author. Hisham Matar did not want us to think that this kind of totalitarian regime was specific to one location. Readers thought that the book was admirable for its presentation of ghastly events from a child's innocent vantage point. We looked at the hanging scene closely and then moved into a discussion of why and how the children's games mirrored the capricious and cruel actions of Gaddafi's government officials. I asked the group why the story is more interesting because the narrator is hardly an angelic boy and sometimes misuses power. The discussion grew intense when people were trying to determine the degree of altruism he showed to others and whether he ever wanted to help the beggar Bahloul.

We also discussed what we would do as parents in a situation where we would want to protect a child and yet would also want to tell the truth about the dangerous environment we lived in. I felt a sense of tension in the room over what choices we would make as parents (although people did not argue with one another directly). I

think it could have been a moment for healthy debate had people known each other better, and perhaps that will develop as we meet again. We moved on to thinking about entrapping gender roles, the mother's youth, the complicated mother-son relationship, and the distant father-son relationship. At the end of our time (which went too fast) we discussed the novel's end. I read out two contradictory statements about the ending's tone (found in book reviews of *In the Country of Men*). People were eager to say what they felt about the ending's grave tone and how they understood the main character to have a hollow sense of his future.

Next 95% of the group were able to walk over to the Islamic Center, which was wonderful. The members were very welcoming and explained the history of the space, the make up the Laramie Muslim community, the various countries and traditions that were represented, etc. I only expected to stay 30-45 minutes, but we stayed for 75-90 minutes because there were so many questions and, very kindly, Ahmed Adam and the others served us creamy chai and cookies! I was especially pleased with the amount of questions that were asked by our group and the respectful tone and phrasing that was used. Of course, I expect nothing less, but it was very gratifying to witness and participate in this event.

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Twelve people gathered in Story to discuss our first novel in the series. Initially, I thought it would be a good idea to set up the series in general. I asked what preconceptions they brought to a series called *Muslim Journeys*...what they think about in regard to Muslim countries. Of course the subject of women's roles came and also most in the group felt that there seems to be constant chaos and shifting of power structures. Someone mentioned the Koran and we talked about how it is the one unifying feature of the Muslim world, but how it is being used (and manipulated) to support any agenda, even the most radical (much like the Christian Bible). I reminded the group that these books were intended to show us the human side of the people living in these countries and how their world affects them.

I too handed maps of Libya and the area and gave a brief history of how Libya came to be. Everyone remembered Gadhafi of course. Several had seen the Barbara Walters interview she did with him. They weren't sure whatever happened to him though and one person remember that the US initially was very supportive so we talked about the current status and all the shifting allegiances.

Finally I insisted we get to the book and from there the discussion was intense and scattered. My outline went out the window quickly. We talked about the role of the narrator and at this point I related some about the author's background, most significantly that he was nine years old when his family were exiled (the same age as Suleiman).

I reminded them that in the novel the narrator is an adult looking back at this period. Even in spite of the meanness his exhibited, this group was sympathetic to the character.

They talked about how confusing his life was in every regard and how frustrated he was. We talked in general about children in these war torn countries and how they are affected. When I asked why they thought he didn't go back to Libya as an adult when the opportunity came, there were different opinions. but one person said had he stayed in Libya, that violent, self serving side of his character probably would have emerged fully because the culture engendered that. It becomes a survival means.

We discussed the mother at length and the ironies associated with her. We discussed the many examples of betrayals and suppression. We saw similarities to other countries where a despot rules, notably the inability to trust. We agreed that the average person living in such a society must often just become numb and do what's necessary to survive without struggling with the moral implications.

I had the library hand some discussion questions from the national humanities site on the series as well as some I added with the book, so the group did want to talk about some of those. They liked having the questions to ponder as they read the book, and I think they are helpful for this series. The discussion could have gone on even longer than two hours but we needed to let the library close. As I say, the discussion veered off in many directions, but everyone engaged, argued, and pondered. I'm excited about this series. I think we all have a lot to learn (as, in my case, where exactly Libya is!)

Norleen Healy

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Seventeen readers gathered to discuss this coming of age novel set in Libya. My intrepid friend and researcher, Carol Deering, provided maps of the Africa, Libya, etc. that were very helpful. We appreciated the attendance of a young woman from Turkmenistan who is attending Central Wyoming College. She is Muslim and answered many questions as well as contributing to the general book discussion. I began by providing biographical information on the author and his family. In addition, I gave a brief history of Libya. Several people pointed out that they wanted more information about the nation itself and the little information about Libya in the novel confused them. I reminded the group that this particular series was intended to show everyday people living their lives rather than focusing on the national and international issues of the day. But for future discussion leaders I do think a brief history is important. We proceeded to go around the room giving each person an opportunity to talk about the book and bring up questions, issues, themes, or whatever. (except whether or not they liked the book!) We talked about chaos - the impact of the revolutionary group, the spying, phone tapping, never knowing who was your friend or enemy - that emerges in the novel. That elicited a discussion of dictatorships that ARE disciplined and the difference between the two types of society. From that discussion we moved on to talk about the family and their relationship. As hard as I tried the general consensus was that the boy was a "brat." I encouraged the group to think about how little direction he got from his child like mother and distant father,,,,, to no avail. We continued to explore

why he hurt people, betrayed people, and yet how he wanted to be seen as a "man." As a nine year old, he lived in the moment, never fully understanding what went on around him. On the one hand he was encouraged to watch executions, but on the other hand was not told about his father's involvement in the revolution. What is it like to be a family of a dissident? How does the family suffer? In this case, what is the role of the mother? Is she a hero, saving her husband? Is she a pathetic drunk, reversing the roles of mother and son? It is the mother who decides that the son must relocate and live outside Libya. We discussed the impact of this on the boy and his parents? Where do expatriates feel that they belong? In general, people were glad to have read the book and acknowledged that they would have never picked it up on their own. It is painful and sad and all too relevant in our world today. What a wonderful learning experience this series is! Barbara Gose

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Eighteen people gathered at the Sheridan Fulmer Public Library to discuss "In the Country of Men". I began by giving background on the author and mentioned the April 18th 2013 article he wrote for the New Yorker about his return to Libya, to find out what happened to his father. For this series I have provided "questions to ponder", and back ground material on each country, tucked into the book when readers pick up the book. I think this has helped the flow of conversation. The themes we wove our way through included betrayal, friendship, loyalty, oppression, manhood, and the choices families during upheaval/war. The group had an insightful exchange among themselves when comparing Marjanne of "Persepolis" and Suleiman of "In the Country of Men". How much information should children be given? What are the consequences of a parent choosing to be a revolutionary? Who pays the highest price? In this context the group also discussed Suleiman's mother, her illness, and their isolation. There was a unique thread of "universal themes of humanity" flowing from this particular book which enriched the discussion. Several found the book relentless and difficult, while others found that it gave a window into everyday people. The participants are very much enjoying this series and there are some new faces in the room which is terrific. We ended with comments on where we are on our Muslim Journey and looking forward to the next book.  
Katie Curtiss

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Twelve ladies met at the Pine Bluffs branch of the Laramie County Library System to discuss the first book in the Muslim Journeys Series *In the Country of Men*. Most were our regulars who have attended many of the WHC discussions before but a couple of the ladies were new to the group.

I started the discussion by reviewing the four books we will be reading in the series and placing the action in the books on a map of North Africa and the Middle East. I quickly reviewed the history of Libya from the Greeks and Romans (and other conquerors such as the Italians) through the coup d'état that placed Muammer Gaddafi in power and on to the more recent civil war, just to place the

book in historical context. Then I asked for their general impressions of the book. Most thought it was an interesting and quick read and they liked it much better than our last series which was "Ordinary Lives: Memoirs of American Women". I believe there is more interest in the Muslim Journeys series because the topics that are addressed are so timely with Isis and Syrian refugees currently in the news. I also told them briefly about the author Hisham Matar's life growing up in Libya, fleeing with his family to Egypt and the abduction of his father.

Several group members mentioned the effect of reading about such a violent time in history through the eyes of a child who doesn't always understand exactly what was going on around him. Several mentioned that the adults in the story never told him the truth about what was going on even when telling him the truth might have kept Suleiman from making some of the mistakes that are nearly tragic, such as hiding the book *Democracy Now* under his bed and talking to Shareff.

We also discussed why the author chose the title *In the Country of Men*. Obviously the treatment of women in Libya at the time is one factor. The women seem to have no power so it is truly a country of men. But also there are a lot of things in the book about what it means to be a man and all the main characters except Suleiman's mother are men or boys. This led into talk about friendship and betrayal and what Hisham Matar calls "the opposite of betrayal", and what effect of witnessing the public execution of a friend and neighbor on public television had on Suleiman.

I briefly explained the role of Schehezarade as the narrator in the tale of *A Thousand and One Nights* and we talked about why the character is viewed so differently by Suleiman than it was by his mother and why we think Schehezarade is discussed so frequently in this book. I also realized during this discussion that I cannot for the life of me pronounce the name "Schehezarade" correctly! This led also to discussion of the somewhat strange relationship Suleiman has with his mother and the mother's alcoholism and her somewhat strange relationship with her husband.

Of course we had to discuss Suleiman trying to drown the beggar Bahloul. Why did he do it? What does it symbolize in the story? Then a couple of group members shared their experiences in Arab countries with beggars, with the Muslim call to prayer, etc. and the changes in those countries (Turkey and Egypt) between now and when they lived or visited there many years ago. This eventually led to discussion of Islamic extremism, terrorism, and the Syrian refugee crisis. I must say we did have a lively discussion! -- Elaine Jones Hayes

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Tongue River Library, November 10,2015

Eleven people gathered to discuss *In the Country of Men*, the final in our series of Muslim Journeys. Ahead of time, I had given the group a map, the brief synopsis of the history of Libya, and the questions from the web site to

have in mind as they read. Because Libya has been so much in the news, they wanted to talk about it in detail. One of our participants' son had volunteered in Libya in the late 1970's and helped on the massive irrigation project Gaddafi undertook. At that time, he reported that the people were quite favorable toward Gaddafi. Most of us remembered the ignoble end he came to a few years ago, so we spent time talking about his long reign and how the ideals he started with in the 60s disintegrated into what the author of our book reveals (and history upholds).

(Fortunately there is a wealth of information available on the years Gaddafi ruled in Libya.)

When we finally started talking about the novel itself, we noted that the author doesn't really ever name Gaddafi, instead referring to him as the leader or the Guide. I suggested that this is intentional in that while it is clearly Libya, Matar wants us to see what the kind of environment he describes in the novel - a totalitarian society where fear and mistrust rule - does to people. We've all read about similar effects in places like Stalin's Russia, Nazi Germany, where there is absolute intolerance of dissent or alternative views.

We spent a lot of time discussing Suleiman. Several in the group were quite negative about him. They saw him as mean and selfish and had little sympathy for him. Others took up his cause pointing out how difficult and confusing his world was where he needed to essentially be the adult (as with his mother) and yet was only nine years old and treated accordingly in a world where everything was topsy-turvy. He couldn't make his world coherent. Even though he did behave cruelly toward some of the other children and the beggar, he felt guilty and confused all the time. We talked about the effect of reading about the Gaddafi era from a child's point of view -- how it brings a certain kind of light to what's going on as well as clouding the truth. We found it interesting (and significant) that three of the four books we've read in this Muslim series are narrated from the point of view of a child.

This book was the one in the series that explored the role of women in a traditional, fundamental Islamic society. We found the mother to be a fascinating character; she rebels and submits to her role at the same time once she is married. We talked about how she and her situation affected Suleiman not just as a child but as into his adulthood, even as he became so disconnected from her.

In drawing some conclusions about the series as a whole, we discussed how prevalent the role of the exile was. Each of the four narrators was, in some way, an exile from his/her country and yet irrevocably tied to it. Also interesting to us was the ubiquitous references to the tale of Scheherazade illustrating the importance of the role of stories. One of the most significant outcomes of this series is that we come to see how diverse the Muslim countries are. We can't think in stereotypes about these cultures. And we bring much more to what we are hearing and seeing daily in the news of this world. This group particularly was initially a little reluctant about taking this series on, so it's doubly gratifying that they found it so valuable. - Norleen Healy

Three of us (another small group, sure is hard to gather folks in here for some reason) gathered at Eastern Wyoming College to discuss *In the Country of Men*, by Hisham Matar. We found the book to be a pretty harrowing tale of childhood trauma experienced under a tyrannical regime. We also discussed how this book really melded a lot of the worst features of life under a dictatorship with some of more difficult-to-understand aspects of conservative Islamic social mores. To wit, the treatment of Suleiman's mother, forced into marriage at 14 after being caught holding hands (!) with a boy in a coffee shop. We wondered how fathers and brothers could treat their daughters and sisters this way, and it was especially interesting in the case of his mother, who was betrayed by a brother who actually lived in America and had an American wife, and so was exposed to a whole different way of women being in society. We found it difficult to believe that he would've treated his own wife (and probably daughters) in such a way; why be so different with his own sister? We discussed the "submission" aspect of Islam, and the way it asks its believers to submit as the highest form of participating in the religion (at least, as I understand it), and that the role of women is, in this context, another form of that submission. In any case, we didn't much blame Suleiman's mother for turning to the bottle - wouldn't we all?

We also thought a lot about what it must have been like to watch your next-door neighbor and family friend executed on live television, and how the relationship between Suleiman's mother and father really changed after he got back from being tortured by the regime, as if he finally had to acknowledge how much he needed her. Then, too, after telling Suleiman that Scheherazade of the *A Thousand and One Nights* fame was in fact a coward for living as a slave rather than facing death courageously and independently, Najwa reduces herself to begging a neighbor - who's well-placed with Gaddafi's secret police - to secure her husband's release. It works, and "Baba" is let go, but it certainly makes a mockery of what she's tried to teach her son. We thought that maybe Suleiman's ultimate coldness to his mother - not contacting her for all those years he lives in Egypt - had something to do with this, though, in hiding out in another country, Suleiman does not himself take a different t act.

One of the participants grew up in Japan, and though she was born after World War II, she heard many stories of what Japan was like prior to defeat, a time when the secret police were everywhere and everyone felt they were being monitored for sufficient patriotism at all times. This is why, she said, American soldiers were so welcomed when the war was over, viewed as liberators rather than conquerors. So this participant said she can certainly understand how growing up under such a regime would leave scars that would last throughout someone's life, to include clouded feelings about parents that might in some way have participated. That said, we hoped that Suleiman and his mother would reconcile now that she was coming to Egypt, and wished there was a sequel, to see! - Court Merrigan

## Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

NEH/ALA-sponsored *Muslim Journeys* held the second of five book discussions Thursday, January 23, 2014 at Laramie County Public Library in Cheyenne. A group of eleven participants met together at 7:00 pm to discuss Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Our introduction to the book focused on the ancient capital city of Persepolis in the Persian Empire, including cultural significance, architecture and military stability at the height of its fame. Participants quickly focused on discussing the benefits and shortcomings of using a cartoon novel to tell a story and whether she meets her goal of breaking down stereotypes of her homeland and community. The group took interest in how writing from children's viewpoints both clarifies and clouds the larger national and regional events to which they are subjected. Of light interest was the role of women in exerting control in conditions that are repressive. For instance, in this story, the group recognized that the repressive regime required both men and women to have separate public and private lives. Yet, and most interestingly, the husband and wife work together to smuggle Iron Maiden contraband into the country for their teenage daughter.

Readers also discussed the shifting roles of religion in Iranian and Tehran societies, especially its seizure by the Islamic Revolution Committee. Here again, the ideas of personal and public lives surfaced, particularly with regard to characters' interactions with each other. We tossed around the question of conflicts between nationalism and loyalty to friends and family, and exactly how much a person's patriotism influences other decisions. For instance, Marji's parents send her away to Europe to complete her education, yet they stay behind. Contributors in our group questioned why this situation appears so often in the readings, and considered the effects of economics, heightened difficulty in leaving a country, age, and nationalism.

As expected, it was an engaging and informative discussion, and most participants felt comfortable sharing their own views and experiences related to this topic.

-- Clara Keyt, Discussion Leader

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Thirteen readers gathered August 11 to discuss this first book in the *Muslim Journeys* series. Since there had been some arrests and charges in conjunction with a video distributed in Iran showing Iranian young people dancing to the song, "Happy," I opened the evening with a brief clip from the video and discussed the reaction by the President of Iran (he generally thought it was fine) and the religious leader who found it blasphemous. Both backed off in the face of the looming threat from ISIL. So the evening began.... theocracy, moderate views, radical insurgents. Not much has changed since Marjane wrote *Persepolis*. I then talked about her background, her given reasons for writing the book, and the film made with *Persepolis II* included. We talked about why the book

might be challenged, as it was in the Chicago schools, and why it is used as an all college and all community read (West Point and Philadelphia). Then we proceeded around the room, offering our own views, insights, and issues with the book. It was a wonderful conversation. We disagreed on the success of a graphic format for this material, or any material, for that matter. One reader called it "Twitter reading," short phrases, with no elaboration. Others found it interesting, but prefer a more narrative format, citing *The Kite Runner* as an example that fleshes out the characters better. But the majority enjoyed the graphic memoir and believed it to suit the style of a young person. We moved on to talk about oppression, the various types of people we are introduced to, Marjane's parents, and especially Marjane's qualities. The book fulfills the author's purpose; we see through her eyes that all Iranians are not fundamentalists, nor terrorists, but are diverse in background, religion, politics, and interests. All of this evolves for us through a young woman's perception of what she sees, hears, and undertakes. We were enriched by the attendance of two people who had relatives living in Kuwait and who had lived in several Middle Eastern countries. They willingly shared their experiences. We had questions about the politics and collectively we answered them. I was grateful for an Iranian timeline. In the end we talked about veiling and the chador and how being forced to wear and being forced to remove these articles can both create trauma. I briefly brought up the reasons why women choose to veil. We will certainly revisit this topic. This is going to be an excellent series. And on to the next book..... Barbara Gose

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Twenty four people gathered at the Sheridan Library for a discussion of "Persepolis". To begin the discussion I introduced some background on the author and the publication of the book in four parts in France and in two parts in the US. Several participants had read the second volume and one had watched the animated film. Ms Satrapi expressed in an interview that she wanted to "show that Iran is not a country of fundamentalists, fanatics, and terrorists". After presenting that sentiment I asked the group to discuss how the book changed, dispelled or confirmed their preconceived notions about Iran and its people. This led to a wide ranging conversation with readers expressing thoughtful and insightful comments; all agreeing that they gained a better understanding of Iranian culture, revolution and of the diversity of people in Iran. One participant told us that when the Shah of Iran hunted in Sheridan County he had the opportunity to meet the Shah. There was concern that perhaps a graphic narrative overly simplified the history and was perhaps a little shallow. I then asked what surprised them most about the book and a lively discussion ensued. We considered the veil, class distinctions, the way the public sphere impacted and changed the domestic sphere, and the importance of knowing one's family history in shaping the family and understanding self. During our discussion of the House of Stone we had talked about the repercussions of parents sending their children into exile so we followed through with this theme in "Persepolis" exploring why Marjane's parents sent her to Austria and why they stayed. The idea

of sending a child away, while the parents remain behind, is a theme with which the group grapples.

Participants began to reference specific images in the book which led me to take the discussion specifically into the book. I introduced some background on the history of the graphic novel, graphic narrative, comix (in the tradition of R Crumb) and comics, and *Persepolis* as performance art. In addition I added some information on the structure of the book in terms of irony, "slippage" and the juxtaposition of the familiar with the other. While looking at specific images/drawings in a black and white format we considered the ways in which the book revealed how Marjane begins to cope with, and understand, violence and torture; the blurring of the public and private sphere; and teen rebellion in the context of a child growing up during revolution and war. I asked the group to bring forward the images that had a powerful impact on their understanding of Iran, the family, the Revolution and the war with Iraq. This led to a discussion of comparing and contrasting traditional narratives and graphic narratives and Satrapi's unique use of the Western form of the comic book and memoir to tell an Eastern or Iranian story.

This group inspires and energizes me; it was such a terrific discussion. Next up is "In the Country of Men" so this should give us an opportunity to continue discussing various forms of literature and expression, what it means to live under repressive regimes, and in exile, and move forward in our exploration of Muslim journeys.  
Katie Curtiss

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Eight ladies gathered at the Pine Bluffs Library to discuss this final book in the *Muslim Journeys* series. I began by reading a short biography of Marjane Satrapi to let them know about what happened to her after the end of this memoir since it seemed to end so abruptly when she is sent off to live in Austria as a young teenager. The version we read in the series is just the first half of her childhood and young adult experiences. It was published in the United States as *Persepolis 1* and *2*. The second book covers her experiences as a teen in Europe and her return to Iran to attend college. I also let them know that both memoirs have been made into a movie, which I have seen and would recommend.

Despite our initial reservations about reading a graphic (comic book style) memoir, we all enjoyed reading the book and it turned out to be the favorite of the series for many in the group. Everyone who attended the discussion had finished the book (which is not always the case). Group members found it easy to read and felt that the pictures in the book added a lot to the narrative. Many of the pictures in the book were very expressive and even humorous. This was also a surprise given the seriousness of the content. It was revealed in a biography that I read that Satrapi wrote the memoir soon after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 to show the human side of the Muslim people and to explain the history of the country of Iran, which was called part of the "axis of evil" by then President George W. Bush, in a more nuanced way.

I can remember the fall of the Shah of Iran, the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979 but I remember most of the focus in the U.S. being on the American Hostages and not on the suffering on the Iranian people themselves. We agreed that it was good to hear the story from a different perspective. Like one of the other books in this series, *In the Country of Men*, the view of the revolution is through the eyes of a child so many events are barely mentioned unless they affected Marjane directly, such as the closing of her French school, the requirement that all women and girls wear the veil, the bombing of Tehran (when the bombs hit her neighborhood), and the imprisonment (and sometimes the executions) of her relatives and family friends.

Even those of us who are old enough to remember this time period have forgotten many of the details so we all learned something from this book. We agreed that reading a graphic memoir was a good way to learn history and one group member suggested that this book would be a good choice for a high school class, especially since the main character is a child who grows to be a teenager by the end of the book. This comment led to a short discussion of some of the efforts I had read about to censor this book in junior high schools.

We understood and enjoyed Maryjane's spunkiness and defiance, she is a teenager after all, but couldn't understand the behavior of her parents. Why would they risk arrest to continue to drink alcohol and have parties or to smuggle an Iron Maiden poster to Marjane from Europe? The risk seemed to be too great. Why would they take a trip to Europe at the beginning of the revolution and return? Why not stay in Europe? Why send Marjane away to study but they stay in Iran? We thought there had to be more to the story than the author was telling us. We were entertained by Maryjane's grandmother but not willing to try her beauty regimens (you'll have to read the book to know what I'm talking about).

The influence of Islam in this book is seen mostly in Marji's loss of faith. In the beginning she wanted to be a prophet and talked regularly with God. As the Islamic revolution progresses, when people are publicly executed and women's rights are curtailed, she loses faith but obviously still loves her country. We noticed that Marjane Satrapi uses the term "God" and not "Allah" when Marji is talking to God. We thought it could just be because she was writing in English so she used the English word for God or that she didn't want to use a strange or "foreign" word for God to make her story sound more familiar to English ears.

Some of our favorite parts of the book were the humorous parts including making hats for the soldiers, getting in trouble with her teacher and in the midst of the air raid her comment about having doubts about the existence of the "maternal instinct" after a mother hands over her baby to Marji and runs during an air raid.

It was a very rewarding learning experience for those of us that finished the series. We learned quite a bit about some very different cultures which is one of the great purposes of the Humanities Council so I would say it was a success.

Elaine Hayes

## House of Stone by Anthony Shadid

*Muslim Journeys'* third bookshelf meeting took place Thursday, February 6, 2014 at Laramie County Public Library in Cheyenne. Our introduction to Anthony Shadid's *House of Stone* focused on the background of his quest to rebuild his family's ancestral home. Our group was interested in how the stories of homeplace create memory, worldview, culture, and ultimately history. We discussed as a theme throughout how story is a powerful medium for understanding the world around you because they transcend time and become part of both the teller and the listener. We spent some time on the universal belief that home, *Bayt*, is sacred, and represents everything – especially if you have lost everything. The ideas and ideologies put forth by Shadid in *House of Stone* engages everyone who has a home, and feelings about that home. Of minor interest was the roles of the townspeople in discouraging Shadid from reclaiming his property, as it does not truly belong to him. Like *Persepolis*, *House of Stone* concerns its readers with the glories and romanticism of the Ottoman Empire at its height. Lebanon, isolated after WWII from its hinterlands, and hemmed in by Israeli and Syrian threats, now only sees shadows of its former elegance. Most of our discussion focused on the present circumstances of Lebanon and creating a homeplace that speaks to one's identity and worldview.

-- Clara Keyt, Discussion Leader

Our group gathered to discuss Pulitzer prize winning journalist Anthony Shadid's book *House of Stone*. I shared biographical details about the author and together we contemplated the complex and painful history of Lebanon, a country of multiple religions that was once extremely cosmopolitan and over the last few decades tragically turned into a war zone between Israel and Hezbollah. Our group enthusiastically discussed immigrant experience, aspects of culture that were new to us and some of which were similar to some aspects of American culture (especially immigrant culture), and Shadid's larger purpose in rebuilding his ancestral house in this uncertain environment.

I will confess that I was a slow convert to this book as compared to others in the series; I found it a bit disjointed. However, though a few readers in our group also found the organization a bit piecemeal, all enjoyed it, and it certainly led to a good discussion.

At the end we watched an episode from the house-building videos Shadid made. (See YouTube *House of Stone Part 9 The End*) and if we had had more time we would have watched part of Shadid's TED talk which I recommend.

In case it's useful for others in the future, I close with my list of questions below.

### *House of Stone* questions

- What did you find most compelling about the book?
- What stood out in the italicized sections about Isber or
- the time in Oklahoma?
- Why do you think he rebuilds the house?
- Which character besides main speaker is most memorable?
- What are some aspects of Lebanese culture that are similar or dissimilar to your own experience?
- Ending a book with the house's completion would seem expected. Do you think writing the ending to such a memoir would be tricky? Does he pull it off? (Arab Spring addition feels a bit tacked on/besides the main point)

My favorite two quotations: "how being torn in two leaves someone with less than one"

"We try to return to a past that may not have existed in the first place" 178

There were divergent attitudes expressed about the book as people gathered. A few said they loved it, that it was their favorite in the series while some admitted to not having finished the book, finding it "hard going." Everyone was aware that Shadid had died soon after completing the restoration of his house, so I began by filling in with the rest of his short bio. The most telling details, we decided, were those he related himself about concerning his impetus for undertaking the restoration: "stunned by war, and shockingly, no longer young, or married, or with my daughter."

We spent some time talking about each of the three "stories" : the restoration of the house, the immigration story, and the story of Marjayoun. Shadid of course is deeply invested in all three. In discussion of the restoration, anyone who has built a house or done major renovations claims to empathize with his experiences. We appreciated his connection to the house ("bayt") and his need for that connection. However, much as he wanted to be recognized as someone with roots in Marjayoun, he finally comes to realize he will always be an outsider. We talked about the other characters and how, in some ways, different ones represented both the new and the old Marjayoun.

Most of the group especially appreciated the immigration stories. We talked about the effect of losing all sense of who a person is in the experience of immigration and of the process of reinvention. We found that many of us in the group are 3rd generation of immigrants and considered how this generation does have a kind of

longing (and perhaps the luxury) to explore the world and people left behind. We saw how, in the reconstruction project, Sadid tends to romanticize the past, and he admits it in the end: "Sometimes it's better to imagine the past than to remember it."

I know we aren't supposed to try to come to an understanding of Lebanese politics or of the Arab situation in the Mideast from this book, but it's impossible not to draw parallels. This is the third book we've discussed in the series, and, with each, we are becoming more aware of the almost hopeless chaos created by the way the whole area has been divided up (and by whom) as a result of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the two world wars. We talked about the state of living in a world of constant war, shifting alliances, and shifting borders and what it does to people.

Everyone had a lot to contribute, though the discussion felt disjointed to me, and some who had not finished the book asked to be able to keep it longer. Fortunately there are lots of pictures of the house on line, and we concluded by looking at part of the video where Sadid describes the process with pictures. -Norleen Healy

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This summer I read the books in the Muslim Journeys series and I decided to take a new direction in leading this series. The first book we were to read was *House of Stone*. I created a brief narrative on the history of Lebanon, an introduction to the structure of the book, and a more detailed history of the branches of the Shadid and Samara family noting which pages applied to the various stories of each. Finally, in response to the group asking me for several years to provide some questions for discussion, I provided a few questions for the discussion. The handout was placed in the book when the library provided *House of Stone* for check out. I think it helped as the discussion was very focused on the book.

Fifteen people attended the discussion and they loved *House of Stone*! I began by handing out maps of Lebanon, the British and French Mandates, religious groups in Lebanon, and a map of the Ottoman Empire, then showed one of Anthony Shadid's videos on the house as well as a web site, with pictures of his ancestors and the house. We began the discussion by exploring what we thought propelled Anthony to rebuild the house and then moved onto the meaning of Bayt. From there we discussed what community meant in Marjayoun in the past, present, and the prospects for a future. We discussed the people we met in the book and what threads through time, held the community together and what set them apart. The conversation included the role of architecture, traditions, food, gardens and the impact of borders. One reader commented that it must be so difficult to send children away; another mentioned that they were struck by how well the book described the way in which life goes on despite war and turmoil. Two themes we will continue to pursue.

Our next book is *Persepolis*. I included a handout which gave a brief history of Iran and some questions to ponder

as they read the book. This will be the first graphic novel any members of the group have read. All are looking forward to the series.

Katie Curtiss, Sheridan Library

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Eleven readers gathered to discuss *House of Stone*. Thanks to the humanities leader who recommended Shadid's videos of rebuilding his ancestral home in Lebanon. We opened and closed the evening with two of them. I especially recommend the last one in which Shadid discusses the changes as he walks through the finished house. Several folks had not finished the book and asked to keep it for another month. Views were mixed concerning the writing; most loved the style of writing, some found it hard to follow. The same is true of the format of the book; some arguing that it was really three books in one and disjointed (war history, family history, house reconstruction), others finding the movement back and forth from history to reconstruction an interesting way to tell the story. I provided some biographical information about the author and then we were off to an interesting and far ranging discussion. I suggested we focus our attention initially on the universal themes presented by the book (suggested in a review): memory, loss, family, and belonging. We decided that the house represented a search for Shadid's roots. This led us to a discussion of emigration and the generally agreed to view that Shadid did not feel at home anywhere and was essentially homeless. This is true although he was born in the United States. Bayt is a state of mind. He was searching not only for a home, but also for a community. We loved the characters, almost always profane, almost always smoking and drinking! We loved reading about the rituals, from drinking coffee to the courtesies of welcome. There were questions raised that really didn't have answers: why do some journalists find war addicting, why is war in Lebanon a constant, how do people live in a war situation and keep hope alive, what impact does religion have on Lebanon, is there any alternative to the dying town depicted in the book? We are glad we read the book and realize more and more that reading about people living in the midst of war/oppression helps us understand war torn regions of the world from a personal perspective. Barbara Gose

Pine Bluffs Discussion of *House of Stone* by Anthony Shadid (Muslim Journeys series)

Unfortunately there were only three people at the discussion of this book. I think this may just have been bad timing as there were several competing events happening that evening in Pine Bluffs. Fortunately all three of us had read and enjoyed the book.

After I shared a brief biography of Anthony Shadid, we started out casually discussing our reactions to the two main themes of the memoir; Shadid's retelling of the history of two branches of his Lebanese ancestry who had once lived in the old house in Marjayoun, Lebanon prior to World War II and the story of the renovation of the same home in 2006 and 2007. This is also the story of his

emotional recovery after his divorce from his first wife and his re-discovery of his Lebanese roots through the renovation of his ancestral home. The subtitle of the book is "a memoir of home, family and a lost Middle East" and that gives you a pretty good idea of what this book is about. We learned a lot about the complicated history of Lebanon and the area known as "The Levant" (approximately the current countries of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel) while reading this book. And we were all surprised that especially in a series called "Muslim Journeys" this book is primarily about Lebanese Christians. All of Shadid's family and most of his neighbors and the construction workers he employs are Christians. I previously wasn't aware that Lebanon had such a large Christian population (approximately 40%). But Shadid also discusses the relationship between Lebanese Christians and their Muslim (both Shiite and Sunni), Druze and Jewish neighbors at length and the tensions between the groups in explaining the county's bloody recent wars.

Because he jumps around between the 2006 and the stories about his ancestors (50 to 100 years ago), reading the book can be a little more challenging than our previous book "In the Country of Men" which had a more straight forward timeline. Fortunately all the family history information is in italics which is a "heads up" that you are venturing back in time. The family tree in the front of the book was helpful to keep the ancestors mentioned straight and I referred to it several times.

Another point of discussion was the frequent culture shock he encounters while trying to find a place to live, buy food and supplies and hire workers to work on the renovation. We noted that there are no women main characters in the story. A couple of wives are mentioned but no women are discussed in any detail. This is somewhat surprising since biographical information on Shadid says that he met the woman who would become his second wife during this time. The only character that stood out to me was Dr. Khairalla who was a friend, a neighbor, a master gardener and dying of cancer. In fact he might be the only Lebanese acquaintance of Shadid's who was always sympathetically portrayed.

Shadid muses on the definition of the Arabic word *byat* several times in the book, which means house and/or home. As in the English words the emphasis on the word *home* is more intimate than the word *house*, there is a more emotional connection than just to the building. It could also mean the place (area, town, country, etc.) or the family that lives in the home. In English we say this mostly as relates to royalty such as the "House of Windsor, The House of Tudor" etc. But in Arabic it can take on more of an association with the nuclear family, and a place you are at ease, and comfortable. Shadid's quest is not to just do a historical accurate reconstruction of a home but to find his home/family/byat in the endeavor.

I had found some *YouTube* videos of Anthony Shadid that was filmed during the process of the renovation of his home in Lebanon and a TV interview with his second wife Nada [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO91\\_Prl-BE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO91_Prl-BE) soon after his death on assignment in Syria from asthma

attack, and shared both with the group. The House of Stone videos are a 10 part set so I showed just the first video of the house as a near ruin (entitled *Returning Home*) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFdHEqos05I> and after the renovation was complete [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNQs0u6\\_F9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNQs0u6_F9s) (entitled *The End*). Other videos cover specific parts of the renovation, planting and harvesting in his garden, etc. It was nice to see a visual of the home because the small picture on the cover of the book wasn't enough for me.

Elaine Jones Hayes

Five of us gathered at Eastern Wyoming College on 2/23 to discuss House of Stone, by Anthony Shadid. We started the session with some pictures of the house in question I found online, and we wondered a bit why there were no pictures included in the book itself. Not that Shadid's description was not vivid, as it clearly was, but we were very curious to see some actual pictures of the house and especially the tile that he went to such great lengths to obtain. We also noted that, contrary to the name of this series, "Muslim Journeys," Shadid was not Muslim at all, but rather a sort of non-religious Orthodox Christian. All of us found this to be a very enjoyable and unique perspective on the Middle East, which is normally portrayed as monolithically Muslim. We also marveled at Shadid's descriptions of the tolerance among Muslims, Christians, and Druze people that existed for a long time under the Ottomans, before the British and French came along with their protractors and surveying tools and drew lines across the desert that never existed before.

We also had a look at the geography of the region, noting how Shadid's hometown of Marajayoun lies less than a hundred miles from Nazareth, as the crow flies, and how it's not too much farther down to Jerusalem. Current political borders, of course, as well as geography make those sorts of a journeys a good deal more challenging than hopping on some Wyoming blacktop for an easy 8-hour drive out to, say, Green River but it always seems to me a bit amazing to look at an actual map and see the proximity in which these places in the Holy Land really are to one another. We also did a quick overview of the history of Lebanon, or the Levant more generally, very, very brief, given that the region has been peopled by various civilizations for something like 12,000 years. It is true that in the case of Shadid's family, there have been far more recent immigrants to the area, and that his family was in effect only carrying on a familial tradition when many of its members emigrated to America, despite Shadid's great-grandfather's attempt to put down permanent roots via the house that gave the book its title.

We also reflected on Shadid's tragic death in the very year the book came out. We wondered what happened to the house, who lives in it now, who among the numerous relatives will ultimately inherit it, if such a thing is possible.

I'm not entirely sure that any of us quite understood Shadid's journey. In our group, we have two immigrants, one Japanese and the other English, who have lived for long periods of time away from their homelands, yet didn't

quite identify on a visceral level with Shadid's quest. For myself, I lived abroad for a number of years and can relate that ultimately the call home became overwhelming. But Shadid was a third-generation American, whose ties to his ancestral homeland were somewhat more frayed than a first-generation immigrant. It was interesting for us to note that, as in life, ultimately it didn't appear that Shadid's journey provided him with the answers he was seeking, although he did seem to be a man more at peace with himself by the end of the book than he was at the beginning. We greatly enjoyed the parts about his haggling with workers that at first seemed intransigent by American standards, but whom Shadid ultimately came to respect once he understood their logic (although we did wonder a bit why a long-time foreign correspondent wouldn't already have been somewhat more attuned to such nuances). Those of us with experience in construction projects could also appreciate the odyssey of the tiles, the difficulty of obtaining tiles that were "just right," and the joy that arrives when they are finally installed.

On the whole, this book is one of my favorites – the writing is superb, and I appreciate the sincerity of Shadid's quest. Our group as a whole was perhaps less impressed, but nonetheless appreciated the insight into a real time and place in the Middle East about which we rarely hear or get the chance to learn about. – Court Merrigan

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16 people gathered for this, our first meeting in the series, Muslim Journeys. This was the third year we had requested this series, so we were grateful to get it.

Reactions to the book varied. Some people thought it was a slog, while others found it poetic and informative. Several participants wished he had spent more time describing the town of Marjayoun as a whole, and more time developing the family relationships, and one person commented that it seemed as if he were writing an assignment. In response, we briefly discussed the differences between journalistic prose, and a journalistic perspective, and that of a fiction writer. We quickly moved to a discussion of the idea of memoir and memory, and the degree to which what we remember, or what we evoke of the past, is memory or imagination. For Shadid, of course, Marjayoun Jedeida was imagination based on transmitted memory from his ancestors, and from research.

Much of our discussion focused on the longing for home, even if that "home" is imagined or unattainable. We discussed the way the book is built on contrasts: between beauty and ugliness; peace and war; destruction and construction; foreignness and nativeness; nurturing and hostility; connection and alienation. We spent a good deal of time on the history of that region, as Shadid presents it, and made the connection between populations fleeing violence in the early twentieth century and populations from the same region fleeing it today. We spoke of the dangers of hewing so closely to our own view of how the world should be arranged (as nation states, in the European view) and imposing that view on more family

based, tribal cultures, and how that issue is at work today, causing much distress and disruption in the middle east.

As often happens with this group, participants did not revise their initial impressions, but came to a greater, or different appreciation of the book by the end of the discussion. The humanities at work. Stephen Lottridge

## **Broken Verses** by Kamila Shamsie

Our fourth book discussion at Laramie County Public Library focused Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses*, a Muslim-American novelist. The narrative is a murder mystery framed in a family drama and psychological scars of abandonment. Undoubtedly, the central theme of our hour was that a different book could have been to achieve the goal of learning more about Pakistan. Our audience tends to be more intellectually-minded, and was quite interested in having a book that tells us more about the history of Pakistan, as opposed to a fantasy novel that that could be set in any country.

We briefly discussed the psychological issues of the protagonist and the world-wide social issues of poor parenting and lack of responsibility; including impacts on children whose parents choose the political over the very personal care-giving. However, our members were most interested in learning about current events and recent history of the Middle East.

As our discussion progressed, we considered thinking of this book, not as a historical type-set for cultural Pakistan, but rather as a lens for viewing the author, and her contributions to this new movement of Middle Eastern fiction and fantasy novels.

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We began by visiting with the author virtually, watching Kamila Shamsie speak in a light interview with a Pakistani reporter, in *The News Weekly* video clip. I mentioned that she has written over 5 novels and has been compared with Forster and Austen and that I personally saw a tie to George Eliot in her novel *Burnt Shadows* because of its 60 year temporal sweep and multi-generational conflict. I also shared some of her quotations about how young Pakistani women were not encouraged to write creatively when she was growing up and told the group that even today the market for Pakistani writing in English is small in Pakistan, though it is growing. I also gave the group a sheet listing recent Pakistani literary titles.

Our in-depth discussion of *Broken Verses* looked into reactions to 9/11 and the American presence in Karachi, the tension in the main character about how to understand her mother's and the Poet's activism, the women's movement in Karachi in the 70s and 80s especially in relation to the Hudood Ordinances, and the romance between Aasmaani and Ed. We also talked about the chief critique of the book which centered around plausibility. Is the main character too old to sound this self-centered? Would the main character really fall for the

unsubstantiated hope that the Poet is still alive after his death was reported over 16 years ago? Most in the group felt they could suspend their disbelief. For me, the back and forth movement between the character's unstable thoughts and sharp self-awareness was riveting, along with the author's prose style. Though most of the group enjoyed the book, only one or two were enthusiastic about it. One person disliked it and had not finished it.

The mixed reactions led to a good discussion of the goal of this cluster of books, to promote thinking about the great variety of cultures and daily lives taking place under an Islamic framework.

In retrospect, I think I would start the series by emphasizing this aspect more fully. This particular reading list is not in itself an Islam 101 course, and I see now that sending the essay out before we met was not enough to communicate that idea. We have one more book to read, *Dreams of Trespass*, but I suspect that *Broken Verses* is regarded as less central to the them in comparison to the others. In this case I think the group wanted to know more about Karachi and about how Islamic practices influenced the inner life of the character. I will close by saying I was really impressed with the close reading skills and very thoughtful comments of all members of the group. It is a pleasure to be amongst such avid readers!

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Seven people came to discuss this, the last of four books in the Muslim Journeys series. This is an unusually small number so I'm not sure how to account for that. The weather was very cold and snowy, but also, I think this was the most difficult book to get through. The seven who did come had all read the book and were anxious to discuss it. Some "loved" the book and others said they found it somewhat confusing.

We started by trying to establish some sense of the background of the story...Pakistan's turbulent past (and present), especially relevant to this novel was the period of the late 1970s and 80's with the Bhuttos and Zia with the coups and assassinations etc. I explained what I had found about the Hudood Ordinance and why this would have motivated the protests that Aassmaani's mother and the Poet were so involved with. We found it interesting that the move by General Zia in the 1980's toward an strict Islam theocracy is similar to some of what we consider the radical groups today want (notably, of course, ISIS). It was interesting and significant to us that the characters in the book appeared to be somewhat detached about the political situation in Pakistan now and that they were only nominally Muslim and, as one person, pointed out, could have been middle class professional people in about any place. We agreed that this is not how many of us envision life in Pakistan (which made us wonder how these people envision our lives in the United States based on their media's presentation).

There were varying opinions about Aassmaani and her obsession with her mother and the Poet when they had been gone for over 14 years. We talked about what motivated her and why she was so unwilling to give up the past and accept what happened to her mother, which was

why she was so willing to believe the letters were from one of them. We agreed that she idealized her mother and the Poet and the people who surrounded them and found the world without them lacking in passion and meaning. We discussed the other characters and how they related to Aassmaani.

I asked the group if they felt, as I do, that Aassmaani's cynicism is central to the book and to her character. We many passages that allude to her conclusion that "Violence is more powerful than language," and that the only way to resist tyranny was to become it. This moved into a discussion (again) of the current state of affairs in so many of the Muslim countries.

As we were wrapping up and talking about the series as a whole, one person made the comment that this final novel was the only one where we don't get a strong sense of "place", and everyone tended to agree after kind of reviewing the other books. I love that they come up with these observations!

In the end we agreed that the series was more challenging than some, but all said they were glad to have had the opportunity to read and discuss the books. – Norleen Healy

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We had a small group of seven tonight who gathered to discuss this mystery set in Pakistan. I reiterated the way in which this series brings alive to us readers the everyday lives of ordinary people in these Muslim countries. Then I asked the group what, before they had read the novel, their impression of Pakistan was. Immediately Three Cups of Tea, building schools, and helping people in isolated, poor areas was mentioned. And then we laughed..... doubtless there is a Starbucks or a McDonalds on most every corner in Karachi! Welcome to the everyday world of upper middle class people. The discussion then moved on to the difference between the mother's time of activism and Aasmaani's life at the time of the novel. Where has the outrage, the passion, the willingness to fight for one's beliefs, gone? At this point I discussed with the group the changes President Zia made in Pakistan during the late 1970s and 1980s in terms of Islamic law, education, military rule, and drumming up support to fight against the Russians in Afghanistan. These were heady times and our main character both admires her mother and the poet and laments her lack of time with them. We moved on to talk about each of the characters, what they cared about, how they move about their world, what they want from life. Most in the group found Ed poorly defined and couldn't grasp the relationship between him and Aassmaani. We enjoyed the mystery, but were more interested in the role of religion and the sexual taboo, the place the city plays in the story, and the lack of passion on the part of the characters. Toward the end of the discussion we looked at the role of ISIS in this area of the world, in particular how ISIS has made major inroads in both Iraq and Syria. What does this mean for modern Pakistan? Oh, and I should mention that I interspersed a discussion of the formation of Pakistan and the subsequent founding of Bangladesh. In and among our various threads of discussion we also

delved into the differences between cultural Muslim views and religious Muslim views. And now we are on to our last book. Barbara Gose

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Seventeen people attended this, our third discussion in the series, Muslim Journeys.

Initial responses included some objections. The heroine spent the whole time complaining about her mother; why didn't she just get over it. I didn't learn anything from this book. She (the author) raises important issues and then drops them. These responses provided fertile ground for an engaging discussion about the differences between a novel (this book), a memoir (*Dreams of Trespass*) and a journalistic autobiographical story (*House of Stone*). We also spent a little time talking about what our expectations of a book are, and what our expectations of this series has been. Some have been hoping for an education about Islamic culture, others for an examination of political events and history in the Muslim world.

As the discussion progressed, many participants pointed out that the personal drama unfolds against the backdrop of political and historical events that influence the characters' choices and fates. We discussed the question of character as it is presented in the book. Is it immutable, or is it actually a story that we create and tell ourselves, which can then be modified? We spoke of the motivation for human action - personal, communal and cultural - and identified responses that drove action for all of the main characters. None of the main characters is as simple as it might seem at first. As is often true in all our lives, our motivations are complex and our ability to understand them all is often compromised. Many readers saw the Poet as a mythic figure, whose murder provides the terrifying backdrop for the lives of all the characters, who respond with courage or fear, or a combination of both.

We spent quite a bit of time on the issue of the relationship between one's responsibility as a parent to one's children, one's responsibility to the larger society, especially under a brutal, totalitarian political regime, and one's responsibility to one's own talents and creative capabilities. Several people brought the discussion to our own lives in the political and cultural world of the present. We spent some time observing how it is that some people are able to mobilize themselves and their talents under the worst of circumstances, and others are not. That led to a discussion of depression and its consequences for the sufferer and for those around him/her. Although we did not speak much about it directly, that raises the whole issue of compassion and love on the one hand, and impatience and judgementalness on the other, both responses being part of human nature. Toward the end, we spent some time discussing the notion of freedom and how it might be expressed, and the relation between personal freedom and cultural respect.

As before, I am not sure that the discussion changed minds, but it did add perspectives and enlighten the issues. Stephen Lottridge

## **Dreams of Trespass** by Fatima Mernissi

*Dreams of Trespass* was a memorable book with which to end our Muslim Journeys series. The reasons for maintaining gendered worlds encourage lively and interesting discussions, particularly when they are set in the near-present. As a memoir, the book stimulated a discussion among our group of different types of harems and their purposes. As a reflection of current beliefs in gendered roles, it provoked an interesting debate between second-wave and third-wave feminists.

Our group was adept at moving the narrative from a lens of viewing Morocco to situations relevant in the diverse understandings of sensuality, power, and politics. That religion was barely mentioned leaves unspoken participants' understanding that repressive activities occur within cultural constructs of understanding, rather than as a religious tenet.

Our participants, prepared with personal experiences in various Muslim cultures, intellectual understanding of women's and men's positions in societies, and knowledge of the book as reflective of political and social changes, probably could have discussed this intriguing book until midnight, but the janitor wanted to go home..... ☺ Continued discussions after the series is over, is after all, the mark of a successful program.

Clara Keyt  
Discussion Leader

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Our Laramie group met in mid-May to discuss *Dreams of Trespass* by Fatima Mernissi. I began by discussing her biography and talking about typical American associations with the harem (based on 19th century European paintings which tried to capture scenes from the Ottoman Empire) versus Mernissi's imagery of the harem. We also talked about the figure of Scheherezade.

We then discussed Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and the imagery of Eastern people as seen through the imperialist lens of some Western writers.

My point was to suggest that *Dreams of Trespass* presents such as multi-dimensional view of the women in the women's quarters that it prevents people from drawing easy and Orientalist conclusions. Obviously, in her book a harem is not a stable of concubines and girls enslaved primarily for erotic pleasure of men but a place where women are highly scrutinized. These women of all ages are somewhat under lock and key and are taught to think about religion, law and custom. On the other hand, there are many examples of women subtly or outspokenly resisting custom and of women at least taking pride and merriment in finding their own ways to create. (For instance, the scene about the pains they took to make cosmetics from scratch, despite some of their husbands objecting to the smell or look of these processes, was

quite memorable to all.) We spent time analyzing the resistance of Chama and Aunt Habiba in particular.

Our conversation was very lively and based loosely on the questions given by the Muslim Journeys series. (There is a separate set of questions available for each book.) One of the participants observed it was one of the liveliest sessions we had, despite (or maybe because of?) it being numerically smaller. I believe this book was likely one of the most satisfying and instructive on our list.

(If interested in any of the first part above, see attached slide show and feel free to use in your own Muslim Journeys series.)

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We began the discussion by trying to situate ourselves (or Morocco) by referring to the map I handed out with the book and with a brief discussion of the Ottoman Empire and how Morocco etc. came to be and then how the influences since the early 20th century lead to the references in the book to "Spanish Morocco" and "French Morocco". All of this seems relevant to the notion that the book is, in so many different ways, about transition.

Then I asked with what notion of "harem" people came to this book whereupon everyone admitted to the western idea from artists and Hollywood, so unlike the harems in this book by Fatima Mernissi.

Because I was afraid of dominating the discussion (I had a lot of things I wanted to cover!), I suggested we go around the room and let each person just say anything that particularly struck her or him (we had one male in attendance) about the book. As it was each person's comments led to discussion that really, in the end, covered a wide range of facets from the book. Among other topics, we talked about the pros and cons of the harem as described in the book, about the influence of Scheherazade which we encounter in all of the books in the Muslim Journeys series, about the many ways of rebellion Mernissi describes, the transitions we see, the values of the women and of the culture, the many illustrations of "walls" or barriers, the positive coping skills that the women teach each other (constructive outlets), and so on.

Somewhere along the discussion, I did talk about Mernissi and her educational background and other writing (mostly sociological studies based on her feminist studies pertaining to Islamic culture). I noted that the book, although referred to generally as a "memoir", is only loosely so...the basic facts about the harem that she grew up in and her mother and grandmother are biographical, but some of the other characters are creation based on many women she knew. I explained that Mernissi writes about and believes that the "harem" in the full context of the word is hardly a thing of the past; she states that she actually believes that the status of woman in Muslim countries has regressed since her grandmother's time. This led to lots of discussion and debate as did her assertion that women in our culture are victims as well of our own "harem" or control (emphasis on body image, youth, appearance).

Though this was only the second book we've discussed in the series, it's abundantly clear that what must be one purpose of the series -- to illustrate the wide scope of the word "Muslim" and the complexity of the Arab world-- is certainly being fulfilled. I have been somewhat surprised and certainly gratified by the level of engagement these books have created in our group even though I have learned to expect this from the Story readers. – Norleen Healy

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Eleven readers gathered to discuss our fifth book in the Muslim Journeys series. The discussion was lively and wide ranging. I started with a biography of the author and then opened the discussion by asking what their opinions were of harems before we read this memoir. To a person, we all thought of harems as rooms filled with scantily dressed nubile women laying around while slaves served luscious food! Of course the Moroccan harem was quite different. We compared life in the city to harem life on the farm. The discussion proceeded to talk about present day harems, or at least places where women are sequestered and the reasons for this. I suggested that the stories in the book represented archetypes of feminist action, play acting, singing, story telling, bathing, skin treatment, and more. These women, with two exceptions, dream of trespass or escape to the outside world, both for themselves and their children. Their activities promote solidarity among the harem. This is a woman's world, where the children are included until the boys come to a certain age. We commented on the lack of competition and picking on one another. The men, nominally in charge, are seldom present and seem to matter little. We proceeded to discuss feminism in Morocco today. This led to a further discussion about feminism in the Middle East in general. I mentioned the evolution from secular feminism to Islamist feminism, with the latter involving questions as to Islam teachings versus cultural concepts.

We concluded by discussing the series in general. What were we to take away from reading these five books? The consensus was that we read stories of the daily lives of people in Muslim dominated countries and that their concerns were more similar to our concerns than we might have realized. How should we live, how will our children fare, is our government doing the right thing, what of our neighbors and their needs.... these are universal issues.

We came away feeling that the political issues that dominate the news hour by hour do not tell the stories of people who live and work in these countries. I ended by discussing the subject of the so called "Muslim World," as though there is one definition of Muslim. There are many definitions of Muslim, just as there are many definitions of Christianity. We need to stop thinking in stereotypes.

This was a wonderful series to read and think about. This is my last year to lead the Riverton series, but I will be an active participant in future series. Thanks to Carol Deering for the always excellent research help through the many years we've done this together. And thanks to Riverton library manager Gloria Brodle who always writes our grants. Thank you, humanities council, for offering these series. We are a more tolerant and informed citizenry because you do. Barbara Gose (You should

ask Carol Deering to send you the “poem” she wrote for me naming nearly every book we’ve read through the years. It would be a great promotion for Reading Wyoming.)

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Eighteen people gathered to discuss *Dreams of Trespass*, the final book in our discussion of *Muslim Journeys*. After I presented some background information on Mernissi the group discussed what they knew about harems before reading the book, as well as the difference between the meaning of the word frontier in the United States and in Europe. We moved into a discussion comparing the difference between Mernissi’s rural family and the one in Fez, and then moved on to a discussion of the various frontiers in the book. All agreed that they really liked Aunt Habiba and her influence in terms of her story telling, and the importance of her words about magic and wings. Tying together the themes of frontiers and transitions we looked at the generational and historical changes Fatima’s family were experiencing, and the impact of colonialism and World War II. Several members of the group read passages from the book which they felt helped them to understand Fatima’s life experiences and family. Interestingly, although all completely understood the oppression of living in a harem, they found Fatima’s father kind and loving (though perhaps not ready to move out); and an example of generational and historic traditions and transitions. A comparison of Scheherazade in *Dreams of Trespass* with, *In the Country of Men*, and western perceptions led to a discussion of the role of female story tellers and the intellectual resources women have to meet the challenges of life. Everyone felt this was one of the most informative, interesting and important series of discussions they have participated in and all are grateful to the WCH for sponsoring this series.

Katie Curtiss

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Pine Bluffs discussion of *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* by Fatima Mernissi in the *Muslim Journeys* series:

Thirteen regulars gathered at the Pine Bluffs library to discuss our third book in the *Muslim Journeys* series. I started off the discussion by asking “Did anything surprise you about this book?” Most of the discussion participants mentioned that the harem in this memoir was much different than how we have always thought of a harem. We were surprised that neither Fatima’s father nor her uncle had multiple wives. Mernissi explains that the word ‘harem’ refers to the place where the female members of an extended family (and children of both sexes) traditionally live together and does not necessarily mean that harem women are multiple wives, sexual slaves and concubines of the adult male members of the household as in our vision of a harem in the west. Their family harem in 1940’s Morocco consisted of Mernissi’s mother, her aunt, grandmothers, and unmarried, divorced or widowed aunts and female cousins, and at least one former slave woman. The household consisted of shared space for eating and family relaxing, areas restricted to just women and areas restricted to just men. It was ‘haram’ or forbidden for men or women to enter areas restricted to the opposite sex. Thus the word ‘harem’ comes from the

word ‘haram’. We were also surprised to read of the emphasis on beauty in a group of women who kept themselves veiled and covered in public.

We also noted how much the women rebelled against this system and violated the rules. They frequently listened to the radio which was located in the men’s area when the men were away, occasionally ‘escaped’ to the outside world without a male escort and regularly went out on to the rooftop area which was supposedly forbidden to them. A couple of group members said that the men had to know about these and other violations because they were aware of them happening when they were young boys and must have known they were still happening but turned a blind eye to the ‘violations’. Mernissi’s mother was very interested in women’s rights and fought for the right to educate her daughter and won that right for Fatima and the rest of the girls in the household. Mernissi benefited from this education to become a very successful sociologist and author.

There was also a clear difference between their life in the city of Fez and their life in the country. In the city they mainly had to stay within the walls of harem within the family compound. But in the country they rode horse, climbed trees and even invented outdoor games to make their household chores more fun such as the washing of the dishes and pots and pans in the river, which allowed the harem women to get wet, swim and play. Some of the stories of life were quite entertaining such as the negotiations over what to eat for every meal. Since every person in the family had to agree on the menu and if they wanted to eat something else they must bring enough of that food for everyone, this made every meal a bit of a buffet experience. The complications of living in such a large extended household were very clear; as one group member said; “Can you imagine having to live with your mean mother-in-law and about a half dozen other women from your husband’s family?”

We also discussed the influence of the stories in *One Thousand and One Nights* on Arab culture, the change in the title from “*The Harem Within*” with an internal focus to “*Dreams of Trespass*” which puts the focus on the desire to leave the harem. Near the end of the book Mernissi speculates on the misunderstandings between men and women and whether that is caused or increased with the physical division between the sexes that go on to varying extent in all cultures.

I believe the group enjoyed this well written memoir, and most were able to finish it. It was refreshing to read about another culture from a young girl’s point of view after two books written by Arab men. Next month we have a completely new experience when we discuss the graphic novel *Persepolis*.

Elaine Jones Hayes

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Tongue River Library, October 12, 2015

14 people gathered to discuss this third book in our *Muslim Journeys* series. I began the discussion by asking them what their preconceptions of a “harem” were and, of course, they alluded to the images we have of a Sultan

reclining on a couch with semi-nude beauties dancing around him. We agreed that the book quickly took care of that image with Mernissi's definition of "harem" as being closer to "family" and the implications of tradition and codes there-in. We had a broad ranging discussion on the many issues the book evokes including certainly the role of women in the Muslim world. Each of the books in the series gives us another view and way to talk about Muslim women and almost always debunks the stereotype sometimes held in the Western world. Mernissi emphasizes through the story of the women in the harem the constructive outlets the women used to channel their oppressiveness: finding an inner life and through the metaphor about wings ("All women have invisible wings").

We looked at power issues from the perspective of both sexes in the harem and the pros and cons of that way of life. It was clear that many forces, both from within and without were creating tensions in the culture. The book is all about transitions and I explained how Mernissi is both proud and defensive about the Muslim culture she represents and concerned about the "regression" she has seen from the advances made in the 60s and 70s to the latter years. With each of the books in the series, we've talked about the end of the Ottoman Empire and how the different countries have emerged with many different variances, disallowing us to make assumptions of one "Muslim" country based on another.

Interestingly, this group was a bit reluctant about taking on this series and with each book they've remarked on how much they're enjoying the books and learning from them. In ending I gave them some background and a map pertaining to our final book, *The Country of Men*, which is a more somber look at a Muslim country in disarray. Norleen Healy.

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Fifteen people gathered for this discussion.

We began by discussing the connection between the ideas of trespass and frontier or boundary/limit (hudud). For the women in the harem in Fez, their enclosure in the house provided both safety and restriction. The idea of a sacred boundary had become a social and political one. We had a long and wide-ranging discussion of the ways that boundaries exist in our own lives, both externally imposed boundaries and ones we impose on ourselves. We discussed both the positive and negative effects of these boundaries. We also discussed the idea of "difference" as a cause of boundaries and, sometimes, of conflict.

Aunt Habiba's idea of dreams as a form of trespass, leading to freedom drew our attention. Many participants connected that with Fatima's mother's assertion that skill with words and story-telling is what would set Fatima free and give her power. This led to an examination of the role of the stories in *A Thousand and One Nights*, with their themes of flying away (freedom) and female solidarity, both of which are central to the harem in Fez.

Most of us learned much about the concept of the harem, with its wide variety of forms. On the farm where Yasmina lived, there are multiple co-wives, but they enjoy a good deal of freedom to move about the land and appreciate nature, while the harem in Fez is more of an extended family, monogamous, but with severe restrictions on the movement and activities of the female members.

We spent some time on the idea of sexual politics. A couple of the participants found the idea that 9-year-old Fatima would have abandoned her playmate, Samir, for the sake of the female beauty treatments of the women. Others thought such a decision was typical of a girl that age. From that disagreement, we moved to the importance of the beauty treatments as a political statement. As Aunt Habiba says, the skin must be a source of power since the imams forbid us to show it. This led to a more general discussion of the ways in which one can make a strength of restrictions, which led to an even more general discussion of the human impulse to create divisions with the assumption that on side is better than the other. The conclusion of the book reinforces this there, with the idea that when there is a divide of any kind, the one who cannot get out, i.e. trespass across the dividing line, is the powerless one.

Our discussion was truncated (another frontier/boundary) by the fact that we had been told that our room was available for only an hour and a half. But, as did the women in the harem, we made full use of the limited circumstances and came away exhilarated by our connections. Stephen S. Lottridge