

A CURIOUS LAND: STORIES FROM HOME

By Susan Muaddi Darraj

Reader's Guide

About the Book

A CURIOUS LAND, Susan Muaddi Darraj's short story collection about the inhabitants of a Palestinian West Bank village, Tel al-Hilou, spans generations and continents to explore ideas of memory, belonging, connection, and, ultimately, the deepest and richest meaning of home. ***A CURIOUS LAND*** gives voice to the experiences of Palestinians in the last century.

“The poignant sense of time and place so beautifully captured in ***A CURIOUS LAND*** makes it impossible for readers to forget these carefully interlinked stories, which vividly depict the lives of the inhabitants of Tel al-Hilou, a Palestinian village in the West Bank. Susan Muaddi Darraj's well-crafted characters and her brilliant attention to the details of their individual and collective experiences of love, occupation, immigration, and loss over the span of several decades creates an immensely powerful, intimate, and complex portrait of Palestinian lives, both at home and in the diaspora.”—Carol Fadda-Conrey, Associate Professor of English, Syracuse University

1. The book's cover depicts a gold bracelet made of Turkish liras; where does this bracelet make an appearance in the story? What symbolism does it have to the characters' lives and to the structure of the book, which is a collection of linked stories?
2. Reviewers have remarked that this book is about “strong women.” Who are some of the women in this story collection, and in what ways do they show strength? Are they fighting against political forces, family members, social pressures, or a combination of all of these?

3. Many characters suffer tragedies that are eclipsed by national ones. (For example, Salma loses the love of her life in the King David Hotel bombing, but she cannot tell anyone why she suffers. Mounir loses his wife in childbirth shortly before the 1967 war, but everyone's mind is on the inevitable war that is brewing.) How does this strategy -- placing personal loss beside national ones -- humanize the Palestinian experience?
4. In what ways has Radwan's fatal error (discussed in both "Abu Sufayan" and "The Fall") had negative consequences on his life?
5. Most portrayals of Palestinians since the 1970s -- in the United States -- have been negative, focusing on political actors and events. How do the characters in *A Curious Land* challenge that portrayal?
6. Which character were you happy to see reappear in a different story?
7. What are your reactions to the way in which Miss Salma has chosen to live the rest of her life (unmarried, working with refugees, writing a village history book)? How has she made life better for other people in Tel al-Hilou?
8. The author opens the book with a quote from WEB DuBois' book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which he describes the deep South as "a curious land," one that is filled with untold stories and tragedies. Do you see similarities between the oppression of Palestinians and the that of other groups around the world?
9. How is Adlah being torn between her homes in Palestine and New York? How is this problem complicated by her inability to have a baby?
10. These stories are primarily love stories -- love for another person, for one's family, for one's country. Which love stories in this book seem especially brave?

11. Amira gives up her calling to be a nun to help Munir raise his large family. Why does her family react so strongly? Is she satisfied with her decision later in life?
 12. While politics stays in the background of most of these stories, where do you see glimpses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Where do you see politics cause the Palestinians hardship in their daily lives?
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About the Author

Susan Muaddi Darraj's stories, essays, and reviews have appeared in *New York Stories*, *Orchid Literary Review*, *Banipal*, *Mizna*, *al-Jadid*, and several anthologies. Her previous short story collection, *The Inheritance of Exile*, was honored by the U.S. State Department's Arabic Book Program. She is a recipient of two Individual Artist Awards from the Maryland State Arts Council. A Philadelphia native, she currently lives in Baltimore.

An interview with the author is available at
<http://www.umass.edu/umpress/title/curious-land>

Visit the author's website at www.SusanMuaddiDarraj.com.