

## Conversation with Susan Muaddi Darraj

**Natasha Tynes:** In this beautiful collection, all of your stories revolve around the imaginary Palestinian village of Tel el Hilou. What was the main inspiration for this village? What influenced you to build this world?

**Susan Muaddi Darraj:** I'm so glad you enjoyed the book! I'd been to Palestine many times as a child and young adult, and I also have spent years reading about historical Palestine. History is one of my passions. I "built" Tel al-Hilou as a model in my mind of the elements you see in every small community—the family dynamics, the gossip, the leaders (both genuine and corrupt), the love stories, and more. The Palestinian people have been under military occupation for over sixty years, and there are unique stresses on that community that I also tried to describe in this book.

One of the most interesting (and sad) aspects of the Israeli occupation is how much it has changed the physical landscape of the West Bank and Gaza—most villages are being crowded out by Israeli settlements. The settlements are illegal, of course, but they're not really "settlements," which makes you think of a small camp—they are cities, massive cities, that are heavily guarded and connected to one another by Israeli-only roads. I tried to show this aspect of the West Bank's changing landscape in the book. Tel al-Hilou, an imaginary town, is being smothered by a growing nearby settlement.

There's a personal connection here, too, to the stories, at least to the first one. The first story of the book is "The Journey Home," which is about a Bedouin girl who finds a half-dead man who is an escapee from the Turkish army. The story is set in 1916 during WWI, and there's some family history here: Many Palestinian men were conscripted into the Turkish army; my grandfather was one of them. He actually did escape and walked from Damascus back to his West Bank village, which took him several days. It's amazing to me, the lives that people led in the last century, and I fictionalized this one, imagining what could have happened to him during that journey home.

**NT:** The Christian identity of the Palestinian residents of Tel Hilou was dominant in most of your stories. Why did you feel that you needed to emphasize their religion?

**SMD:** Tel al-Hilou is a village of both Christians and Muslims, but most of my stories take place in the Christian neighborhood. My own family is Christian, so perhaps I just feel more comfortable representing that part of the Palestinian demographic. Most people probably don't realize that Palestinians are quite diverse (for example, about 15-20% of Palestinians are Christians). When I give readings from the book, many people comment to me that they never realized how diverse the Palestinian population is, but of course it was the crossroads of the world for centuries.

**NT:** There is a lot of detail and historical material in your stories. Can you tell us a bit about your research process? Did you have to travel to the West Bank to conduct your research, or was most of it conducted remotely?

**SMD:** I've been in the West Bank and even Gaza in the past, but a lot of my research was conducted using books (both history books and memoirs) and photographic images. The focus is the characters themselves, of course, but I wanted to be sure the history and the setting were just right, because the book covers the people of Tel al-Hilou over the course of a century, from WWI to the present time. I genuinely love historical research, and I enjoyed the process of making sure that it served as a useful backdrop in this book. You have to be careful of course as you do research, because you have to ask yourself, "Who is writing this? Does s/he have a vested interest in depicting historical events in a particular way? Does s/he bring any biases to the work?"

But the research was amazing. One story, "The Pillar of the Orthodox Church," is set during the time of the bombing of the King David hotel in Jerusalem, so I had to look up documents of what the hotel looked like, what kind of people worked there, stayed there as guests, etc. Fascinating stuff.

**NT:** Were any of the stories in this collection inspired by real-life events?

**SMD:** As I said, my grandfather was almost 30 years old during WWI, when the Ottoman Turks began conscripting Palestinian men into their army. He was kidnapped from his West Bank village and marched to Damascus, where he somehow escaped and walked the whole distance back to Palestine. I've been hearing that story since I was a child, and when I did some research, I found that yes, indeed, many Palestinian men and boys were stolen from their homes and forced into the Ottoman military. So the opening story, "The Journey Home," is my attempt to fictionalize what may have happened to him as he struggled to get home after escaping.

The last story, "Christmas in Palestine," features a main character who is struggling with infertility—something I struggled with as well. So that story is pretty personal in terms of the individual character, although all the other events are fictional.

**NT:** There was a big gap between the publication of your first collection *The Inheritance of Exile* and *A Curious Land*. What's the reason for this gap?

**SMD:** Three wonderful children! I teach full-time, and my children were born between 2006 and 2009, so *A Curious Land* was simmering in my mind as I struggled in the trenches of being a working mother. I've been reading a lot lately about parents who write, and the unique challenges we face—there is a premium now, in our lives, on stretches of uninterrupted time.

**NT:** What about reading time? Are you able to make time for reading?

**SMD:** There is also so much less time to read, which is important for replenishing your creativity. I am remorseful now as I think about my 20s and how much "free time" I used to enjoy! The good thing is that my husband has always been so supportive of my writing, so he help me to try to protect some of my time.

**NT:** What's the last book you read?

**SMD:** I like Tracy Chevalier's novels, because of the research she infuses. And I'm a huge fan of Rohinton Mistry, so I'm reading his novel *Such a Long Journey* right now. It's just that I can't sit with a book for the whole weekend like I used to, start it on Friday and finish it Sunday night. The weekends are not mine anymore, and that's ok, but now it just takes me longer to read a book.

**NT:** Both of your books are a collection of short stories? Why do you prefer this format? Any plans for a novel in the future?

**SMD:** I am working on a novel now, but I think that the format of short stories was the result of my limited time. I can work on a short story for six to eight weeks and feel that it is complete, whereas a novel would require much more time and focused energy. Linking them together, however, is something I love doing because that makes the stories in both of my books feel like novels.

**NT:** Can you tell us a bit about your writing process? What's your writing routine like?

**SMD:** I am an early bird—I am up at 5 am when the house is quiet and I work until 7 am, when I first hear the children wake. Then it's a flurry—make breakfast, pack lunches, go to work, etc. Therefore 5-7 am is the time I claim for myself; sometimes I write, sometimes I read, sometimes I get sucked into social media. Whatever—I don't have a rigid “must write 1,000 words a day” because then I feel bad if I don't meet that goal.

**NT:** We writers are notoriously tough on ourselves.

**SMD:** Yes, we are. We shouldn't be, because most of us are usually working another job that “pays the bills,” and so time is scarce.

So, I guess you could say I read a lot and then I write in bursts. I also have belonged to a writer's group for several years now. We are five women who all write fiction, and we meet once a month, and every one of us submits work to be reviewed every month. They are a blessing, because every month I have a deadline to meet, and they have always given me wonderful feedback on my work. Lalita Noronha, Carla DuPree, Rosalia Scalia, and Andria Cole. We call ourselves a circle of sister writers.

**NT:** Who are the authors that influenced you the most?

**SMD:** I am a big fan of Indian Anglophone novelists, like Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance* is the best novel, hands-down, that I have ever read) and Jhumpa Lahiri and others. I also like historical novelists like Tracy Chevalier, and writers who write about being an ethnic in America without making that the whole story, if that makes sense

Gish Jen is one writer I love. Of course, I always read every book by Arab-American writers that is published: some of my favorite Arab American writers include Rabih Alameddine, Diana Abu Jaber, Laila Lalami, and Randa Jarrar. Again, because I enjoy history, I also read a biographies and history books; just read Manning Marable's biography of Malcolm X, which was quite good.

**NT:** Can we talk about what you mean by writers who don't make ethnicity the whole story?

**SMD:** Well, the story itself has to be solid on its own. The character has to be dynamic and someone the reader latches onto, and if this character is solely defined by his or her identity crisis. What else is happening in the characters life and world? She has to be three dimensional.

**NT:** How do you assess the status of the Arab-American literature? Any new and upcoming Arab-American authors we need to keep an eye on?

**SMD:** I'm very excited about how quickly the genre of Arab-American literature is growing. Among poets, I enjoy the work of Phil Metres, Fady Joudah, Hayan Charara, Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhran. We have amazing essayists and novelists as well, such as those mentioned above. Randa Jarrar, who has a new short story collection coming out. Almost all these writers have new books coming out. So many wonderful writers, which is heartening, because this is a dismal time in the Middle East. It's also a frightening time to Arab in the United States.

But writers are still producing exciting work, and the body of critical work of Arab American literature is also growing: check out new books analyzing this genre by Carol Fadda-Conrey and Steven Salaita. I'm a board member of Radius of Arab American Writers (RAWI), the major association of Arab American artists and writers, which is doing amazing work: there's another conference this summer in Minneapolis, and RAWI is co-sponsoring, along with the University of Arkansas Press, a poetry prize in honor of Etel Adnan, a wonderful novelist and poet.

Arab Americans have been writing for decades, but our voice is crystallizing now.

*Natasha Tynes is a writer based in the Washington, DC, area. Her fiction and non-fiction work has appeared in the Washington Post, the Huffington Post, Esquire magazine, Fjords Review, among others. Tynes worked as a journalist in the U.S. and the Middle East during the past 15 years. She is currently working on her first novel.*