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Ethnic bias is no longer an option

Diane Scharper | Feb. 12, 2010

Monica Ali (AFP DDP/Sebastian Willnow/Germany Out)

Facing the challenge of recommending five women writers who can provide us with salutary insights into ourselves as we live in a world full of international tensions, I selected five who assure us we don?t have the option of ethnic bias.

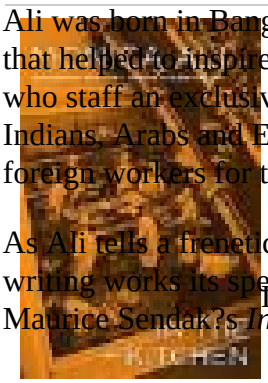
The most recent books by Alia Malek, Monica Ali, Marina Nemat, Jhumpa Lahiri and Jehan Sadat -- biography, autobiography and autobiographical fiction -- search inside the lives of immigrants to the United States and Europe from the Middle East, India and Bangladesh. Providing a fresh take on everything from raising children to living a good life, these books are authentic, engaging and well written.

In addition, these authors focus on people, places and circumstances that play important roles on the world stage. As such, their books are high on the list of required reading.

In *A Country Called Amreeka*, Malek offers vignettes about 10 Arab Americans living in the United States. She believes that Americans -- especially post 9/11 -- know little about their Middle Eastern neighbors and explains that most of the 3.5 million Arab Americans are not Muslims. Most Muslims are not Arabs. Islam teaches that killing is wrong and preaches the Golden Rule.

The daughter of Syrian immigrants and a civil rights lawyer, Malek realized that immigrants? rights would be better served if they were given a name and a voice, something that she does admirably in this book. It includes the football player who faces racial profiling in Birmingham, Ala.; the homemaker in Baltimore who learns that her family in Palestine is being terrorized by Israeli invaders in the Six-Day War; the pastor of the Maronite cathedral in New York who worries about his flock as he watches the fall of the World Trade Center; and the Arab Marine who is torn between his brother Marines and the Iraqi people who raised him as a child.

A COUNTRY CALLED AMREEKA: ARAB ROOTS, AMERICAN STORIES
By Alia Malek
Published by Free Press, $25



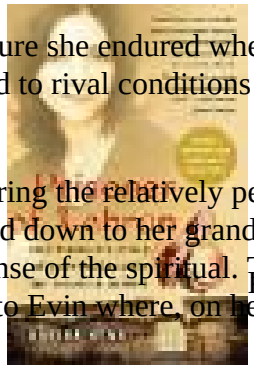
IN THE KITCHEN

By Monica Ali

Published by Scribner, $26.95

Ali was born in Bangladesh and raised in London, where she grew up feeling like an outsider, a circumstance that helped to inspire her first novel, *Brick Lane*. Ali peoples her second novel, *In the Kitchen*, with immigrants who staff an exclusive London restaurant and who lead troubled lives. The financial difficulties of Africans, Indians, Arabs and Eastern Europeans help to create the circumstances of the plot, while many English blame foreign workers for the country?s economic problems.

As Ali tells a frenetic story about immigrants living in post-9/11 London where nothing is what it seems, her writing works its spell. She moves the story with brilliant bursts of activity that read like an adult version of Maurice Sendak?s *In the Night Kitchen*.



PRISONER OF TEHRAN:

ONE WOMAN?S STORY OF SURVIVAL INSIDE AN IRANIAN PRISON

By Marina Nemat

Published by Free Press, $14

Nemat?s memoir, *Prisoner of Tehran*, describes the brutal torture she endured when she was 16 years old and wrongfully jailed in Iran?s notorious Evin Prison, which is said to rival conditions in the Bastille during the French Revolution.

Born in 1965, Nemat spent her early years living in Tehran during the relatively peaceful reign of Shah Pahlavi. Nemat?s Russian grandmother lived with the family and passed down to her granddaughter a love for the Russian language, the Russian Orthodox faith, and a strong sense of the spiritual. The last two play a part in this memoir as they helped to sustain Nemat, who took her rosary to Evin where, on her knees and unabashedly, she prayed the Hail Mary.

Now living in Canada, Nemat heard of many others (including several Americans) who had also been tortured in Evin and decided to dredge up her horrific experience in the hope of calling attention to the deplorable lot of other Iranian prisoners.

ACCUSTOMED EARTH

By Jhumpa Lahiri

Published by Vintage, $15

Lahiri, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her debut collection of stories (*The Interpreter of Maladies*), was raised in the United States by Bengali parents. She knows firsthand how difficult it is to become assimilated in America, which, as she sees it, values material things over family, as opposed to her household, which held the family sacred. That theme shapes the eight stories of *Unaccustomed Earth*, in which the characters are torn between two worlds.

With Bengali names, dark hair and eyes, they never fit in with their schoolmates. They are embarrassed by their parents, who, despite their professional status as doctors and professors, speak with heavy accents, wear traditional Indian clothing, and cook Bengali dishes. Lahiri studies the ties that bind and comes up with lessons learned -- at a steep price.

Sadat says she wrote her book, *My Hope for Peace*, to set the record straight, especially at the start of Barack Obama?s presidency. ?That Barack Obama was ?smeared? by allegations he was a Muslim spoke volumes,? she says. A memoir laced with history, her book doesn?t just offer practical advice for pursuing Mideast peace, it also provides an engaging and informative look into the life of a woman who has played a major role on the world stage.

MY HOPE FOR PEACE
By Jehan Sadat
Published by Free Press, $25

Widow of Anwar Sadat, the assassinated former president of Egypt, Jehan Sadat is a scholar and an activist for humanitarian causes. She lives in Egypt and in the United States, where she witnesses firsthand common misperceptions about Muslims. As a senior fellow with the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland in College Park and a recipient of more than 30 honorary doctorates, she?s an expert when it comes to relations between the West and the Arab world.

Muslims are capable of being patriotic and religious without being terrorists, she says. In Arabic, the word for peace, *salam*, and the word *Islam* come from the same etymology. Yet some Americans post-9/11 have increasingly viewed Muslims as terrorists and Islam as a religion of violent jihadists. Suicide bombers are anathema to Islam, which teaches its followers to value life and preaches the sanctity of the family -- not just the nuclear unit, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives.

Ultimately, Sadat says, Muslims, like Christians and Jews, believe that we must treat others as we wish to be treated. Sadat, whose father was Muslim and whose mother was Christian, argues there?s more that unites us than divides us. This, if nothing else, is the crux of her message. The point is well-taken. It applies to all of these compelling books.

[Diane Scharper, a professor at Towson University in Maryland, coedited *Reading Lips and Other Ways to Overcome a Disability*, an anthology of winners of the Helen Keller International Memoir Competition.]

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