

What to Read Next?

I REMEMBER BEIRUT

by Zeina Abirached
(Graphic Universe, 2014)

Born in 1981, Abirached grew up in Beirut during the Civil War that divided the city streets. In her graphic novel, *I Remember Beirut*, we follow her past cars riddled with bullet holes, into taxi cabs that travel where buses refuse to go, and on outings to collect shrapnel from the sidewalk. With striking black-and-white artwork, Abirached recalls the details of ordinary life in Beirut during Lebanon's war.

THE BULLET COLLECTION

by Patricia Sarrafian Ward
(Graywolf Press, 2003)

Marianna watches her older sister Alaine collect the detritus of war from around Beirut—bullets, shrapnel, grenades, a gas mask. These objects, some taken from dead bodies, catalogue Alaine's retreat into a dangerous depression. In lyrical, dreamlike prose, Patricia Sarrafian Ward mines both the stunning landscape of Beirut and the pure, defiant landscape of a child's heart, and shows how war leaves its indelible scars on both.

THE WOMAN UPSTAIRS

by Claire Messud
(Alfred Knopf, 2013)

Nora Eldridge is a reliable, but unremarkable, friend and neighbor, always on the fringe of other people's achievements. But the arrival of the Shahid family – Skandar, a Lebanese scholar, glamorous Sirena, an Italian artist, and their son, Reza – draws her into a complex and exciting new world. Nora's happiness pushes her beyond her boundaries, until Sirena's careless ambition leads to a shattering betrayal.

2015

ARAB AMERICAN **BOOK AWARD**

The Arab American Book Award is a literary program created to honor books written by and about Arab Americans. The program, managed by the Russell J. Ebeid Library & Resource Center at the Arab American National Museum, generates greater awareness of Arab American scholarship and writing through an annual award competition and educational outreach. Learn more about past and present winners at arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward.

The goal of the Reading & Discussion Guide project is to increase the audience for Arab American literature and stimulate discussion about the winning books' themes and topics.

*This project has been made possible by
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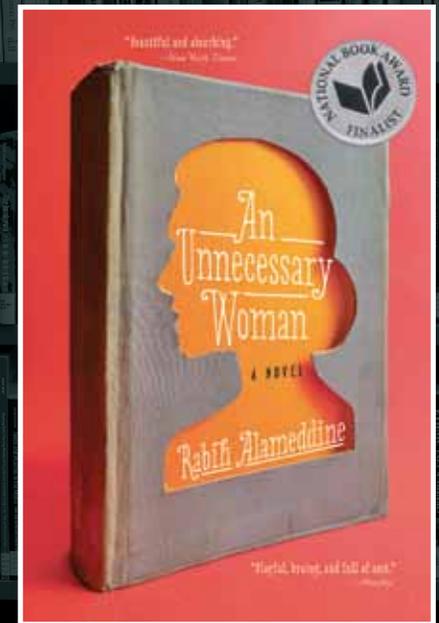
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2015

ARAB AMERICAN **BOOK AWARD**

Fiction Award Winner

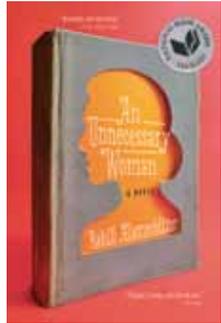


READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE



2015
ARAB AMERICAN
BOOK AWARD

Fiction Award Winner



**An
Unnecessary
Woman**

by Rabih Alameddine
Grove Press

SUMMARY

A slightly neurotic, yet lovable, recluse of incredible wit, Aaliya Saleh has never led a conventional life. Born in Lebanon in the late 1930s, Aaliya was a childless divorcee by the age of 20 who chose to spend the rest of her life living alone in her oversized Beirut flat, disconnected from family and neighbors. Yet, Aaliya is not completely alone. She has her books and she has Beirut. Now in her 70s, Aaliya comfortably spends her days translating works of literature into Arabic – translations that no one else ever reads. One translation per year, every year for the past five decades until one day an event occurs that threatens to shatter her calm and quiet existence.

In this portrait of a reclusive woman's late-life crisis, readers follow Aaliya's digressive mind as it ricochets across visions of past and present Beirut. Colorful musings on literature, philosophy, and art are invaded by memories of the Lebanese Civil War and Aaliya's own past as she attempts to come to terms with the life she's chosen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Throughout the novel, Aaliya constantly refers to and quotes a vast array of authors, writers, books, sayings, and poems. What role do these references play in the novel?
2. What do literature, art, and music provide Aaliya that human relationships do not?
3. What role does Ahmad play in Aaliya's life? How does he compare to the other men in her life, including her former husband, half-brother, and Hannah's lieutenant?
4. Despite Aaliya and her mother's complicated, if not cold, relationship, Aaliya is deeply troubled by her mother's unusual behavior the day she comes to Aaliya's apartment with her brother. Why does her mother's behavior trouble Aaliya? In what ways does it affect her?
5. How does Aaliya relate to the writers whose work she reads and translates? How does this compare to the way she relates to the individuals she encounters in her own life?
6. How does Aaliya feel about the use of epiphanies in contemporary literature? Is there an epiphany in *An Unnecessary Woman*?

About The Author



RABIH ALAMEDDINE is a writer and painter. He is the author of the novels *Koolaid's* (Picador, 1998); *I, The Divine* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001); and *The Hakawati* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), and the short-story collection, *The Perv* (Picador, 1999). His most recent work,

An Unnecessary Woman, was awarded the 2014 California Book Awards Gold Medal for fiction and was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He is the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship and currently divides his time between San Francisco and Beirut. You can follow him on Twitter @rabihalameddine

Did You Know?

Aaliya mentions many novelists, poets, and translators throughout the book. For instance:

FERNANDO PESSOA (1888-1935):

Aaliya's most beloved writer. Born in Portugal in 1888, Pessoa was a prolific poet, writer, translator and literary critic. Through the course of his career, Pessoa adopted over seventy-five heteronyms, including Álvaro de Campos – one of Aaliya's favorites – whose persona was that of an adventurous naval engineer who traveled across Ireland, England, and through the Suez Canal.

I am nothing.

I'll always be nothing.

I can't even wish to be anything.

Aside from that, within me I have all the dreams of the world.

- Álvaro de Campos (as quoted by Aaliya)