

Defrosting Lebanese Architecture

The German philosopher, Schelling, likened architecture to frozen music. A building, from its façade to the building materials used, is as much a snapshot of an era as any symphony or concerto.

Robert Saliba's work, "Beirut 1920-1940: Domestic Architecture between Tradition and Modernity," investigates the metamorphosis of Beirut from the neo-Islamic Ottoman of the late 19th century to the rapid urban expansion and face-lifting under the French mandate. He concentrates on the buildings and streets that have survived not only the intervening years but the destruction brought on by war in the first place, and the subsequent peace under Solidere. Indeed, only a few years back, when the plans for the city center were front-page issues, this book would have been viewed as highly topical. As it is, it falls instead in the classical realm, in the sense that there is a timeless quality about the book in the way baroque music can still enchant: a generation from now, one should be able to pick up this book with as much delight.

Topicality is neither necessary nor, in fact, the stated objective. In the preface, Saliba explains that the aim is to "raise consciousness about an endangered heritage." He does so admirably, aided by a healthy number of full-color photographs, tables and illustrations, leading his reader from the historical background to the aesthetic evolution of the infant republic of Lebanon.

The work is divided into three sections: the driving force in architecture, with an impetus on the historical, technological and cultural variables; building façades, with case studies from verandah designs to iron and concrete balustrades; and, finally, an architectural survey of sample buildings replete with plans and elevations.

The one problem with this book is an apparent hesitation as to the destined readership. Saliba's work is not "just another book dealing with nostalgia and memory," writes Assem Salaam, president of the Order of Engineers and Architects. "It is founded on academic research and devoted passion, and is intended to reach the professionals as well as the general public."

Unfortunately, it is precisely in its attempt to appease two masters that the book ends up fully satisfying neither. The academic research is evidently thorough and, while the methodology is rationally set out, there is a certain scientific absence in the text. In the chapter on building technology, for instance, a purely historical approach is adopted to explain the evolution of structures from sandstone to cement, with tables of the growing consumption of cement for the period. However, the need for this change in material, in the strict engineering sense of tensile stresses and strains, is amiss. This is a shortcoming which the professional architect, being both artist and scientist, will immediately spot.

With reference to the general public, the devoted passion that went into the book is apparent more for the wonderful pictures than the text itself. Saliba's style is precise and fluent - but passionate it is not.

One reads of the rise in urban bourgeoisie being the result of "the massive migration of Maronites ... and Greek Orthodox ... following the 1845, 1850 and, mainly 1860 sectarian upheavals." Perhaps given the thorny nature of his topic, Saliba has no leeway to do better. However, at times it can read like the nutritional information on cereal packets: informative but otherwise bland.

Yet this should not detract from the merit of this book. Expertly published by the Order of Engineers and Architects, Saliba has succeeded in portraying and explaining the rich eclecticism that is Lebanese architecture of the mandate years. Furthermore, he has done so with the courage of a maestro conducting Schubert's forgotten symphony.

Collection of Poems Boasts Little Mastery

In the Master Musician, a collection of poems by Hassan Zein, the title promises well: we scent a reflective account ahead, of sunlight gently tapping on boulders, or the singing of tree trunks crusted with ice. Yet seldom have expectations been more systematically frustrated.

Zein, who studied tourism in Canada and is now a professor of tourism at the Lebanese University, has drawn a pot-pourri from his ruminations on life that terrifies with its emptiness even more than with its all-pervasive ennui.

There are a total of 37 poems, four of them in Arabic and the rest in English, with titles - grand, but equally deceptive - like Planet Nora, Of a Sleeping Person, and Satan Speaks. There is, rather bizarrely, a glossary of English terms with definitions from abrupt to wretched and where, thanks to a misprint, fright is defined as a "sudden or extreme pear."

We are fed Zein's foggy thoughts about life and love, and eye the dog-eared texts, adrift in a world where literature means Keynesian models of surplus value - for Zein has a materialistic streak. Images are greasy, words are sloppy, the emotional and spiritual dimension has been excised from life. Which is an overwhelming shame for - and here is the clinch - it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

Hassan Zein is an affable, bright, and hard-working man. He is also forthright and readily admits that his heart is in the science and mechanics of tourism, rather than in the art and craft of words - which begs the inevitable question as to his reason for publishing a collection of poems at a personal cost of around \$10,000.

He is a dab hand at teaching mnemonic aids, and should stick to what he does best. Zein has discovered and perfected a technique to help his students at the Lebanese University come to grips with geography so that, for instance, the Australian coastline between Darwin and Perth is rendered as an easily-remembered phrase, "Meet me at Darling's Bar." His course is popular with his undergraduates, whose numbers have grown from 130 to 400 in the two years he's been at the faculty. It is therefore fair to say that a book on Zein's teaching methods would not only have proved more acceptable, but considerably more thought-provoking and amusing.

The one novelty in the book is in the presentation: facing each poem is an image from around the world with an accompanying short text, snapshots from the piercing gaze of a wise Indian Sadhu to the majestic ruins of the Angkor Temple in Kampuchea.

A poet might well have adopted Zein's format and put it to stunning effect, interspersing lyricism with achingly harmonious vignettes of natural beauty: dew on the morning leaves, the fragrance of chrysanthemums, moonlight among trees. A thunderous symphony of the spheres to a maestro. And so it is unfortunate that, in Zein's work, the effect fizzles out, to the extent that the rhythm and cacophony are more the hallmark of an Apprentice Fiddler.

A BORDER PASSAGE: From Cairo to America - A Woman's Journey

On one level, "A Border Passage" is the story of Leila Ahmed's intellectual and emotional journey from a privileged childhood in post-World War II Egypt to Cambridge University in the 1960's and finally to the United States, where she now lives and teaches. But perhaps just as fascinating as the memoir itself - what Ahmed modestly calls her "work of memory" - is its rich, insightful setting: an account of the inner conflicts of a generation coming of age during and after the collapse of European imperialism.

Although Egypt was not, strictly speaking, a British colony, it was under Britain's pervasive tutelage until the 1952 revolution that ultimately brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power. Like many other bright young people under British or French colonialists in Africa and Asia, Ahmed had essentially a European education. In a home full of books, she read the British classics, reviled by some Arab nationalists, and set her sights on Cambridge at an early age.

But Ahmed also suffered the racial slights and insults of colonialism, some doled out by her British teachers in Cairo, some encountered in England, where she was spat at on a bus.

Through it all, Ahmed kept her balance and distance, and that makes her wonderfully evocative memoir all the more valuable to the outsider. As a young woman, she reflected on what Nasser's socialism and Arab nationalism had done to destroy not only her own family but also the social fabric of Egypt, where her friends had been Muslims, Christians and Jews. Under the new Nasserite order, Jews fled and many Christians -- indigenous Copts and others - entered a new era of fear and uncertainty. In her nationalized school, a Palestinian teacher slapped young Leila for insisting that she was an Egyptian and not an Arab, as the propaganda of the day demanded. The identity question hovers over this book, in part because as an adult Ahmed would encounter other unreal definitions of "Arab" in Western stereotypes laden with their "cargo of negativities".

Ahmed writes beautifully and with deep understanding of her mother and the other women of her extended family who, in their comfortable Cairo homes and through long summer days along the Alexandria seafront, created a world apart from men. It was a gracious, pious Muslim environment different from the universe of "official Islam".

"Islam, as I got it from them, was gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical - just as they themselves were," she writes. "Generations of astute, thoughtful women, listening to the Koran, understood perfectly well its essential themes and its faith. And looking around them, they understood perfectly well, too, what a travesty men had made of it."

A Middle East Mosaic: Fragments of Life, Letters and History

For over 2000 years, the Western World has had frequent political, cultural, and religious exchanges with the peoples and nations of the Middle East. Western businessmen - from the

arms dealers who supplied Saladin with weapons to fight the Crusaders to the first oil prospectors - have seen great possibilities in the markets of the Middle East. And throughout the centuries, East and West have met in battle.

In this compilation of writings about these contacts, Lewis (Near East studies, emeritus, Princeton University) serves up an engaging account of how East and West learned about each other - a phenomenon that didn't always foster mutual understanding and acceptance. Both sides may at times have been amused as well as bewildered by these contacts, but more often than not their exchanges were tinged with envy and hostility. Indeed, Lewis believes that basic attitudes on both sides have remained substantially unchanged. The wide range of historical and literary materials presented and Lewis's excellent introductory comments ensure the reader's enjoyment and enlightenment.

In the 13th century, for instance, an Islamic observer wrote that no people were "more filthy" than the Franks. Other entries indicate that such negative attitudes persist to this day: Lewis reprints a short selection from a contemporary Afghani Web site in which it is alleged that, in forcing women to work, the West has destroyed the "personality, position and identity of a woman." He also cites the mid-20th-century American diplomat George Kennan calling Iraq a country ruined by "selfishness and stupidity," full of a "population unhygienic in its habits." While Lewis does not shy away from the troubling history of this cultural interaction, he also highlights some of its positive effects - devoting a chapter to words such as "sugar" and "magazine" that have entered the English vernacular from Arabic languages, as well as the descriptions of the rules and etiquette of both societies as described by travelers and diplomats. Nor does Lewis ignore more domestic and less momentous matters: there are chapters on cookery and one titled "Wit and Wisdom." What emerges is a vivid, nuanced account of the fascination that the West and the Middle East have had for each other and the troublesome ways that members of both cultures have tried to navigate and then explain their differences.

Comparison is the beginning of all serious scholarship, and in this spirited reappraisal of Western views of the East and Eastern views of the West, Lewis proves that he is one of the greatest scholars of the Middle East in the second half of the twentieth century - with a knowledge that spans other regions, too, offering a rich basis for comparison with the Arab, Turkish, Persian, and Jewish worlds. Few Middle East experts could have compiled this collection. Lewis is living testimony to the ability of an outsider to know and enter into another culture and illuminate it for the larger public. His opus is remarkable.

Arab Folktales

The introduction to "Arab Folktales," an anthology of 130 stories collected and translated by Inea Bushnaq, begins with a comparison of the arts of embroidery and storytelling in the Arab world. In the tales presented here, Bushnaq discerns a similar pattern of unity and internal local differences. The wiles of women, for example, so important to the stories of the "Thousand and One Nights," continue to animate tales told today in Libya, Iraq or Egypt, just as the trickster figure - Si Djeha in Morocco, Goha in Egypt and Djuha in Syria - brings humor, cynicism and wisdom to the storytellers' varied audiences. Sultans who disguise themselves as commoners and venture into the streets of their cities are no less characteristic of Cairo and Damascus than they were of Baghdad in the time of Harun al-Rashid. In some cases, however, the rulers' forays

among their populations are motivated by philanthropy, in others by a more authoritarian desire to spy out popular threats to their dominion.

The anthology, which is divided into seven sections, opens with "Tales Told in Houses Made of Hair," stories of Bedouin life and the male vigor and collective generosity it enjoins. The emphasis is on the struggle against separation and division, and the narratives often end, as in "Atiyah, the Gift of God," with the happy marriage that unites two tribes. The next two sections are devoted to tales of magic and the supernatural, the first featuring "Djinn, Ghouls, and Afreets" and the second recounting "Magical Marriages and Mismatches." There is then a section of animal tales, which, like Aesop's, tend to insist on the "triumph of shrewdness and common sense over mere physical strength."

A translator from Arabic and French, Bushnaq's style is both fluent and graceful. And although her collection, which emphasizes the persistent vitality of the folk tales, does not examine their continued role in modern Arabic literature, it is nonetheless an extensive compendium of stories and information on the social structures and practices out of which they grow. Thus the importance of her book is not only in the pleasure and delight it gives but in the way it participates in the retrieval of a cultural heritage by making that culture available to today's English-language reader. Like the embroidery on Arab women's dresses, "Arab Folktales" is no less universal for being rooted in a specific culture.

ASAD: The Struggle for the Middle East

British journalist Patrick Seale, whose books include *The Struggle for Syria* and *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire*, here fashions a political portrait of the late President Hafez al-Assad that emphasizes his patience, caution and courage without obscuring his conspiratorial past or his selective ruthlessness. He describes Assad's rise from peasant, Alawite origins to national leadership in a bloodless coup, analyzes the view from Damascus of Syria's role in the wars with Israel and Assad's efforts in blocking piecemeal settlements with Israel by other Arab countries. Double-crossed, according to Seale, by his Egyptian partner Anwar Sadat during the 1973 October War, Assad was then "duped" by Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy and "robbed" of the fruits of the war. Assad is quoted as claiming that his goal was not Syrian supremacy but a balance of power, and that a fair peace would come about only when the Arabs achieved strategic parity with the Jewish state.

This book is, it must be said, a sympathetic and rather admiring biography of Hafez al-Assad. Seale had access to Syrian officials and to President Assad himself that is extraordinary for a Western journalist. This is largely because the author framed the book from the late president's point of view. And that is the strength of the book as well as its weakness. If this is a somewhat uncritical work, it also offers valuable insight into the development and thinking of a hard man, whose stubborn desire to stay at the center of events was reality for over 30 years.

First published in 1988, with a 1995 revision limited to a chapter on Rif'at Assad's attempt to dethrone his brother, the book represents something of an incomplete picture - its prominence in Lebanese bookstores has more to do with postmortem merchandizing than any true topicality. Missing are such thorns to the Syrian view as Michel Aoun's short-lived war, and Arafat and Rabin's handshake on the lawn of the White House.

And yet, having said this, there is much for the reader to appreciate and digest in "Asad". Along with the previously obscure details about Assad's early life, the most valuable parts - especially from a Lebanese perspective - are the author's discussions with the veteran American diplomat Philip Habib, about negotiations over Lebanon. Seale quotes the would-be peacemaker on his frustrations during 1981 and 1982 in dealing with the Israeli leaders Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon. Illuminating, too, is the revised chapter with the details of the falling-out between Assad and his black-sheep brother, Rif'at, who led the elite troops that protected the Syrian Government and who, according to the author, lived high from corruption and the Lebanese hashish trade and tried to take power when he thought Assad was dying. To his credit, Seale does not shrink from describing the darker side of President Assad's rule - the corruption, the suppression of dissent and the use of terrorism as a tool of policy.

After 500 densely footnoted pages chronicling double-crosses, betrayal, wars and all manner of mayhem and bloodshed on the part of the various parties of the Middle East, Patrick Seale gives his subject the last word, almost as a eulogy: "Say simply that the struggle continues." Indeed.

At Home in Beirut: A Practical Guide to Living in the Lebanese Capital

Pity the dedicated soul who writes a guidebook to Beirut. So much to see, so much to do, and the silly place keeps changing so quickly that there will be items out of date or out of being by the time the work is published. There are so many Beiruts, in fact: historical Beirut, which traces its history to the early Canaanites; skyscraping Beirut, the city of architectural upmanship, which plants a big new box on downtown corners every year or so; cultural Beirut, whose museums are either opening or closing down old wings for lack of operating funds; good-time Beirut, where theaters, nightclubs, restaurants and bars either survive as venerable landmarks (in very few years, too) or close shop before the ink is dry on their press releases. Writing a guidebook to Beirut must be like trying to grasp an eel with greasy hands.

No one guidebook tells all. Some tell more than others, but each gives its own particular cut to the Beirut Bastirma. "At home in Beirut" is, as the title suggests, perhaps more of a guide for Beirutis than for out-of-towners in that it is designed for recent residents, both of the foreign expatriate as well as the returning Lebanese variety. And with that objective, the authors have, it seems, left no pothole uncatalogued in a compendium that has so much to relate that it takes reams of smaller type, relieved by an occasional illustration, to fit it all in. The book's strength is its painstaking care with facts. There is no part of living in the city that is not covered, from renting an apartment to adapting to working in Lebanon to finding the right schools to shopping and going out in Beirut. There are maps of the city roughly detailing neighborhoods (but this is certainly no A-Z with street indexes) and Forbes-like text boxes and tables on such useful information for residents as taxable income rates and Libanpost mail charges.

But even the visitor who arrives bent purely on spending money will find solid reference here (the restaurant and shop listings particularly are quite wide-ranging), but less emphatic in comparison with the chattier "The Guide", the monthly magazine that covers Beirut using a system of colored type that instantly clues you in on various categories (shops in red, pubs and restaurants in green, and theaters and museums in blue).

In *At home in Beirut*, restaurants are not rated and although in a period of change, prices are wisely unspecified, relative costs - say from cheap to lavish - could easily have been indicated. The items are short and somewhat terse, and the authors would have done well to leaven the data with anecdotes.

What it lacks in spirit and interesting trivia, it offsets in the thorough detail. The authors write with a restrained elegance, a good sense of description of an area's life, an occasional irony and a complete certainty. All told, this is an attractive guide that is perhaps as comprehensive as they come - no mean task especially in light of the byzantine complexities of living in post-war Beirut.

At the Wall of the Almighty

Reading *At the Wall of the Almighty* is like being enmeshed in a Persian fabric of dark, confusing colours and patterns. Tehran-born Farnoush Moshiri here fashions a tale of torture and twisted fragments that is not so much distracting as it is disturbing.

The nameless narrator is a political prisoner who is defiant, yet completely subject to the merciless, inhuman power of religious fundamentalists. He has remained nameless, feigning loss of memory, both as an act of defiance and in his determination to survive.

Loony Kamal, the prison guard, is bent on finding out whether it is actually possible to lose every shred of memory. Their relationship - with its inhuman brutality - lies at the complicated heart of Moshiri's novel.

As if he were a latter-day Sheherazade, the narrator fights for his life by retreating into a world of stories - or memories? - of grandmothers and peacocks, of love songs and saffron smells.

The grim unreality of life inside the prison falls darkly upon us. This work - Puig's 'Kiss of the Spider Woman' meets Kafka's 'The Trial' - plays on the ever changing 'good' and 'evil' characters, the horrifying themes, the nightmarish and disturbing images, the heroic struggle to overcome, to make sense, to drive meaning out of misery. The colours set in this Persian tapestry will not be to everyone's taste.

Between Jihad and Salaam

For this revealing collection of interviews that unveil the thoughts and personalities of Muslim thinkers and leaders, reporter and newspaper editor Joyce Davis adopted traditional dress to gain access to a range of Islamic leaders normally off limits to westerners. In 17 face to face encounters with the hidden elite of the Muslim world, Davis reveals extremes in opinion. We hear the words of individuals such as Sudan's Hassan al Turabi, often described as the new Ayatollah; Muntassir al Zayat, spokesman for Al Gamaa and al Jihad, responsible for much of the violence in Egypt; and Abida Hussain, Pakistan's former ambassador to the U.S. who allows her daughter to date. These men and women possess religious principles and moral leadership that many western readers will find admirable, while they also express sentiments that are

alarming. What becomes clear from these profiles is that some of the people who once provoked fear are worthy of trust, while others, undeniably, are not.

Birds of Passage

Robert Sole, born and raised in Egypt, writes a mix of fiction and history to portray the life of one of the many minorities blown about the Middle East. The narrator's grandfather, Georges Batrakani, comes from a clan settled in Egypt for three generations before him. In long languorous lunches - Mr. Sole does them wonderfully well - uncles and cousins embroider dreamy variations on their Syrian origins: from Lombardy or from a Greek Patriarch or, an aunt insists, right back to the Crusaders.

Identity, though, becomes not what you are but what you are not. The grandmother's relatives left Syria two centuries earlier and, like the Batrakanis, are still not really Egyptian. They are not Muslim either, of course, nor Roman Catholic nor Greek Orthodox. They belong, along with the rest of their community, to a splinter Greek Catholic sect in disputatious communion with Rome.

The Syrians prospered in an Egypt ruled by the Ottomans, who made a point of giving positions of trust and profit to foreigners, even in the Court of Constantinople. When the British took over in the early 1800's, they found a similar convenience in these same educated and enterprising Syrians and Greeks, aloof to the rising hungers of Egyptian nationalism. When nationalism took over, in the army coup led by Nasser, the aloofness paid its price. The minorities were gradually squeezed or threatened out.

In his three-generation story, Sole portrays the rise, golden time and eventual scattered departure of the Batrakanis and their circle. There is George's father, Elias, with no head for business. He settled, instead, for a modest job with the British-run public works department. His lifelong regret was failing to get rich at the building of the Suez Canal. A Cairo millionaire used to trace the origins of his engineering fortune back to having imported 300 cats to solve an advertised rat problem at the canal site. "I thought of cats too," Elias would chime in at family gatherings, "but I was too busy to answer the advertisement that day."

There is George's self-indulgent brother, Nando, who makes a cheerful fortune buying up rural property and taking no account of local resentments till the day he is murdered. There is George's son Michel, who develops an obsession with Hussein Kamil, installed by the British in 1914 with the title sultan (a move against Germany's ally, the Ottoman sultan).

Mainly, of course, there is Georges, a man of great enterprise and exuberant life: a minor Sun King to family and friends. They share the pleasurable existence he provides for them: meals, expeditions and long summers on the beaches of Alexandria. The key to George's fortune is also the key to its decline. He achieves a near monopoly manufacturing the fez. It is the national headgear of the old Egypt he lived in and kept an intimate distance from. The new Egypt discards fez and Baktrakanis, though they move and prosper elsewhere.

Birds of Passage, translated by John Brownjohn from the French, is delightful, despite a junky subplot or two and some thinly fictionalized history. It takes a golden look backward to send its characters into the world, their gold devaluing as they live in the puzzlement, displacement, comedy and regret of universal human exile.

Black Dog of Fate

At the center of what is a quintessential American baby boom childhood experience - a time filled with baseball, rock 'n' roll and making out with girls underneath a benign 50s and 60s sky - lies the dark specter of a trauma Peter Balakian's forebears had experienced: the Ottoman Turkish government's extermination of more than a million Armenians in 1915.

The "Black Dog of Fate", set in the affluent New Jersey suburbs, is Balakian's personal quest to uncover the bleak story that lies behind the silence of his Armenian family's flight from Turkey at the beginning of the century.

The story could be grim and unbearably egocentric with personal and moral revelations but for Balakian's artful touch. In describing his awakening to the facts of history, the author introduces us to a remarkable family of characters. The unforgettable central figure of the story is Balakian's grandmother, Nafina Aroosian, a survivor and widow of the genocide who speaks in fragments of metaphor and myth as she cooks up Armenian delicacies, plays the stock market, and keeps track of the baseball stats of her beloved Yankees.

The book is so infused with the collision between this family's ancient Near Eastern traditions and American pop culture that the result is often comic and thoroughly readable. Written with power and grace, "Black Dog of Fate" unfolds like a tapestry its tale of survival against enormous odds. Through the eyes of a poet, here is the arresting story of a family's journey from its haunted past to a new life in a new world.

Bring Down the Walls: Lebanon's Post-War Challenge

Though relatively short, Dagher's book covers a lot of ground. It contains a historical overview of Lebanon's myriad communities as well as an analysis of the development of their mutual distrust. By exposing the nation's self-destructive, inter-communal misconceptions, the author aims to dispel them. Among her allies she numbers no less a figure than Pope John Paul II, whose 1997 visit to Lebanon is stirringly described by Dagher, who shows him standing erect (with the sun setting into the Mediterranean as a backdrop) and imploring the country's youth to "bring down the walls erected in the painful past". Those walls, in the author's view, are founded on dogmatic ideologies: sectarianism, secularism, Maronitism, fundamentalism, and pan-Arabism, to name a few. With unabashed passion, Dagher warns that if Lebanon fails in its multicultural mission, it spells doom not just for a nation uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between Christianity and Islam, but for the entire Levant, which looks to the "country of Cedars" as an oasis in a desert of expanding fanaticism.

Her book is a model of engaged journalism, combining thorough research with intensity derived from a personal connection to the subject matter. Quoting numerous Christian and Muslim leaders who stress the importance of preserving diversity, she proves that pluralism is not her ideal alone; it is Lebanon's. Documenting the nation's efforts before and after the civil

war to build a model democratic society of diverse sects, she makes a convincing case that the current chronic discord is an aberration.

Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance

Revered by many fundamentalist Shiites and reviled by the West, Hezbollah is considered to be a paradigm for other militant groups wishing to make the promise of Islamic Revolution a reality. A former correspondent for The Associated Press and Reuters, Hala Jaber was granted - in the words of her publishers - "exclusive and unparalleled access to the inner circle of this organization", and she exposes not only its tactics, but also its history, ideology, and culture.

Since she lets her interlocutors speak for themselves, she gives us a picture of a society and of politics that are as intricate as a Persian carpet.

Her report, though rich, is not cheering. With few exceptions, she finds Islamic movements in the wider region - there are regular forays into Hamas and other extremist organizations - propelled by anything but the ideals of tolerance and the democratic values their leaders profess to Western audiences. She paints a picture of a fractured and fragmented society. Publics are discontented: the poor with their poverty; the rich because they are not as rich as they once were; the intellectuals because their rulers are not, alas, true democrats; and Hezbollah itself because, having launched and maintained an effective political movement, it now hungers for power and moral certainty.

But the reasons for the rise of Hezbollah - that is, the root causes for the "vengeance" in the book's title - are more complex than Jaber describes. Glossed over are such key issues as the failed experiments in liberalism and Arab nationalism; exploding populations, for which hard pressed governments cannot provide adequate jobs, housing or educational opportunities; and, notably, the boost given to Islamic movements by the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Jaber most often favors the economic explanation and describes the poor, or the almost poor, as the most likely recruits for radical Islam. In one of the many striking vignettes that do enrich this book, she tells of a four-year-old who proudly watches a video of his father ramming a car packed with 450 kilograms of explosives into an Israeli convoy.

Jaber acts as our guide through the maze of Lebanese politics, and is at her best when she is reporting, pitting points of view against one another. The 1983-84 bombings of the US Embassy and Marine headquarters in Beirut are conveyed with the immediacy of the flash bulletins and banner headlines of those dark days. She recounts previously disclosed information as well as adding some new insights into the connections between Hezbollah and its supporters. It is a murky business. The whole hostage-taking episode is amply described, while such basic information as the identities of the kidnappers often remains elusive. This is the case with the assassins of Lt Colonel Higgins and CIA chief William Buckley whose bodies were later returned to the US government at the end of the hostage crisis.

Her profiles of Hezbollah leaders, whether Subhi Tufeili or Naim Qassem, are deftly and sharply sketched. However, when it comes to prognostications for the future - the south had yet to be liberated - or policy proposals, she appears as uncertain as the rest of us. In her concluding chapter, when you expect her to wrap it all up, to move in, as it were, for the kill, she appears less sure-footed.

Notwithstanding her earlier confidence that the Islamic movement she describes is violent, intolerant and unlikely to change, she now thinks Hezbollah might, after all, prove pragmatic and flexible. But never mind. These are inherently difficult issues, and Jaber attacks them with verve and very good writing.

Lawrence: The Uncrowned King of Arabia

Few historical figures have been as vigorously mythologized as T. E. Lawrence, the British soldier and archaeologist who helped lead the Arab Revolt against the Turks during World War I - a legend that was galvanized by David Lean's stunning 1962 epic, "Lawrence of Arabia," and that immortalized its hero against the sweeping desert vistas of the Middle East.

In the latest biography of Lawrence, Asher, an explorer and author, attempts to sort fact from fiction, retracing his subject's travels across the Arabian Peninsula while sifting the biographical record for inconsistencies and contradictions. Asher is an Arabic speaker who lived with a traditional Bedu tribe for several years, and he uses his intimate knowledge to provide the reader with a palpable sense of the beauties and hardships of desert life.

But while his narrative account of Lawrence's role in the Arab Revolt often rivals Lean's movie in sheer drama, his portrait of the man himself is decidedly more problematic, relying on paint-by-numbers Freudianisms to decipher this most enigmatic of men. He argues that Lawrence developed an acute fear of pain as a boy, and that the courage he would later exhibit in battle stemmed from his willful "flight forwards" toward the very thing he dreaded.

On other debated points in his life, Asher suggests that Lawrence was an expert at "massaging the truth," both in manipulating public opinion in his official capacity as a British officer during the war and later as a writer intent on mythologizing his own exploits.

As for the Arab slaughter of a Turkish column at Tafas in September 1918 and the subsequent massacre of Turkish and German prisoners, Asher questions Lawrence's actual involvement in the killing, suggesting that his penchant for self-sacrifice "may have obliged him to assume responsibility for savage acts in which he personally had played no part."

In the wake of the daring raid on Aqaba (which put the last Ottoman Red Sea port in Allied hands and provided the Arabs with a supply base in Syria), Lawrence was able to convince his British superiors that he was "the indispensable conduit through which arms and money must flow to the Arabs." This, in turn, helped him to persuade the Arabs that he was essential to their cause.

In the course of rallying his Arab troops, Lawrence had repeatedly reassured them that they were fighting for their own independence, not to further Allied objectives, even though Britain and France had already vowed to carve up the Middle East between themselves in the event of an Allied victory.

Asher suggests that "the wily intelligence officer who had at first accepted the realpolitik of sacrificing Arab priorities to those of the Allies became increasingly plagued by doubt," and that he felt considerable guilt over his determination to raise these "tides of men" on a sham promise. But while Lawrence promised his old friend the Arab leader Faisal that he would fight

the French for the Arab cause in Syria after the war, he instead settled down to write his memoirs.

Lawrence died in 1935 in a motorcycle accident in the English countryside. A monument was later erected in the old Anglo-Saxon church of St. Martin at Wareham in Dorset, complete with a stone effigy of Lawrence wearing an Arab headdress and robe.

Nadia, Captive of Hope: Memoir of an Arab Woman

A candid memoir from a Lebanese woman, born in Beirut in 1918, who recounts the drama of her personal life - from World War I to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 - against the backdrop of political violence and upheaval in the Middle East. Written after the author fled war-torn Lebanon in the 1980s, this memoir is a remarkable and fascinating document about a woman's role in a Muslim family and her will to overcome both personal and political tragedies.

Kanafani's story begins with her troubled home life in Beirut, complete with a family divided over status and fortune, aggressive brothers, and a sexually abusive father. While the young Nadia, as she is referred to in the memoir, survives her ordeals by means of avoidance, dreaming, and denial, she is unable to escape the arranged marriage to her cousin, to whom she was engaged when she was 13. Traumatized by her new situation as a wife and member of her cousin's family in Haifa (in Palestine, then under British mandate), Nadia displays a stubbornness that leads to her being intoxicated and raped by her frustrated husband. The memoir evocatively describes how Nadia settles into her marriage and motherhood and provides an intriguing insider's perspective on daily life in Palestine during the 1930s and '40s. Jewish immigrants (a psychiatrist and a rabbi), Lebanese Christians, and old Palestinian Muslim families come to life in Kanafani's depictions of personal friends and acquaintances. The Palestinian period and her husband's death prove to be the first in a series of rebirths and tragedies. During the following decades, Nadia claims her independence and happiness through education, employment, motherhood, travel, romance, and a second blissful marriage. It is with a frank and graceful voice that Kanafani reveals her life offering a quietly compelling and ultimately uplifting story, rich in remembered and reinvented dialogues, an insightful blend of poetry and history.

Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein

Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, Irish-born brothers and veteran Middle East journalists, offer a sober and balanced yet intrigue-filled book to explain how, over the course of a decade, Saddam Hussein has been able to play cat-and-mouse with the West, defying all predictions of his demise. Like others, they argue that the 1991 post-gulf-war uprising of southern Shiites and northern Kurds failed at least partly because of American ambivalence, and that continuing economic sanctions on Iraq are doing little to pry Saddam Hussein from his power base and much to ruin the lives of ordinary Iraqis. But the strength of the book comes from new details from untapped sources, including two key former associates of Saddam, a previously unknown

young Iraqi rebel and several former CIA officers. The picture of the last eight years that emerges is among the most coherent and accessible of any book on Iraq to date.

The Cockburns argue that the Americans had decided from the beginning not to lift international trade sanctions on Iraq so long as Hussein remained in power. But efforts to support a rebellion against him have failed miserably. They say Washington fell victim to its ignorance of the nature of its Iraqi adversary and its potential allies.

American failures are self-evident. But what the book fails to show is what should have been done differently. The Cockburns say ominously that the world will pay the price for the suffering of the Iraqi people, but they also say that the overthrow of Saddam "will come at the hands of his own people." Can both be true? And, if the latter is correct, should the world turn its back until then?

Given the history and makeup of Iraq, could the entire conflict have been handled differently and more effectively? That is never addressed in this otherwise quite interesting book.

Ports of Call

Originally published in France in 1996, *Ports of Call* is the first of Amin Maalouf's novels to be set in the 20th century. (*Rock of Tanios*, this Lebanese writer's evocation of a Levantine satrapy in the 1840's, won the Prix Goncourt in 1993.) Fluently translated from the French by Alberto Manguel, the novel is the story of two ill-starred lovers in the Middle East: Ossyane, the principal narrator, is a Muslim (and an Ottoman prince and a hero of the French Resistance to boot), and his beloved Clara is Jewish. They marry in the aftermath of World War II; unfortunately, the chaotic dislocations that ensue keep them apart for a quarter-century, during which time the prince is unjustly committed to an insane asylum. Their marriage is presented here as an exemplary rejection of suspicion and hatred between peoples, most particularly in the Middle East. Perhaps the author's fondness for allegory is the reason Ossyane's tale sounds more like polished writing than real speech, and why the characters often seem more like ideas than people. The final scene, the couple's reunion in Paris, is related by another narrator; the result is that we can see Ossyane and Clara together but not hear what they are saying. Their future can only be imagined: will they take up their life together again, or are the scars too deep? We are left wondering whether peace, between individuals or nations, is anything more than a beloved word.

Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran

Americans love a self-made man, but the British, as everyone who reads *Private Eye* or Jane Austen knows, generally hate anyone who succeeds and despise anyone who fails, which leaves very little room for movement. And yet, if biographers are to be kept in work, a few self-esteeming, ambitious people need to step off the ordinary path from time to time, if only so their adventures may be recorded as cautionary tales. In *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*, the classical translator and sometime anthologist Robin Waterfield proves how vexing it must be for a British scholar to possess a passion for Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), the Middle Eastern-born poet and artist who moved to Boston from Bsherri, Lebanon, when he was 12,

held his first critically lauded art exhibition at 21, had become a respected painter and writer in Greenwich Village by 30 and at 40 acquired cult status as the author of a mystical illustrated psalter called, immodestly, *The Prophet*. Over the years, Gibran's book has been ecstatically embraced by scarf-swathed disciples of Isadora Duncan and Madame Blavatsky, hash-brownie-munching beatniks, herbal tea-drinking New Agers and, evidently, by quite a lot of ordinary people as well. The book has sold more than nine million copies in America alone -- each one bearing Gibran's portrait of his prophet, Almustafa, who resembles the artist and who stares hypnotically off the page like a gravestone rubbing of the young Pancho Villa. Here is not only a self-made man, here is something infinitely more embarrassing: the self-made seer.

In "Prophet," Waterfield struggles to present the life and career without permitting his readers to think that he may himself have fallen under the swami's spell. His admiration for the man may be accepted; he has, after all, taken the trouble to edit a Gibran anthology for Penguin, and this year, in addition to the biography, he has also written benign introductions to Penguin Arkana's new translations of Gibran's "Spirit Brides" and "Broken Wings." But the unforgiving portrait he paints here reveals a narcissistic pretender who did not care about his family and who may have cruelly manipulated his chief patroness, literary collaborator and one-time fiancée, Mary Haskell Minis, for financial ends. "It is hard to avoid the conclusion that he knew he was on to a good thing, and made sure that it remained in place," Waterfield writes, reducing a complex 20-year relationship to the exploitation of a lovesick human trust fund by a cad. He also speculates hand-rubbingly on Gibran's romantic attachments, divining "a sexual charge" between the artist and his model, Emilie (Micheline) Michel, and detecting a similar "charge" in the atmosphere during Gibran's conversations with Haskell. While he accepts that Gibran never slept with Haskell, he decides that Gibran and Micheline "consummated their relationship sexually," though he admits "there are no extant letters or anything to provide concrete evidence of this." His basis for Ken-Starring the pair is that Gibran "was certainly not a virgin" when he met Micheline, and, more damning, that Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal" was in print, "containing some of the most highly charged erotic poems ever written." Finally, he sneers at Gibran for having been a "tabula rasa" when he met his first benefactor, the Boston photographer, publisher and philanthropist Fred Holland Day, at 13. But one black mark in Gibran's character overshadows the rest: "the enormity of his self-estimation."

Ironically, Gibran's character flaws were more thoroughly explored a quarter-century ago in "Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World," a lucid, comprehensive biography written by a cousin, also named Kahlil Gibran, and his wife, Jean, who undertook the project because they could find no objective study of their illustrious relative. When they began their book, the chief accounts of Gibran's life were "This Man From Lebanon," an appreciation by an acolyte who called herself Barbara Young, who described him as "one of the rare gestures of the Mighty Unnameable Power," and a sloppy memoir by his good friend Mikhail Naimy, written in Arabic, that characterized him as a rake and a tippler. In this 75th anniversary year of the publication of "The Prophet," the 615 letters and 47 diaries the Gibrans unearthed in the course of researching their book -- which was expanded and reprinted in 1991 -- constitute the bulk of firsthand knowledge of Gibran's American experience.

If Waterfield's *Prophet* is pathography, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, by the Lebanese scholar Suheil Bushrui and his colleague Joe Jenkins, both of the Kahlil Gibran Research and Studies Project at the University of Maryland, breaks new ground, falling into a category that lies somewhere in between hagiography and history. Bushrui and Jenkins's adoration of their subject emerges in their declarations that the poet could "sing with the eloquence of Isaiah and the sorrow of Jeremiah," that he ought to be recognized as a national hero for the Arab world,

much as Cuchulain is for the Irish, and, more controversially, that, although Gibran was a Maronite Christian, "his writings through the years reflect his desire to merge the Sufi Muslim tradition with the Christian mystical heritage of his background." And yet, through their consultation of Arabic and other sources, the authors add substantial texture to previous descriptions of Gibran's social and work habits in Beirut, Paris and New York, paying particular attention to his friendships with men like Rodin, Yeats and Carl Jung. "Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet" also amplifies Gibran's relationship with Mary Haskell, furnishing poignant detail of her November-December marriage with the widower Jacob Florance Minis, which she embarked upon in 1921 when she was 48, as she and Gibran were completing their collaboration on "The Prophet." Haskell asked Gibran if she could truthfully tell her Minis that she loved him "better than anyone else in the world," as he so often asked her. Gibran told her she could say yes, because "every love is the best in the world, and the dearest." Haskell married Minis, but eight years later, while keeping house for Minis in Savannah, Ga., she still edited Gibran's works in secret, registering her thoughts about him in her diary in code. Like Jean and Kahlil Gibran before them, Bushrui and Jenkins are not afraid to acknowledge the poet's foibles. They readily admit that he mythologized himself, cultivated famous people and had sexual relationships with women. They quote a dialogue between Haskell and Gibran in full: Haskell asked if Gibran thought it was all right for a man or woman to have as many as seven sexual partners; he replied, "If the seven were all willing, yes." No nudges or winks required. Gibran's widely varying critical reception can be laid not to any deficit of character or talent, they suggest, but to the problem of categorization. His writing "is neither pure literature nor pure philosophy, and as an Arab work written in English it belongs exclusively to no particular tradition." In other words nine million people have bought the book and don't know where to shelve it.

What kind of book is "The Prophet"? No one could call it humble, no one could say it is not derivative. It is a slim volume of fewer than 20,000 words, in which its hero, Almustafa (Gibran), at the invitation of his muse, Almitra (Mary Haskell), tells the people of Orphalese (New York) what he really thinks about everything. Its poems are incantatory and willfully symbolic, and they resonate of Blake, Yeats, the King James Bible, Laotzu and, occasionally, the off-kilter whimsy of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. Bushrui and Jenkins, wishing to claim Gibran for Islam, insist that he also echoes Sufi precepts, and there is no reason to rule that out, either. Gibran's drawings and watercolors, which are often dismissed as overpretty, resonate of Rodin, Redon, Picasso's "Romeo and Juliet" and assorted Pre-Raphaelites. Finally, the themes he chooses to discuss are in no way original: Gibran wrote on love, family, beauty, pain and death. Of married love, he wrote: "Make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls." Of children, he wrote: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself." Beauty, he apostrophized, is "eternity gazing at itself in a mirror. But you are eternity and you are the mirror." Call it gnomic nonsense, but "thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon" sounds absurd if you don't know it's from the Song of Solomon, and "the cut worm forgives the plow" is gibberish to someone who does not admire Blake. Only somehow more people are willing to confess admiration for Blake than for Gibran.

On April 11, 1931, Kahlil Gibran died in his studio in New York. The woman by his side was his secretary and later his biographer, Barbara Young, who had begun working for him seven years earlier, after Haskell married Minis. In his most significant addition to Gibran lore, Waterfield furnishes the dramatic post-script. Because both Haskell and Gibran had been exceedingly discreet, nobody, much less Young, suspected the strength of their attachment, and when Young discovered Haskell's letters in the studio, he recounts, she was shocked. Gibran's will had left the management of his art collection to Haskell, but Young soon began to

appropriate not only his artworks but his correspondence and other artifacts, claiming that Gibran had meant her to have them. Gibran's will also incensed many of his Boston relatives, because it bequeathed royalties from sales of "The Prophet" to Bsherri, the tiny mountainside town he had left in 1895. Waterfield suggests that the grandiose gesture was a bid to retroactively create the myth Gibran had spread among his American friends -- that his family had been wealthy. If so, it was a scheme worthy of a Gatsby. However, once hundreds of thousands of dollars began flowing from the publisher into Bsherri, fierce squabbles divided the villagers; the Lebanese Government had to step in to restore peace.

The larger squabble over the worth of Gibran's literary legacy may never be resolved. Bushrui and Jenkins glumly conclude that the critical split that Jean and Kahil Gibran deplored decades ago plagues Gibran scholars today: "those who have deified him and those who have dismissed him as a mere populist poet" still refuse to be reconciled. A solution to this troubled opposition may lurk within the multipurpose wisdom of "The Prophet." Just as Gibran instructed married couples to imagine their love as an ocean that unites as well as separates them, the quarreling camps might as well acknowledge that their shared obsession joins them in a partnership of opposed minds. Like it or not, Kahlil Gibran is "the moving sea between the shores of their souls."

Smile

Relatively uncontroversial is the proposition that Arabs as a group have not been as successfully integrated into the mainstream of European life as the architects of human rights would hope and expect.

In his first novel, Paul Smail chronicles everyday racism as experienced by a young Parisian of Moroccan origins. Inspired by his love for literature, the narrator refracts his experience through the characters of Shakespeare and Melville, his favorite writers.

Smail's knowledge of the history, the literature, and the philosophical ideas of our times underlies the novel. He offers, among other things, a reflection on French political culture, describing the racism in all its unsavory shades ranging from the xenophobic sledgehammer variety to the more subtle role played by a European media that alternately demonizes Muslim cultures and fosters ignorance of them.

Unfortunately, the result is a work of fiction that is more somber and bitter than powerful. "Smile" is also bolder in conception than it is accomplished in execution - due in part to its size. With just 150 pages - read in one sitting at the tip of the iceberg - the reader remains relatively unmoved.

The Dream Palace of the Arabs

Fouad Ajami, who teaches Middle Eastern Studies at Johns Hopkins University, here focuses on the Arab writers and intellectuals of the last two generations - Ajami's own and the one preceding his - who strove to forge an Arab awakening through poetry and fiction. The writers

themselves vary enormously, but all of them in one way or another have, like the statesmen, politicians and tyrants they observed, mirrored the Arab experience itself.

Ajami uses the phrase "dream palace" as a metaphor for that experience. He identifies it as the "intellectual edifice of secular nationalism and modernity" by which the literary figures he studies in this volume sought to bring about a new, modern consciousness. But as a phrase, the notion of "dream palace" suggests other things as well. There is the dream palace of pan-Arabic unity, the dream palace of the reconquest of Israel, the dream palace of Islamic fundamentalism, all of which have occupied the minds of writers and politicians, poets and tyrants alike.

Ajami is deeply schooled in his subject. His writing is smooth, evocative, richly cadenced. One derives from Ajami's work a deeper appreciation for the vision of recent history sustained by these intellectuals as well as for their tragedy. And, it must be said, the overriding theme here is disillusionment. Ajami devotes an 84-page chapter to Khalil Hawi, the influential Lebanese poet who committed suicide in Beirut on the very day of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, June 6, 1982. Hawi, a man with whom Ajami clearly and strongly identifies, embodied the failed effort of the Arabic man of letters to create the ground for an Arab revival.

The author also introduces his readers to a large cast of Middle Eastern figures, from Malcolm Kerr, the president of the American University of Beirut, assassinated in 1984, to Ali Ahmad Said, the exiled Syrian poet and essayist who wrote under the pen name Adonis. Like Hawi, Adonis, who wrote of "tyranny, silence and exile," passed from the guarded optimism of the 1950's, when Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt seemed to provide new hope for vigorous nationalist leadership, to bitter disillusionment as Arab society plunged into "a new world of cruelty, waste, and confusion."

Along the way, Ajami provides close, intelligent readings of political events, including what he calls the Palestinian-Shia war in Lebanon, the Israeli invasion, the Nasserite revolution in Egypt, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the Gulf war. His chapters on Egypt and on what he calls "the orphaned peace" between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization bring his generation of poets into harsh confrontation with the political violence of power and make the clash between the two seem all the more tragic. The "Dream Palace of the Arabs" is a valuable testament to a tragic generation that tried to bridge the Arab past with modern ideals. One reads on, grateful for the intimacy of Ajami's portrait, which could only have been drawn by a figure who is himself a kind of bridge between the two worlds of Arabia and the West.

The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After

Since 1993, when Israeli and Palestinian officials met clandestinely in a Norwegian country house and emerged with a historic accord to work toward division of the land they unhappily inhabit together, one concern has hovered over their new relationship: what if the Oslo agreement fails? For Edward W. Said, however, the concern has been the opposite. What if the Oslo agreement succeeds?

This is because Said, a Palestinian-born professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and one of the world's most eloquent advocates of the Palestinian cause, sees Oslo as obscenely one-sided. It is, for him, the latest example of the way Israel and its

American backers crush what stands in their way, confiscating land and brutalizing Palestinians while turning former guerrilla leaders into corrupt lackeys with limousines. The vaunted "peace process", Said says (he always places the phrase in dismissive quotation marks), is nothing more than power masquerading as reconciliation.

His impatience is evident throughout "The End of the Peace Process," an angry but affecting book that contains a selection of his recent political essays, mostly written for various newspapers from the mid-1990's. He is especially impatient with what he considers the charade of the purportedly dramatic developments of recent years - the heralded turnover of a few measly acres of land, the protracted "negotiations" - because the basic power equation remains unchanged.

Few are as consistently devastating or as learned as Said in their condemnations. In discussing the Zionist approach to Palestine, he echoes Tacitus on the Roman conquest of Britain: "They created a desolation and called it peace." He says of the Israeli-American policy that it "threatens to rob us of our memory and of our past, so that we will be faced with the choice of either coming into the American fold or remaining outside, stripped of everything except the terrorist-fundamentalist identity."

But, equally, no one is as unforgiving of contemporary Arab cultural and political turpitude: "Wherever one looks, the signs of an absence of humanity in the powerful toward the weaker and the disadvantaged stands out starkly. Torture, massacres, repression, undemocratic practices: this is what we Arabs have become known for."

His prose is elegant and muscular, his moral vision unwavering. On the other hand, it seems awfully easy to condemn so indiscriminately, without any practical ideas on how to make things better. Beyond the Utopian model, Said's solution is anything but useful. He thinks Jews and Palestinians should give up on their nationalist ambitions and live together. He argues that this one-state idea is the only one based on equality and so the only one that offers hope. It seems likely, however, that instead of merely making many unhappy, as the current arrangement does, such a solution would render everyone truly miserable.

You don't have to agree with Said to admire him. He is one of the more interesting and thoughtful cultural critics of our age, a man of tremendous breadth, the author of more than a dozen books. He has waged a lonely and just battle for recognition of Palestinians, Arabs and third-world peoples generally; and his voice, as heard in these essays, is deep, rich and courageous in what is often a scripted and dishonest international dispute.

The House of Mathilde

Certain novels inspire in us the visceral shock of discovery that we most often associate with travel and with landscape, with rounding a bend and coming upon a panoramic, breathtaking vista, at once eerily familiar and terrifyingly strange. One such book is *The House of Mathilde*, Hassan Daoud's powerful saga in which the forces of history, greed, obsession and Machiavellian intrigue turn a somnolent apartment block in Beirut into a rich, corrupt microcosm.

Set in the civil war, the novel sits on that stormy front where past and present collide and unleash a damaging hail of temporal dislocation. The novel glitters with brilliant, refractory

character portraits. At its labyrinthine center is Mathilde, the Emma Bovary-like tenant who shelters a war refugee, and the refugee himself - ominously nameless - who plots, calculates, and flatters his way into her favour. Our immersion in the refugee's machinations is so total and so dreamlike that Daoud must rouse us at intervals to witness how the pattern of the ordinary lives of building's other Muslim and Christian tenants changes as society disintegrates around them. He quietly brings us to an understanding of the way in which the world of the Lebanese village, with its clan and family loyalties, was recreated in the city, and registers the country's sectarian divisions with great subtlety. When violence does intrude, it is all the more shocking in such an intimate setting.

The characters speak in folksy, epigrammatic proverbs that sound natural and colloquial. Its skilled translator, Peter Theroux, has done a splendid job with effortless cadences to support an impressive range of tones, from the lyrical and poetic to the gritty talk of the souk.

What makes the novel so fascinating and so tricky to describe is that its texture and narrative methods embrace so many seeming contradictions - paradoxes that mirror perfectly the book's atmosphere and themes. The novel is simultaneously sweeping and claustrophobic, traditional and timely, linear and digressive, serious and satiric. It's a complicated book, crowded with incident and character, requiring close, unflagging attention.

The Last Life

Told in the first person in the voice of a young woman named Sagesse LaBasse, *The Last Life* chronicles the lives of three generations of her French-Algerian family, which left Algiers during the political upheavals of the 1950's to settle in the south of France. It is a family that zealously guards its secrets, a family that has created its own mythology as a defense against the world, a family that naively believes that its pessimism is a "bulwark against disaster." During the summer of Sagesse's 15th year, a single violent act, her grandfather's shooting of a teenage girl, will loosen the bonds of loyalty and compromise that have kept the clan together, unleashing a torrent of rage and recrimination and flinging each of its members "into the ether alone."

Writing in dense, lyric prose, Messud has Sagesse recount this story from two perspectives, recreating her 14- and 15-year-old self while at the same time glossing her blunt, adolescent judgments with an older self's melancholy, retrospective wisdom. As a result, the reader has a stereoscopic view of Sagesse and her family. We witness her youthful efforts to cope with the loss of her father, her home and her innocence, even as we are made aware of the eventual emotional fallout of these losses; we watch her try to put together the puzzle pieces of her family's past, even as we are made aware of the formative events that caused each of her relatives to choose a life of exile.

Sagesse's grandfather Jacques LaBasse, we learn, left Algeria when he realized that the days of the French colonists there were numbered and he determined that "the second half of his life would redeem the humble first." He built the Hotel Bellevue on the French Mediterranean and over the years turned it into a three-star "haven of order and quiet for France's *bonne bourgeoisie*," presiding over its marbled hallways and manicured lawns with the same tyrannical authority he exercised over his family.

His son, Alexandre, Sagesse's father, would rebel against that authority to little avail. Having vowed to stay in Algeria after his parents had left, he found himself forced, by escalating violence against the French, to follow them to France. And having vowed not to buckle to his father's indomitable will, he found himself forced to depend on his family's largess after Sagesse's brother, Etienne, was born brain-damaged and physically impaired.

For her parents, Sagesse observes, Etienne's birth signalled "the clanging of their prison door," trapping both of them in an arduous marriage of betrayal and resentment. Though Alexandre would insist on "a fiction of love at first sight," theirs was a mismatch from the start. Carol, Sagesse's American-born mother, tried her best to reinvent herself as a Frenchwoman, but she could never win the acceptance of her husband's imperious parents, and her discovery of Alexandre's many affairs would lead to a further chilling of the marriage.

The young Sagesse takes her mother's side, denouncing her father as a cold, selfish man whose "malignant presence" was "unconvincingly masked by his cheerful smiles and premeditated caresses." Only later, years after his suicide, would she "wonder what it was to be my father, stoked with self-loathing, to observe the world through the sheen of failure: born of a failed country, a mediocre businessman trailing in his father's footsteps, an unsatisfactory spouse, the father of a son who could never grow up, seeking always and again the moment of conquest when he might escape his history, himself, and soar unburdened for a stolen hour."

Tensions between Alexandre and Carol escalate in the wake of an impetuous, coldblooded act by Jacques, who, angered by the sound of children splashing in the hotel pool, fires a gun in their direction, wounding one of Sagesse's friends. The incident creates one of those fault lines after which nothing is ever the same: it isolates the LaBasse family from the community and precipitates the disclosure of ancient family secrets.

The incident and its aftermath also cut Sagesse off from her friends and her former life. Henceforth her teen-age romanticism will be tempered by a defensive cynicism, her nostalgia for an Algeria she never knew qualified by the sad knowledge of her family's racist politics.

Ms. Messud writes with enormous authority in these pages, although some of Sagesse's grown-up meditations can sound wordy and portentous: "And mixed with fear and dismay lies an undeniable, glittering anticipation, a detached curiosity: something must happen that I cannot foresee; noon will come, and evening, and tomorrow." Happily, such lapses are infrequent, and Ms. Messud delineates Sagesse's efforts to come to terms with her past and to forge a new identity and sense of self with sympathy and conviction.

"The Last Life," however, is not simply another coming-of-age story: it opens out beyond the bounds of the usual Bildungsroman to become a thoughtful meditation upon the uses of personal and public history and the need people have for creating narratives, fictions if you will, about their families and themselves. Ms. Messud has written a large and resonant novel that is as artful as it is affecting.

The Map of Love

At either end of the twentieth century, two women fall in love with men outside their familiar worlds. In 1901, Anna Winterbourne, recently widowed, leaves England for Egypt, an outpost of the Empire roiling with nationalist sentiment. Far from the comfort of the British colony, she

finds herself enraptured by the real Egypt and in love with Sharif Pasha al-Baroudi. Nearly a hundred years later, Isabel Parkman, a divorced American journalist and descendant of Anna and Sharif, has fallen in love with a gifted and difficult Egyptian-American conductor with his own passionate politics. In an attempt to understand her conflicting emotions and to discover the truth behind her heritage, Isabel, too, travels to Egypt, where she gradually unravels the story of Anna and Sharif's love.

This is romance writing more in the style of the nineteenth century novel - thought-provoking Charlotte Bronte, not lowbrow Barbara Cartland. Soueif's skillful prose styling compares her two central characters not only through the details of their lives but also through their meticulously wrought voices. Moreover, just as interesting as what unites them - the smells and tastes of a realistic Egypt - is what distinguishes them from one another: the respective challenges and the different conventions that govern their lives as foreign women choosing to live in the Middle East.
