

home of the

Home Delivery | Subscriber Services




SEARCH

SFGate

Web Search by

YAHOO!

Advanced Search

Sign In | Register

[Movies](#) | [Music & Nightlife](#) | [Performance](#) | [Art](#) | [Events](#) | [Books](#) | [TV & Radio](#) | [Horoscope](#) | [Comics](#) | [Things To Do](#)

## Isolated Iraqi woman longs for better times

 Reviewed by Julie Foster  
 Sunday, July 29, 2007

PRINT | E-MAIL | SHARE | COMMENTS (0)

 FONT | SIZE:  

### Absent

By Betool Khedairi, translated by Muhayman Jamil

#### IMAGES


[View Larger Image](#)

RANDOM HOUSE; 221 PAGES; \$13.95 PAPERBACK

In 2003, the Cairo newspaper Al-Ahram Weekly reviewed the book "Iraqis Speak: The Iraqi Drama in Women's Writing," by Inaam Kachachi, a journalist born in Baghdad in 1952. The compilation contains works by "women who have undergone the infernal

mélange of war, detention, exile and siege."

The reviewer posed a question: Why devote a book to Iraqi women writers rather than just Iraqi writers, both men and women? Kachachi explained in the preface that while war affects all members of society, men and women have different responses based upon their gender. Men are conscripted into the army, and their language reflects that predicament. Kachachi writes, "Women encounter war in their homes and experience it differently, often with a sentiment of fear and solitude."

Betool Khedairi, author of "Absent," was included in the collection, cited as a new and emerging voice. "Absent" is her second novel. Khedairi, who now lives in Amman, Jordan, was born in Baghdad in 1965 to an Iraqi father and a Scottish mother. Her first novel, "A Sky So Close," which was published in 2004, has been translated from Arabic into English, Italian, Dutch and French.

Khedairi's life has been punctuated by what she calls three bloody crises: the eight years of war between Iraq and Iran, the invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991 and the U.S.-led occupation in 2003. The continuous chaos inflicted upon Iraqi life during these years shaped Khedairi's tone for her novel.

"Between the exported nightmare fantasy of weapons of mass destruction and the imported dream of democracy, I concluded that black comedy was the best style for my new novel."

This is the story of an Iraqi family's struggle to survive day-to-day life during the sanctions imposed after the Gulf War. Set in an apartment complex in Baghdad, each floor represents a different class of Iraqi society -- and a place where those lives have become intimate and nothing remains a secret.

"With the worsening of the economic situation, the flat residents have tended to venture out less often, but for some reason, their movement between the different floors has increased."

Upstairs there's Umm Mazin, the hefty fortune-teller who predicts the future by examining used coffee grounds and who ministers to the romantically and



MOST COMMENTED | MOST READ | MOST E-MAILED

1. Obama angers gays with marriage law defense
2. Palestinians angered by Netanyahu peace terms
3. Pride Parade, celebration has a political bent
4. High noon on the Hill for health care reform
5. Mom recalls death of baby she left in car
6. Deadline day for state leaders to close deficit
7. Iran protester slain after huge pro-reform rally

## TopHomes

 From  
 Urban Bay  
 Properties

[SOMA, HAYES VALLEY](#)  
 2 BR / 1 BA  
 \$375,000

[DALY CITY](#)  
 2 BR / 1 BA  
 \$515,000

[CIVIC CENTER, TENDERLOIN](#)  
 1 BR / 2 BA  
 \$509,000

[CENTRAL WATERFRONT, PORTERO HILL, CHINA BASIN, SOMA](#)  
 2 BR / 2 BA  
 \$899,000

[UNION SQUARE / EMBARCADERO](#)  
 2 BR / 2 BA  
 \$995,000

[CENTRAL WATERFRONT, PORTERO HILL, CHINA BASIN, SOMA](#)  
 1 BR / 1 BA  
 \$524,000

[CENTRAL WATERFRONT, PORTERO HILL, CHINA BASIN, SOMA](#)  
 2 BR / 2 BA  
 \$1,579,000

[EMERYVILLE](#)


psychologically distressed women of the apartment complex. Downstairs is Saad, the chatty homosexual hairdresser whose female client base is dwindling. Ilham, the nurse who faces the increasingly bleak conditions at the hospital and her own cancer, lives on the second floor.

Dalal is the narrator. A young woman in her 20s, with a facial deformity -- from the effects of a small stroke -- and a love of French literature, she now lives with her childless, self-absorbed aunt and psoriasis-ridden uncle. A land mine left from the 1967 conflict killed her parents as they were traveling from Baghdad to the Sinai Desert. The story moves forward through conversations, gossip and overheard remarks, revealing the increasingly bedraggled lives of those inhabitants unable or unwilling to leave, but still getting on with life. One day, finding the lift inoperable, Dalal and her uncle proceed to walk downstairs.

"The sewage draining from the ground floor flat has overflowed. We jump in synchrony across a pool of rotting lettuce leaves."

Time is mutable. Though set sometime in the 1990s, Khedairi also flits back and forth between Dalal's memories of her childhood, adolescence and the longed for Days of Plenty, prior to the sanctions.

Khedairi interlaces the universal themes of life, love, death and betrayal with the mundane tasks rendered surreal by the blockade. A routine trip to a dentist's office becomes an uncomfortable exercise in making do. The couch in the waiting room is an old leather car seat, and a flashlight held by the dentist's brother supplies the light for the examination. The dental instruments were "being sterilized in a small oven that, in the Days of Plenty, would have been used to roast chickens."

Khedairi's keen eye for detail is on a par with another young writer, Lara Vapnyar, whose compelling short story collection, "There Are Jews in My House," also floats back and forth through time while elegantly capturing in exquisite language the minutia of daily life.

"She chose a cream-colored French curtain," Khedairi writes. "It was embellished with soft brown knots made out of shiny nylon threads. It looked as though the tailor had scattered raw sugar cane crystals onto the fabric, and the crystals had dissolved, clinging to the cloth wherever they'd landed."

Through her encounters with Westerners, Khedairi perceived a blind spot in their views of Iraq.

"I realized that they knew little about Iraqis as human beings. Understandably, they were taking their impressions from the Iraq of the headlines."

In "Absent," Khedairi successfully eradicates this lack of vision by inviting "readers to share [her] seven-thousand-year-old culture, which was being destroyed by deprivation." •

*Julie Foster is a member of the National Book Critics Circle and also reviews books for Publishers Weekly.*

*This article appeared on page M - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle*

3 BR / 2 BA  
\$329,000

[CENTRAL WATERFRONT, PORTERO HILL, CHINA BASIN, SOMA](#)

1 BR / 1 BA  
\$759,000

[EMERYVILLE](#)  
2 BR / 2 BA  
\$375,000

[See more from this broker](#)



[About Top Homes](#)

#### REAL ESTATE



#### '90210' actress selling 90265 house

Actress Shannen Doherty ("Beverly Hills 90210") has put her Malibu 90265 home on the market at \$4 million.

Mortgage rates up, refinancing activity slows  
Some push to expand home-buying tax credit  
Square footage varies depending on formula

[Search Real Estate »](#)

#### CARS



#### 1999 Jaguar XK8 meets the need for a smoother sports car

Cal Tabucci, 66, taught junior high school in Los Gatos for 28 years and sold real estate for the next 10 years.

NASCAR says it's open to foreign automakers  
Tom and Ray settle an argument  
Photo: Car gallery. Submit your photos.

[Search Cars »](#)

#### JOBS



#### Job hunters flock to Avon, Mary Kay, Tupperware

Armies of new Avon ladies, Mary Kay reps and Tupperware sellers are advancing on living rooms across...

Bad credit and job offers don't mix  
Movers and Shakers  
Green-sector jobs booming

[Search Jobs »](#)

#### ADVERTISERS

Caribbean \$745+Beaches Resorts Save up to 60%

Equifax can help you monitor your credit score

PRINT E-MAIL SHARE

(0) View Comments »

Be the first to share your thoughts on this story.

Add Your Comment

You must be signed in to add a comment. Sign In | Register

Empty text box for user comment.

Submit



Raiders reportedly sign Greg Ellis



Susan Boyle will rejoin tour



Your guide to Gay Pride 2009



Woman's push for change at mosque



Acupuncturist uses needles, kindness

Ads by Yahoo!

Landsat Satellite Imagery

Get Your Custom NVDI Product. Buy one Get one Free. (www.LandsatImagePlace.com)

Satellite Equipment

C-band satellite equipment, 4DTV, big dish, digital programming. (skyvision.com)

Satellite for PC

3000 Stations for small one time fee, watch tv on your pc. (hoppymedic.udc01.hop.clickbank.net)



Subscribe to The Chronicle

Home News Sports Business Entertainment Food Living Travel Columns Classifieds Jobs Real Estate Cars Site Index [return to top]

Advertising Services: Place a Classified Advertise in Print Advertise Online Public Notices

Reader Services: Home Delivery Subscribers E-Edition Mobile RSS Feeds Newsletters Feedback Buy Photos FAQ Corrections Get Us

Company Info: Contact Us Hearst Corp. Privacy Policy Terms and Conditions Work for Us Chronicle in Education Events & Promotions Submissions

© 2009 Hearst Communications Inc.

