

Looking for Palestine

Review of Najla Said's Book

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Global Research, September 14, 2013

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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If you've seen Najla Said perform on stage or spoken to her, reading this memoir, you'll feel the same person. "Looking for Palestine" is a conversational memoir—fresh, youthful, and zesty. Najla's story and that of her parents, with her famous father ever present, begins with her birth and ends with his death when she's college age. It's well written, in a breezy style echoing her theatrical and comedy performances. Still her light style is underpinned by serious issues—personal psychological ones, ambiguous relations with the Jewish people who seem to be everywhere, and the painful inevitability of 'being Arab'... whatever that means.

Said's is a very New York story—upper class Manhattan American with teenage identity problems — an 'other', looking different while still being conventional except that the family excursions to Beirut are interrupted by wars.

As a teenager Said becomes only slowly informed about Palestine. She admits her interests are primarily school, books, friends and music. She also acknowledges enjoying an upper class life, surrounded by classmates who while Jewish are more like her than unlike. Indeed she seems to become aware of her father's exalted reputation and his mission through these classmates.

All this Najla Said admits to in this candid, fluid review of her young and unromantic although quasi exotic life. Very unpretentious. The revelations have a child's honest quality, with neither philosophical nor poetic depth. Just as with her on-stage performances, one feels she is in fact on stage in this book. But this makes her disclosures no less genuine and informing. We are treated to a steady output of memoirs and semi-autobiographical novels from a new generation of Arab writers, mainly women, mainly American, telling their story of becoming Arab— from the Iranian hostage affair, through Sabra-Shatila massacres, the intifadahs, the first Gulf war on Iraq, and of course the 911 attacks in 2001. Each crisis gradually, and only gradually, adds to Najla's maturity—a track many of us took. She emerges as savvy American artist with a political message.

We are uncertain if Najla's evolution is special because of a father rooted in the Palestinian cause, or if this is common to Arab American youth. Although he's woven into her story, I suspect Edward Said's mission as a nationalist leader was secondary to his daughter. Possibly his contributions in political thought and literary criticism are more central to Najla's own maturity and mission.

This is a valuable story of a young woman—definitely Arab— growing through many traumas associated with our 'being'. Although an all too frequent experience, this journey has not been told this way before. So, Najla's memoir add to the ongoing history of our people in

America. With this book she can reach many in her generation.

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