

Skies So Close

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With an upcoming book signing and a stirring film project, Iraqi born Betool Khedairi shares her personal insights into her life, work and inspiration as novelist and scriptwriter.

Her mother whispered her awake every morning, "Yella. Go wake up the pixies sleeping in the roses in the garden." Betool Khedairi would open her sleepy eyes onto her native Baghdad sunrise, and her imagination would soar. Those magical morning whisperings destined Betool to become a novelist. "How could I have not become a writer waking up this way every day?"

It took many years that spanned wars, sanctions, dictatorship, an unfulfilling position in her family's business that involved a great deal of travelling between Jordan, Iraq and England and the deaths of her Scottish mother and Iraqi father before Betool would publish her first novel, *A Sky So Close*, in 1999. But the story was conceived nine years earlier in 1990 when Betool and her family, minus her father who died suddenly in a car accident, were forced to leave Iraq during the First Gulf War. "I fought against depression by writing. I clung onto life by writing."

The book, available in Arabic, English, Italian, Dutch and French, is the semi-autobiographical story of a half-Iraqi, half-Scottish girl growing up in Iraq, so torn between cultures and stretched between ideologies that she loses her sense of identity until her mother's slow road to dying brings her back to herself.

Despite Betool's insistence that much of the story stems from her imagination rather than real events, her own life mirrors that of the female protagonist (who remains unnamed in the book) in profound ways. The girl in the book reconciles her cultures and ultimately herself from the vantage point of her mother's bedside as she watches her die from breast cancer; Betool completed *A Sky So Close* at her mother's bedside as she struggled against breast cancer. She eventually succumbed to her eleven-year battle and died in 1993, just twelve hours after Betool's wedding. "I cried at my first book signing because I missed mum so much. She loved books. She is the reason I became a writer. She was

"My logic is European, my emotions are Arabic"

the only person that believed in me as I wrote. She told me to follow my heart. And I did."

Writing can be a lonely process, especially when you are the first and only writer in your family. Being labelled the black sheep of her family made it lonelier. *A Sky So Close* broke taboos within her family, where the idea of liberal, independent, artistic thinking and execution was far less desirable than involvement in the family business. Betool's community, who assumed she was referring to her own parents in her novel, were only able to tame their outrage by excusing her with, "She's the daughter of the foreign woman".

With an enthusiasm that echoes the elasticity of a youth less than her 38 years, Betool excitedly paints an optimistic picture. "Everything that happened to me was beyond my dreams!" After repeatedly being asked by students to whom she lectured how it felt to be half Western and half Arab, Betool realised the best way to get the word out was on a mass scale. *A Sky So Close* had always lived in her head as visual images; film was the logical choice. She defined her next challenge.

After two years of searching for a director who understood

her cultural language, Betool saw a one-man theatre piece called *The Grave and Garden Shadows* in Amman. Fascinated by the director/actor's performance, she gave him a copy of *A Sky So Close*. Two days later he rang, "You are the voice I've been searching for. We must turn this into a film." *A Sky So Close* now exists as a feature film script, co-written by Betool and Iraqi director Tariq Hashim, who recently won the Golden Hawk award for his documentary *16 Hours* in Baghdad at the 2004 Arab Film Festival in Rotterdam.

Never having written a film script, Betool found the hardest part to be "chopping so much out of my book, condensing whole paragraphs into the flicker of a hand, the toss of a head. I learned from Tariq to let go, to give up the psychological build-up of novel writing." At first they worked separately, each making notes for the visualisation of the story. They came back together after a few weeks, found their "visual images to be worlds apart but ourselves mentally very close as we are linked by the Middle East in general, Iraq in particular," and wrote the script in three weeks.

Their synchronistic efforts paid off. Without a clue as to the dynamic of film industry protocol, Betool attended the Institut du Monde Arabe Film Festival in Paris last month, where she shopped her script around and now has several producers interested in the project.

If someone told Betool she'd be doing what she's doing now "I'd feel it was a fortune teller telling me a lie." Reaching for the sky, for her dreams, is what she did as a little girl playing on her swing. That sky is closer now than ever, particularly with the recent publishing of her second novel, *Ghayeb* (*The Absent One*).

Structured in a unique filmic format, broken down into extended scenes rather than chapters, *Ghayeb* is a series of stories linked by Um Mazin, an old female fortune-teller who becomes part psychotherapist, part escapism-artist for several Iraqi families that inhabit one apartment block. They stumble through in a Dada-esque collage, recounted through an eclectic mix of realistic narrative and surreal hallucinations while the infrastructure, and consequently the social fabric, of their community crumbles.

The crumbling of Betool's own community in Iraq continues to inform her work and her personal life. The state of Iraq's continual development and deconstruction has not been a hindrance to her, but rather a catalyst to heal, inform and entertain. "My logic is European, my emotions are Arabic." The disparity be-

Betool completed a *Sky So Close* at her mother's bedside as she struggled against breast cancer

tween her Scottish and Iraqi legacies too could be problematic, but instead provides the very foundation from which she creates in proactive and positive manners.

Coexisting comes naturally to her; rather than choosing, Betool finds it easy to combine and utilise opposing dynamics in her life, including novel writing and script writing. "The difference between writing a novel and a script is the difference between the old Iraq, where you know the smell and the taste and it's part of your memory – and the new Iraq, where you must let go and rewrite it, especially when it comes to the dialogue."

By not separating her Western and Arab legacies and by melting the division between written and visual story telling, Betool considers herself a positive example of the enormous possibilities of not just embracing differences, but celebrating them as well. "I am very proud to represent my cultures. It is what helped me hang on."

Yet, it is over 7000 years of history that defines her Iraqi-centric writing at the moment; despite being half-Scottish and living in Amman for over ten years, she can't escape the Iraqi pain that compels her to write. "My compass is always pointed to Iraq. I know where I came from. I don't know where I'm heading. I certainly know where I want to go back to." **JO**

Check out *Betool Khedairi* at www.betoolkhedairi.com, including details of her *Ghayeb* book signing on 30 August 2004 at *Al Anda Gallery* in Amman.