

Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* is our third offering for AROHO's Book Club. Halaby writes about Salwa, a Jordanian woman struggling to find and sustain a place in America. Her story is catalyzed by the personal and cultural fracturing of 9/11. She marries the man she loves, believing in goodness and the future. But caught between two cultures and condemned for events that are far beyond her control, she struggles to claim a place for herself in an unwelcoming land, and to construct a bulwark against the losses she senses are coming. AROHO women will recognize this story of love and hope and loss.

**Conversation with Laila Halaby,
February, 2008**

Playwright Jayne Benjulian was a finalist for the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Commission at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco last year. She attended Ellen McLaughlin's workshop at the AROHO retreat in June 2007. Her new play, In Poland, will be read at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis in May.

Cultural differences, especially as they are heard and expressed in language—the language of Americans and Arabs, of intimacy and silence—beat at the heart of Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*.

Considering the importance of language, her readers will want to know that the author pronounces her name LAY-la and her characters Jassim and Salwa, JASS-im and SEL-ua.

Laila Halaby and I spoke by telephone in February 2008. I began by asking her to read the first few words of the prologue to me in Arabic, which she did. Halaby asked me if I had read the hardcover version of the novel. I had read the paperback, and I was surprised to learn that she had written a longer prologue, from which, according to Halaby, the publisher cut several pages in the paperback edition, believing that it might “put you off . . . it just might. The object was to sell the book.” The next day, I ran to the University of San Francisco Library and borrowed a copy. That original version includes a

more concrete and more unambiguous presentation of prejudice against Arabs, in particular, an imaginary scene in which an Arab moves through an airport security line. “I remember writing it and thinking yes, that’s it: now I’ve said something I needed to say.” What remains in the prologue and epilogue is the dreamlike frame of a Palestinian folktale.

Jayne Benjulian: In your prologue, are we being invited to drop our preconceptions about Arabs?

Laila Halaby: Yes.

Jayne: When did you know in terms of your development of this story, that you were going to frame the novel with a “Before” and “After”?

Laila: Fairly far into it. As the story became more complicated, I felt like there needed to be an introduction, and I do have to say, I don’t know whether it’s the folktale background or just the way I view the world, but I do have this need to have starts and finishes that are fairly clear—not clear in terms of meaning—but in terms of “now we’re embarking on this.” I will also say in the course of writing *Once in a Promised Land*, it did not start out as a post-9/11 novel. It evolved during the writing of it and as a result of my living in this time and becoming more and more aware that there was no way I could write a book about these professional Arab people and not give a nod to 9/11. That nod got bigger and bigger.

Jayne: Did the novel start as a story about a professional Arab-American couple and their relationship?

Laila: Actually, I wanted to see what would happen to a very successful immigrant who had something happen to him—an accident—and how it would affect him. In my mind, I started with the accident and worked backwards. I also wanted to explore their relationship and the things that get said and don’t get said. In terms of it featuring in my book, 9/11 probably didn’t come about until the middle of it. While I was working on the book, 9/11 had already happened.

Jayne: How many years did you work on this novel?

Laila: My other book came out in 2003, and I had bits of *Once in a Promised Land* at that point. For a while, I worked from 4:00 to 6:00 every morning because I had a job and children. I was able to take a year off of work, so in total, I worked on *Once in a Promised Land* for a full year plus pieces of several other years.

Jayne: What are the Arabic words that begin the prologue? Are those fairy-tale words in the way “Once upon a time” are English fairy-tale words?

Laila: Yes, they are a way to begin a fairy tale. In Arabic: *kan / ya ma kan / fee qadeem az-zamaan*. The words are repeated in the first line in English: *They say there was or there wasn't in olden times . . .*

Jayne: What would Arab readers know about this prologue that non-Arab readers don't know? Are there things from this prologue that you have taken from an Arab myth?

Laila: Only the *kan / ya ma kan / fee qadeem az-zamaan*. Any Arab speaker will say, “That brings me back to when my grandmother told me stories.” There's a line later in the prologue: “the afterlife promise, *gardens beneath which rivers flow*” from the *Quran*. It's a subtle nod to post 9/11 when American media talked about the promise of virgins in heaven. There is so much publicized about virgins in the afterlife, but there is actually very little about virgins in the *Quran* and more language like the quote I used in my prologue. That is one consistent theme in the *Quran*. It amuses me that it's always the louder topic that gets grabbed onto and not the more sincere, present one. So that was why I chose to include the quote about the gardens.

Jayne: In *Once in a Promised Land*, your character Salwa notes that Americans always find the oddest quotations about the *Quran*. What would you want Americans to know about the *Quran*?

Laila: Honestly, the one thing that has always stuck with me is that in the eyes of god, we are all equal. Islam is a very egalitarian religion, and that sings to

me because that is such an important tenet of Islam . . . and to me, it's so clearly spelled out, that I wish those aspects were seized upon.

Jayne: Keep writing and maybe we will understand more about it. Let's turn to the immigrant experience. Maybe because you started it as a relationship book, the relationship remains crucial to the novel, and it is so painful in so many ways—these moments of silence and the things that Salwa and Jassim don't tell each other. Jassim embodies the assimilated immigrant experience. As a hydrologist working in the U.S. to promote accessibility to clean water, he's a contributing part of the American system, yet he is cast out. Each of the characters has a separate and growing experience of what America has made him or her. Can you speak about how these characters function as immigrants?

Laila: Any time you leave a place, you leave part of yourself behind, and if you can re-create some of that in your new place, I think your emotional comfort level is higher. I think for immigrants who find a society in which they're comfortable, whether it's with fellow immigrants or with people who share the same religion or people with the same ideas, they will be more comfortable. I think for this couple, Jassim has really left a lot behind purposely. His nod to home was marrying Salwa. They both view their relationship and life in America in such different ways. Salwa has such a unrealistic view of America—that ridiculous exported myth she accepted at such a young age that I don't think she can shake it. I think because of their differences, they are isolated from the communities that would normally embrace them. I see him in an academic community that would embrace him. Jassim has less need than Salwa to be reminded of a home where they'd be surrounded by family. So many times I've been talking with people here and they say, “you've become friends with people you'd never be friends with back home.” I think away from home one still wants the familiar, a level of comfort even though one must deal with people one would never socialize with back home. Salwa feels isolated. Partially because she doesn't

have children and partially because her husband is more intellectual. She's been cut off from things that she would have been a part of if she'd married a man more like her. Even if she had immigrated, their life together may not have been so isolated.

Jayne: Are you suggesting someone like Hassan?

Laila: Yes, somebody for whom home mattered more on an emotional level. Jassim would like to think that home life just doesn't matter so much.

Jayne: Is it Hassan who calls Jassim "effete"?

Laila: Yes, but that's the opposite of what the name means. *Jassim* implies somebody like "Butch" or "Igor," someone thick, not this little intellectual man. His name implies something he's not.

Jayne: And why is that?

Laila: I just really enjoy playing with ironies. In the first book I wrote, there's a character named Farah. I was at a reading and a Palestinian man said, "You know I think we can all enjoy this book, but for those of us who speak Arabic, we have an added joy of knowing that "farah" means "joy and happiness," and this is the most miserable woman in the entire book." I think it's fun to see how you deal with the givens in life and how often they're so contradictory.

Jayne: Well, you have plenty of irony in your book. One of those ironies is that they live near the desert, and the desert is reminiscent of the Middle East, yet it is nothing like the Middle East. Is that why your mother took you as a baby to Tucson, because it was the desert?

Laila: Her family was all from Philadelphia, and she moved to Arizona, to Tucson in particular, because it reminded her of Amman, where she felt at peace.

Jayne: Tell me how your parents met.

Laila: My mother had worked in the Middle East for a number of years. She had been in Jordan for some years where she worked for the State Department

Jayne: Did you ever fantasize that she was like Queen Noor?

Laila: You know, I didn't fantasize about my mother; I fantasized about my father. When my mother and I came back to the U.S., my father stayed in Jordan. He always lived in Jordan. Since he was the one who was missing, I built him up as being someone superhuman. I think a lot of girls do that.

Jayne: Do you think it feeds your imagination to live in Tucson?

Laila: My mom always said that Tucson was so much like Amman of thirty years ago, and I've never felt that. Certainly when you drive down from the foothills, there are some similarities, but it's never been particularly evocative. When we used to drive north of Los Angeles where you're getting those soft hills, to me that was more nostalgic. Maybe Tucson makes you think of things more in their bare bones form.

Jayne: Have you thought of writing a memoir?

Laila: No. I have this obsessively honest side. I'm much too editorial. It would have to be honest rather than a good story. I'm working on a young adult novel, and I'm struck with how delightful it is to change the story. I've had this girl's voice nagging in my head, and it's easier—and more self-indulgent—to change it the way I want it.

Jayne: Let's talk about the writing life. Unlike many writers, you don't teach, but work as a counselor.

Laila: Yes. I counsel people who want to stop smoking. But of course they never just talk about quitting. People tell their stories, and it has made me a better listener. I am struck by how it just takes one bad stroke of luck, and then there's a sort of downhill spiral that is hard to recover from. This idea has stuck with me. Penny still has this hope that she can recover. I enjoyed writing about her character. At the end, I didn't enjoy writing about Salwa. Penny had her own tragedies, but she wasn't constantly making bad choices.

Jayne: And you worked while you were writing this book?

Laila: I took a year off. I went back to work, and that was good because I found that I needed structure. I work three days a week and have two days a week that are for writing. I drag out my laptop and work at the dining room table. You know, I read the AROHO web page [on the Gift of Freedom Awards], and I was touched by what people go through to write. It reminded me of how much I put aside to write and how much you have to do that. I am always struck by how difficult it is to put things away and write.

Jayne: You write poetry, too.

Laila: Yes. I took a poetry class with a compelling teacher. He would tell stories, and listening to the cadence of his voice, I learned that I could tell a different kind of story in the space of a poem. I think I found my voice with him. Cadence, voice, rhythm: I think that's what poetry has given me.

Jayne: Is there anything you wish an interviewer would ask you and hasn't?

Laila: You haven't asked me about the book's character Jake. Everyone asks me about Jake.

Jayne: Because I think I understand why Salwa does what she does with him, although I winced when she returned to say goodbye.

Laila: Lots of people don't want to believe that someone could be so yucky. Often there are things readers don't want to believe, and that makes them very uncomfortable.

Jayne: When Jassim breaks his date with Penny, he contemplates the alternative, having safe American sex with her. In the world of the novel, what is safe American sex?

Laila: At that moment, casual sex was something disconnected from the life he came from. He could've gone and had sex with Penny, and there would be no repercussions, no one to hold him accountable.

Jayne: It becomes clear what Salwa misses in Arab culture. What does Jassim miss?

Laila: He came from a family that is attached to the

land, and whether he wants to admit it or not, if he walks in somewhere he's recognized, he's known, he has a story behind him. What he didn't realize is that even in America, you need that familiarity to some degree, and because he had none in the U.S., he loses himself.

Jayne: What is he searching for in the boy's neighborhood?

Laila: He starts realizing that he's been there, but he hasn't seen anything. He's looking for peace within himself for what he's done, but he finds it without understanding what he has taken away. Looking for what is now missing from the world, in the form of the boy, he starts seeing things that he had no idea were there in the first place.

Jayne: Let's turn to the ending. I was struck by a question in your publisher's Study Guide: *What do you think happens at the end of the novel? Is Salwa dying?* I thought, what? She's not dying. But that part of her that believed in the Disney America is dying. Salwa is *disfigured* by a sharp edge, and the young woman in the folktale is *disfigured* with a knife and lies *crumpled and bleeding*. Salwa is freed from her attachment to America. The nightingale turns into *an ordinary man* and *carries her home across land and sea*. Jassim is *an ordinary man*, too.

Laila: Yes.

Jayne: You want those parallels to resonate, and yet you take great pains to tell us *it was and it wasn't . . . an American fairy tale*. You want people to see the parallels, yet it's not a happy ending.

Laila: So much has to do with your expectations. I've heard strong reactions. Some people need to have an ending. This book does not make people feel comfortable.

Jayne: You finished writing *Once in a Promised Land* in 2005. How does it feel to be talking about a novel you're no longer engaged in creating? Do you feel as if you're constantly being dragged back to the world of the novel you've left?

Laila: I used to talk about it with my editor. I have the best editor in the whole, entire world.

Jayne: Helene Atwan.

Laila: And we used to talk about these people as if we had met them and they existed. And we talked about it so much that I think I really do believe that they exist on a certain level. It doesn't feel remotely odd. Actually, I enjoy talking about it with people who have read it well—and you've read it particularly well—they're alive, and it's safe to talk about them: I don't have to explain very much.

Jayne: You're writing a young adult novel. Do you imagine writing—or are you taking notes for—another adult novel?

Laila: I'm working on one of those, too. I'm not one of those who wakes up, has a plan, writes it all down, writes out the outline, and then does it. I write every day, but I don't plan what I'm going to work on. And so I go for a while where I do poetry, and then I do work on the young adult thing, and then I have a couple of different novels or a couple of different sides of the same one I've been working on for a while, so it's just which one takes off—or which one gets an advance.

Jayne: Do you keep notes in categories?

Laila: Kind of. It's more folders on my laptop. I have different folders, and sometimes the folders need to move to other folders. I'm a visual person; if I put something away, I forget about it. If I have the computer open, I can look at every document.

Jayne: What are you hoping and wishing for the future?

Laila: In a perfect world, I would like to just be able to write enough that I could live . . . so if I chose to keep my day job I could, but it wouldn't be under pain of losing the car kind of thing. I would like to have the luxury of hanging out with these characters and having a predictable desire from outside for wanting to read them. I find this "who knows what the next thing is going to be"—and I know it's just the nature of art as a whole—but I find it's frustrating. There was a time when I was younger and didn't have a family and I wouldn't have cared as much. I was okay with the flexibility of whatever comes, but I find as I get older, I would just like to be able to keep writing and not always have to predict: okay, I need to work *this* much more unless *this* happens . . .

Jayne: Amen, is what I would say to that.

Laila: I think I heard an echo of that across the world.

**Discussion Guide for Readers of Laila Halaby's
Once in a Promised Land
by Ramona Reeves**

Ramona Reeves has attended two AROHO retreats. Currently, she is working on her MFA in fiction at New Mexico State University. She has published poetry, magazine articles, and in 2007, received a residency and grant from the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for Arts.

1. The title of the novel "Once in a Promised Land" encompasses both secular and religious ideas. The U.S. has been referred to as a "promised land" or refuge for persecuted peoples, while

parts of the Middle East have also been referred to as "the promised land" in terms of a sacred place. Additionally, the title offers the word, "Once," a familiar beginning to fairy tales. How do you interpret the title in relation to what happens in the novel?

2. Place and home are deeply rooted themes in the novel. For Salwa, living in Tucson does not make it a home. On page 325, Jassim realizes that, "He loved Salwa because in her he saw home . . ." Do Jassim's and/or Salwa's definitions of home change during the course of the novel? How do you define home? Has your definition remained static throughout your life?

3. At times, Salwa and Jassim tell outright lies, but more often, the distance between them swells as a result of withholding or concealing information. For example, when Jassim plans to meet Penny at the botanical garden, he lies to Salwa and claims to be meeting a client on a Saturday, although he is no longer employed. In addition to the lie, he withholds the fact that he is meeting a woman and is "Careful not to add *for him*" (p. 309). Is concealing or withholding information the same thing as lying? Why, or why not?
4. Hassan's success as a television producer is partly made possible by Salwa's departure. Yet, he pines for her for nearly a decade and attempts repeatedly to contact her before his wedding. What do you make of his actions? What connection, if any, does he have with the Clever Hassan in the folk tale?
5. American culture as viewed through Salwa's eyes wants to ". . . show everything, but to remain an island" (p. 54). Jassim thinks, "Jordan pumps in the blood, but America stays in the mouth" (p. 64). Also, as Salwa becomes involved with Jake, she decides that she will work like an American by letting her ". . . soul get sucked out . . ." (p. 189). What do you make of these assessments of American culture and others like them, which are prevalent throughout the novel?
6. A ghula appears several times in the folk tales of *Once in a Promised Land*. In Arabic culture, a ghula is a female demonic entity that ensnares victims only to gorge on them when they are within her reach. Only the truly wise, such as Nus Nsays in the folktale beginning on page 93, can escape this fate. Salwa remembers that her grandmother never revealed the identity of the ghula in the folktale. Who, or what, do you think represents the ghula in the novel?
7. Both Tucson and Jordan inhabit desert terrain. The desert is a beautiful, but also a desolate place. At the same time, water is both a source of life and a means to contaminate a population in the novel. Halaby uses water language throughout the book, in conjunction with the tidal of lies and growing distance between Jassim and Salwa. For example, Salwa is Jassim's ". . . anchor, who seemed to be drifting now" (p. 151). How does the metaphor of the desert speak to the relationship between Salwa and Jassim? Are there other places where water imagery is used to convey the thoughts and feelings of Jassim, Salwa and/or other characters? What do these two images—water and desert—say about Jassim and Salwa's relationship and how do these dichotomous images mirror the inner and outer landscapes of Jassim and Salwa?
8. Penny and Jake present Jassim and Salwa with serious moral dilemmas at exactly the moment when the lies between the couple have gulfed into an enormous chasm. Is the appearance of Penny and Jake coincidental, or does their timing say something about the needs of Jassim or Salwa? What does this say about human nature? Given your answers, consider the folktales with which we are presented. What path do you think Jassim and Salwa's relationship takes at the end of the novel?
9. Penny and Jake are no better able to achieve a happy American life than are Salwa and Jassim. Ironically, when Salwa and Jassim's relationship breaks apart, they have the most in common with their American counterparts, even as they are being unfairly singled out because of their ethnicity. What do you make of this turn of events?
10. Hassan and Jake are each attracted to Salwa, despite the fact that she is married. What attracts them to her? What part does culture play for

each of them? How is it different for Jake than Hassan and vice versa?

11. 9/11 unmistakably impacts Salwa and Jassim's lives. For example, Jassim's erratic behavior—stemming from grief about Evan's death—is interpreted as suspicious activity by Jassim's acquaintances and co-workers, simply because he is Arab-American. Other incidences—such as Salwa's sending \$14,000 on September 12th to her family—also compound the situation and conspire to undo Jassim. Can you think of times in your life when circumstances caused your actions or intentions to appear differently than they actually were?
12. The disruption of order is a key ingredient in Halaby's novel. On the national level are the events of 9/11. On a personal level, Salwa disrupts the order of her birth control routine, which eventually leads to the physical disruption of her pregnancy. For Jassim, order is destroyed not only when Salwa lies to him, but when he kills Evan. Likewise, Hassan's life is disrupted when Salwa marries Jassim and Mary Parker's

life is disrupted by her son's death. It seems that each disruption feeds the chaos to eventually result in violence. What other examples of disruption and imbalance can you identify in the novel? In your personal experience, how are order and balance restored in difficult situations?

13. We are told that, "Behind every story there is another . . ." (p. 239). How does this idea fit with the story of Jassim and Salwa and the people who impact their lives, such as Marcus, Jack Franks, Mary Parker, etc.? How many stories within stories can you identify in the novel? How do you define "story"?
14. Near the end of the novel, Jassim realizes that, ". . . they had spent their lives together not saying what mattered most . . ." (p. 303). What things do you think Jassim is referring to regarding he and Salwa's relationship? Do you see any evidence of a similar realization from Salwa? What things matter most in your life that are not often said? Why do you think it is hard for us to say what matters most?

Study Guide of Laila Halaby's: *Once in a Promised Land* by Roberta Harold

Roberta Harold, currently at work on her second novel in a historical mystery series, is an M.A. graduate of Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English. "Big Whoop About Zip," her modern adaptation of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" for high school students, premiered in 2003. "Midsummer City," an urban middle-school adaptation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," will premiere in New York in May 2008. She has attended all three of AROHO's retreats for women writers and divides her time between Montpelier, Vermont, and Brooklyn, New York.

1. Any work of fiction can be thought of as the interaction of character and circumstance. In the case of *Once in a Promised Land*, we may also add culture—the cultural formation from the Middle East that Jassim and Salwa bring to their lives in America, and the mass culture of America that surrounds them. As you look at the events and outcomes in the novel, to what degree do you think each of these three factors—character, circumstances, and culture—determines the unfolding of the plot? Does one predominate over the others in your reading?

What balance of these three factors creates a satisfying reading experience for you, and why? For example, how do you think the story of Jassim and Salwa's marriage, and their professional lives, might

have been the same or different without the events of 9/11?

2. Halaby's narrative style is an interesting blend of highly specific, concrete detail—observe, for instance, the way she describes Jassim's initial visit to the Fitness Bar: his drive there, preparations for the swim, the swim itself and his grooming ritual afterwards—and elaborate, colorful metaphors anchored by active-voice verbs which could be said to verge on magical realism or perhaps to contribute to the theme of folk-tale or fairy-tale which weaves throughout the book.

An example or two: “. . . an out-and-out lie, the kind that slips into the waist of your clothes and slowly, slowly expands until you are so uncomfortable you think you might pop,” and “No telling how such a good plan can slit itself apart, bleed across the tiles, through many layers of glaze, and leave stain after stain to remember, always to remember.”

What are some other instances you noted of these two stylistic elements: the concrete, realistic detail and the elaborate metaphor? How do these elements, in your reading, affect your engagement in the narrative? How successful do you think Halaby's use of such metaphors is in drawing us into her narrative and engaging us in the situations and feelings of her characters?

3. Halaby uses Salwa's relationships with Hassan, her first boyfriend; with Jassim; and with her co-worker Jake to illustrate different elements of her personality and her internal conflicts. What does her attraction to and interaction with each of these men tell us about who she is as a person and where she is on her journey as a character? Similarly, Jassim's interactions with his first love, Cornelia; with Salwa; and with the sympathetic waitress Penny illuminates aspects of his evolution as a character. What do we learn about him from these interactions?

4. On page 60, after Salwa has learned she is pregnant, her thoughts turn to “wishing that things between her and Jassim were as they used to be, not as they had become.” What evidence have we had up to that point about how things used to be between them, and the nature of the transition to where they are now? How does the *placement* of the major flashback revealing how Salwa and Jassim met and married, which occurs about three-quarters of the way through the narrative, illuminate your understanding of the issues in their relationship? In the balance between giving the reader tools to understand the characters and their situation, and having a well-paced narrative that awakens and maintains our interest and engagement with what it does *not* tell right away, how well do you think this element of the narrative succeeds?

5. Water and its absence are recurring metaphors in *Promised Land*. What does water and its conservation or waste mean in the context of Salwa and Jassim's relationship? How does Halaby use these to gauge the state of their marriage? How does the abuse and depletion of water in their desert environment—for example, Salwa's lengthy showers—illuminate the issues in their marriage and relate to the broader problems Halaby identifies in American society?

Another recurring set of images in the narrative relates to the uses of fiber, sometimes as personal covering and sometimes as connective material: Halaby frequently refers to threads and their tangling, binding, and unraveling, and to fabric, with its role in veiling, concealing, and revealing. In what ways, for example, do Salwa's decisions and choices about her clothing (especially her lingerie) mirror her feelings, her state of mind, and her changing values? How do the “ties that bind” her and Jassim to their old lives as Jordanians tangle and ensnare them in America?

6. What is there about their native cultures and about American culture that respectively make Salwa and Jassim feel a) constrained and b) liberated or supported?

Garrison Keillor of "A Prairie Home Companion" once noted that it's "convenient to be forbidden to do what you didn't want to do anyway." As the book goes on, Salwa seems to find the permissiveness of American culture increasingly oppressive, which forces us to think of it in ways we're not used to. For example, when Salwa and Jake are beginning the flirtation that leads to a destructive affair, Salwa reflects (or Halaby tells us) that "Here in America, no one said anything, no one intruded in other people's business or stopped things like this from occurring...there were no intrusive neighbors or blunt aunties to announce what they knew and say, *You'd better not, or else*. Here people sat on the front lawn waiting for the aftermath, the hideous carnage of advantage taken."

What insights are to be found here about the ways in which American culture deprives people of safe havens for being who they are? Do you see the author coming down on one side or another of the cultural divide between Arab and American? Does one culture or the other come off as more nurturing, humane, life-enhancing? If so, what narrative devices does Halaby use to get this across?

7. Halaby sets up her narrative as a sort of fairy tale, opening and closing and occasionally interspersing with traditional story-telling devices. For example, Jake is introduced with "Once upon a time a young man..." Why do you think Halaby uses this fairy-tale device to bring the character into the narrative? Why doesn't she name him at that point? Another example, after Salwa's miscarriage: "Maybe this was the fork in the road, a last chance to go right...Too bad that forgetting is so easy, especially for fickle girls in fairy tales." In what respects is Salwa a "fickle girl," and what fairy tale is she living in?

Salwa's unveiled beauty attracts the attention of a morally deficient/evil man, and she suffers harsh consequences for succumbing to his advances by being disfigured to a point where being veiled might actually be preferable for her. Evan, whose skateboard carries the legend "Terrorist Hunting

License," is killed, in an accident that is arguably by his own fault, by Jassim, an Arab he'd probably have labeled as a terrorist. Where on the spectrum from dramatic irony to fairy-tale outcome to moral judgment on the author's part do you see these events falling?

8. The "After" section with its myth of the ghula and the maiden sets up an analogy with the story of Jassim and Salwa. Looking back at the main story, what might the ghula represent? How does the Hassan in that story correspond to or differ from the Hassan in the main story?

9. The Promised Land of Salwa's dreams is said to be the America of marketing—"the exported America of Disneyland and hamburgers." While she is recovering from her miscarriage, she vows that she will have to make a change in her life, and that if Jassim is not willing to have children, she may have to "turn this into an American story and leave."

What are the key differences as the author sees them between "American stories" and "Arab stories"?

When Jassim makes a date with Penny the waitress and then decides to break it, Jassim says to himself, "I could have taken her away, somewhere private, and had American sex with her . . ." What do you think in his mind constitutes "American" sex versus other kinds?

10. Both Salwa and Jassim, about the time Salwa begins her affair and Jassim goes to the dead boy's mother's house to apologize, reflect on the emptiness and meaninglessness of their life in America, about the broken promises of the promised land. "...he saw that the past nine years had been a sabbatical from real life, a rich man's escape from the real world." What "real world" is it that Jassim has been on sabbatical from? What have they each been seeking in America that they haven't found—what is the broken "promise" of the promised land? What do they recall from their lives in Arab culture that they miss in their American life?

Since its beginning A Room of Her Own Foundation (AROHO) has given almost \$500,000 to creative women through our \$50,000 Gift of Freedom awards, scholarships, retreats, public readings, the AROHO Book Club, and our customized web-based resource center.

AROHO has hosted over 200 women writers at our unique retreats which feature a world-class faculty, and we have sponsored approximately \$50,000 in scholarships for women writers to attend our retreats as well as other intensive writing programs.

AROHO promotes the interests of our community of women writers by sponsoring and supporting national writing programs and journals, including the National Poetry Slam and the AWP National Conference, the American Academy of Poetry, Poets and Writers, and Creative Nonfiction.

Dedicated to furthering the vision of writer Virginia Woolf, AROHO continues to change the lives of creative women by rewarding and showcasing their important voices to our own community as well as the marketplace. AROHO is committed to bridging the often fatal gap between a woman's economic reality and her artistic creation.

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