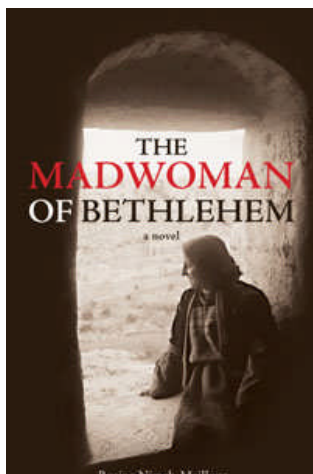


The Madwoman of Bethlehem

by Rosine Nimeh-Mailloux



In mid-20th century Bethlehem, a woman finds that the only way to take control of her life is to feign madness

It is 1957, and Amal is an inmate of the “Bethlehem Oasis for Troubled Women,” having feigned insanity for nine years in order to avoid being put to death for the murder of her abusive husband. When a violent attack by a fellow inmate confines her to bed, Amal must not only heal physically, but also come to grips with her traumatic memories. These take her back to the harsh childhood, restricted life, and unhappy marriage that culminated in her “madness” and incarceration.

Amal’s story offers compelling insights into cultural norms that exist throughout the world even today, norms that tolerate the violence, repression, and abuse of girls and women. Perhaps most disturbing is that the author brings us into a world where the guardians and foot soldiers of repression are women themselves, often mothers and grandmothers who’ve experienced no better, and whose only power comes from what they can wrest from their relationships with other women.

Amal ultimately finds hope and redemption through her relationships at the asylum and hospital, finally discovering that the support and kindness of others gives her the strength to forgive the past and take control of her future.

Discussion Points:

1. How does the structure of the novel—alternating the present and past—serve the story and the readers?
2. Is the main character, Amal, a weak or strong character?
3. To what extent is she the weaver of her own destiny, or the victim of her time and culture?

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4. Is her husband a villain or a victim?
5. Are there similarities between Middle Eastern and North American culture in the way women are viewed and treated by in-laws and husbands?
6. How do women perpetuate their own difficult role in society? What is the answer to their situation?
7. What do you think of Amal's parents and the way they treated her?
8. Some novels have definite heroes and villains. Are there heroes and villains here, or must they simply be viewed as a product of their culture?
9. Does the novel give the reader a clear picture of the setting? Do you feel you know Bethlehem and Jerusalem a little more than you did before reading it?
10. To what extent does this novel relate to women's experiences in other parts of the world?
11. Is the novel realistic and believable?
12. How did you find the mood of the novel? Somber, dark, pessimistic or combining gloomy elements with brighter ones to create a balance?
13. Is the ending satisfactory? Realistic or otherwise?

About the Author

Rosine Nimeh-Mailloux was born in Bethlehem, and raised in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. She graduated from Arizona State University and went on to teach English in Bethlehem and Ramallah's Teacher Training Centre for Refugee girls. After coming to Canada and settling in Ontario, she taught high school for 28 years. She self-published her first book *Mustard and Vinegar* (2001), a collection of 15 stories that tell about the struggles of her people in Southern Turkey, Syria, and Palestine. Now retired, Rosine lives in Belle River, Ontario with her husband. This is her first novel.