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Balcony On The Moon: Coming Of Age In Palestine



Synopsis

A Palestine Book Award Shortlist Selection
A VOYA Nonfiction Honor Roll Selection
A Skipping Stones Honor Book
Picking up where *Tasting the Sky* left off, *Balcony on the Moon* follows Ibtisam Barakat through her childhood and adolescence in Palestine from 1972-1981 and chronicles her desire to be a writer. Ibtisam finds inspiration through writing letters to pen pals and from an adult who encourages her to keep at it, but the most surprising turn of all for Ibtisam happens when her mother decides that she would like to seek out an education, too. This memoir is a touching, at times funny, and enlightening look at the not often depicted daily life in a politically tumultuous area.
A Margaret Ferguson Book

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 18 years

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Gr 7 Up—An endearing memoir from an acclaimed author. This work picks up after the events of Barakat's previous title, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*, which left off in 1971. Barakat's lovely, lyrical style depicts an adolescence that will be simultaneously familiar to readers in its universal themes (struggle to become one's own person, family life and its usual squabbles) and very different in its backdrop of 1970s Palestine. The era was rife with political turmoil—the region was still reeling from the Six-Day War in 1967 and the continued fallout. With dreams of becoming a writer, Barakat embarked on a new path. She found encouragement

from the adults in her life, especially her mother, who decided she wants an education, too.

Barakat's recollections of her mother's educational pursuits are especially poignant. She reflects on her mother's chafing at the religious and cultural norms that forced her to leave school after the sixth grade and to marry at 15. Barakat wonderfully captures the mood of the time and place once again. At times humorous and heartbreaking, this work will immerse readers in Barakat's experience, leaving them with a perhaps a broadened worldview. VERDICT Highly recommended for upper middle school and high school libraries. Elaine Baran Black, Georgia Public Library Service, Atlanta

"Lyrical and moving, Barakat's first-person, present-tense story catapults the reader into a time when political tensions and the battle for human rights rage on, and the fight, not only for survival, but to have a voice is in full swing. Not to be missed, this memoir is a wonderful addition to any library. VOYA, starred review "Divided into five parts correlating with the family's five homes, the book captures Barakat's growing understanding of the complex dynamics in her parents' marriage, her outrage at gender-based restrictions, and her determination not to live a life like that of her mother. When her willingness to question and explore opens doors for her, Barakat receives encouragement and support from surprising sources, validating her sister's statement that "being Palestinian teaches you to be ready for any destiny." This is a compelling personal history, brimming with humor, wisdom, and empathy. Publishers Weekly, starred review "Told in a first-person, present-tense voice, the episodic narrative deftly combines personal and political events. . . A pervasive sense of loss informs much of her childhood, with a growing realization that no promising future exists for her or her siblings in Palestine. A poetic, deeply felt coming-of-age story. Kirkus, starred review "In this sequel to *Tasting the Sky* (2007), a memoir and winner of the Arab American Book Award, Barakat moves beyond her early school years during the Six-Day War and its uprooting aftermath. She focuses on the years 1971-81, when she's a feisty protofeminist and her family shifted about in the occupied West Bank, trying to find a place that felt safe and like home... The beauty of the writing is its clear-eyed matter-of-fact-ness. Barakat doesn't plead for sympathy (political or emotional); she just recalls, in concrete detail, this particular world as she experienced it as a young woman, and the result is as inspiring as it is engrossing." Booklist "Barakat's lovely, lyrical style depicts an adolescence that will be simultaneously familiar to readers in its universal themes (struggle to become one's own

person, family life and its usual squabbles) and very different in its backdrop of 1970s Palestine. . . At times humorous and heartbreaking, this work will immerse readers in Barakat's experience, leaving them with perhaps a broadened worldview. . . Highly recommended for upper middle school and high school libraries. School Library Journal

Balcony on the Moon is a moving, fast-reading memoir of life in the Occupied West Bank told from the point of view of a teenager who lived there. Ibtisam Barakat's descriptions of family life, school life and the surrounding community of Ramallah are unique for English-language readers, and perhaps even for Arabic readers. The memoir reveals a girl who is sensitive, intelligent and unusually self-confident for a girl in any society, but particularly hers. Ibtisam's parents are unique individuals who encourage their children to be themselves. The mother in particular is an excellent role model for her daughter in many, if not all, ways. Ibtisam's determination to be educated, to travel, and to remain unmarried until she at least attains her ambitions make her a plucky, likable and admirable protagonist. This book is a "must read" for those who enjoy memoirs or who are interested in the Middle East. Every library should have a copy in their Young Adult section.

Near the end of Ibtisam Barakat's wonderful memoir of her school years, she reports a conversation with her younger sister, Mona, during which Mona finally is quoted as saying, "being Palestinian teaches you to be ready for any destiny." When she has said this, the narrator's comment is: "Now we are silent for a long time." This conversation comes as the narrator is resisting an "arranged marriage" and hoping for a superior conclusion to her education so far, hoping to step beyond the imposed destinies to earn the right to choose her preferred destiny and goal. Certainly this volume, especially in combination with her fascinating earlier account of her childhood, *Tasting the Sky*, would convince any reader that the ability to encounter, confront, understand, and overcome the numerous obstacles a young Palestinian must survive just to become an adult, requires, as Mona says, that one be ready for any destiny. Ms. Barakat's first memoir, *Tasting the Sky*, is distinguished in particular by the skill with which she sustains the "voice" and perspective of a very young child, while managing to convey the complexity and painful crosscurrents of life in Palestine during periods of conflict and even destruction. Her family is forced to move several times, she spends time in a transit camp, separated from her family, and yet this child consistently fights her fears and pain with affirmation of her love for language, for the beauty of the world around her even in its upheavals and threat. While it is not necessary to read it first in order to understand *Balcony on the*

Moon, I feel certain that anyone who has read one of them will want to read the other and will await, with eagerness, the publication of the forthcoming third volume. The second volume, *Balcony on the Moon: Coming of Age in Palestine*, differs appropriately in several ways. Where the younger narrator saw the world with eyes of wonder, but also of fear and anxiety based on a child's inevitable confusion about the adult world and its conflicts, the narrator approaching her schooling and the prospects of choosing a mission and a profession (for her, they are close to the same), the voice is sometimes more didactic (explaining both secular and religious customs, for example), and more practical. She wants two things and must strategize ways to have them against potential resistance from her family and community: first, she wants to study, to progress toward the completion of her education and move on to college; second, she wants to work, in part to earn money to help her family, but also to gain experience through contact with the world around her. Further, in the realm of work, she wants her education and her jobs to contribute to and sustain her passion for language, a passion that is expressed powerfully throughout both volumes. This is a woman looking back at the origins of her commitment to her greatest task, to write and to create the narratives and poetry that will communicate to a world unfamiliar with her heritage and culture the power and beauty, and the justice, of the Palestinian claim for recognition, for respect, for acknowledgment of the legitimacy of their grievance against the political and social forces that oppress them, but also for the basic right to communicate and to relate with others. Barakat's narrator, who is herself, speaks with both analytical clarity and emotional power about being in this world, specifically about being Palestinian in this world but also, universally, being human. The subject she carefully weaves through her narratives is important to all peoples of all ages. I find it difficult to understand why these memoirs are being marketed as "young adult" when they speak so eloquently to readers of all ages. Of course, it is important that young adults have access to and interest in these volumes, and so perhaps labeling them in this way is a good strategy. But I would say to readers of good will and open minds--these are volumes worth reading. We learn important things from them..

Palestinian Ibtisam Barakat, author of the internationally acclaimed *TASTING THE SKY*, a Palestinian Childhood, comes of age in this haunting memoir *BALCONY ON THE MOON*. Though conflict is the inevitable backdrop of her narrative of growing up under military occupation, the main theme of *BALCONY ON THE MOON* is the power of creativity and human potential in responding to conflict. As a young girl Ibtisam defies the social norms that would keep her from independence and fulfilling her dreams. Her creativity and passionate love for language help her to excavate her own

path and in so doing she finds jewels of insights and unexpected doors of healing. **BALCONY ON THE MOON** is the story of a Palestinian girl and a Palestinian family also -- a poignantly human cast of characters that humanizes a population all too often portrayed only as statistics. Additionally, this book gives readers a clear glimpse of Ibtisam's beloved homeland, with the natural beauty as well as the scars. **BALCONY ON THE MOON** is a luminous memoir that leaves the reader wanting more writings from this brilliant author. This is hoping for more books by Ibtisam Barakat.

What a treat to be drawn into the daily life and inner world of Ibtisam Barakat, the real life Palestinian teenage girl who is the heroine of *Balcony on the Moon*. This well-crafted story transports its reader to the very center of schools, family homes, landscapes and cities shared by Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the 1970s. While learning about the hardships, strife and indignities suffered by the Palestinians we also share in one of the great heartwarming truths about humanity: tragedy can also birth great resiliency, surprising creative gifts and sometimes fate delivers just the helping hand that is needed! Reading this memoir feels like receiving an affirmative gift about the spirit of humanity and creativity that can prevail despite all.

Balcony on the Moon and *Tasting the Sky* are two of the most important books written when it comes to understanding the strength of the human spirit in the face of oppression. Somehow Ibtisam Barakat has managed to find compassion and understanding for herself, for her people, for Israelis, and for all people despite the difficulties that were part of her life. Sometimes I am hesitant to read books on these difficult topics, afraid that I will end up feeling hopelessness and despair. Yet reading these books has had the opposite effect. My heart is bigger and my courage is strengthened because of the journey I have followed through her work.

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