



Etel Adnan

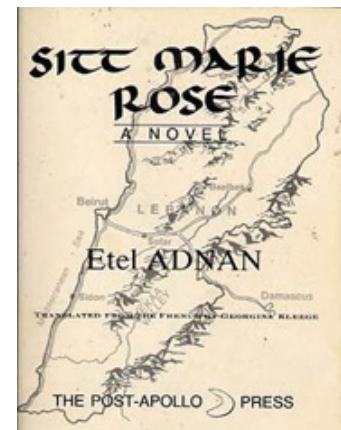
Biography

Etel Adnan was born in 1925 in Beirut, Lebanon. Her father was a Muslim Syrian and her mother was a Christian Greek. She received her early education at Ecole Superieure des Lettres, a private French Catholic school. Adnan was raised speaking French, and her father taught her written Arabic. She learned English throughout her schooling. Being multi-lingual presented a dilemma for Adnan: she was unsure of what language to write in due to the political situation between France and Arab countries. She found an outlet for her poetic expression through painting. “Abstract art was the equivalent of poetic expression; I didn’t need to use words, but colors and lines. I didn’t need to belong to a language-oriented culture but to an open form of expression” (Etel Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language”). Adnan studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, Paris, University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard. After receiving her degree in philosophy she taught philosophy of art at the Dominican College of San Rafael, California. She has also presented courses, classes and lectures at over 40 universities or colleges throughout the US.

Adnan has more than ten books of poetry and fiction published, including *Paris When It's Naked*, *Of Cities and Women*, and *Sitt Marie Rose*, which has been translated into over ten languages and is considered a classic of Middle Eastern literature. Adnan contributed to *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* in 1994. Adnan combines Arabic calligraphy with modern language in many of her works, including *The Arab Apocalypse*. She also creates oils, ceramics and tapestry.

Quick Facts

- * Born 1925
- * Most famous work is *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978)
- * Raised in Lebanon and identifies as an Arab artist



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In her book *Of Cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* (1993), Adnan illustrates cultural experience via a collection of letters from cities throughout Europe and Beirut. In one instance, Adnan uses the form of a letter to capture the essence of Holland. This format provides the reader with an accurate yet metaphoric vision of Europe. The letter proclaims: “Holland is immaterial. The sky and water begin to flow into one another and into a kind of osmosis. One’s spirit becomes feast passage, transparency, flotation.” Adnan not only literally describes Holland; she creates a forceful sense of imagery, which makes the reader feel her words as opposed to just reading them.

This ability to transform reality into metaphor is a key aspect of Adnan’s creative genius. Her immense talent and lyrical fluency, however, does not cease at poetry and prose. Adnan has also mastered the skill of writing in essay form. “To Write in a Foreign Language” is a powerfully written essay by Adnan that deeply discusses the history of her personal involvement with various languages and how they have affected her own poetry and prose. The author insightfully views her childhood as the root of her openness to language in general. Her historical and emotional essay pinpoints the importance of culture and aestheticism in written work. Adnan describes her college experience in detail because it was, for her, a time of “permanent discovery”. It was during this time that Adnan came into herself and her knowledge of language: she recognized the fact that she could not write “freely” in a language that faced her with a deep self-conflict. Adnan depicts this type of conflict in her essay by means of discussing political troubles between Algeria and France. Adnan writes benevolently about her past resentment of expressing herself in French due to political conflict and apartheid. She explains how important language truly is in every art form, whether it be writing or painting.

Adnan writes this essay not only to stress the importance of being able to comprehend/write in different languages, but also to tell her history. She says in reflection of her life that “this century told us too many times to stay alone, never to look back, to go and conquer the moon, and this is what I did. This is what I do”. This image of Adnan’s past and present is expressed in her essay, which shows that not only are poets embedded deeply into language, but they can transcend it as well. “To Write in a Foreign Language” depicts Adnan’s difficult origins and complex connection to language as her main source of material for a lifetime of creativity.



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Etel Adnan's work is more than just poetry. She creates an aura; her writing is derived from history, wisdom, politics, and visual art. Adnan's poetic prowess and literary depth make her work full of emotion and life. Her engagement with the languages and the ways they inform one another is at the heart of Adnan's aesthetic. Etel Adnan has several influences; Lyn Hejinian, Robert Grenier, and Jalal Toufic are among those who have made a strong impression on Adnan and her literary ingenuity.

Adnan currently divides her time between Lebanon, Paris, and California. She retired from a permanent teaching position in the late 1970s and now devotes herself to her art and writing.

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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The Indian Never Had a Horse and Other Poems (The Post-Apollo Press, 1985)

Journey to Mount Tamalpais: An Essay (The Post-Apollo Press, 1986)

The Arab Apocalypse (The Post-Apollo Press, 1989)

The Spring Flowers Own and the Manifestations of the Voyage (The Post-Apollo Press, 1990)

Of Cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz) (The Post-Apollo Press, 1993)

Paris, When It's Naked (The Post-Apollo Press, 1993)

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- Dickison, Steve. "Paris, When It's Naked by Etel Adnan" (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 1994).
- Garden, Nancy. "When We Were Young" (*Lambda Book Report*, 1998).
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Works in Languages other than English

Arabic

- al-Sitt Mari Ruz: riwayat (Sitt Marie Rose)* (al-Mu-assasah al-Arabiyyah lil-Dirasat wa-al-Nashr, 1979).
- n mudun wa-nisa: rasail il Fawwaz (Of Cities and Women)* (Dar al-Hihar, 1998).
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French

- Ce ciel qui n'est pas* (Éditions l'Harmattan, 1997).
- Rachid Korachi: Ecriture passion*, with Rachid Korachi and Jamel-Eddine Bencheikh (Galerie M'hamed Issiakhem, 1988).
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- Sitt Marie Rose* (Des Femmes, 1978).
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