



Elmaz Abinader

Biography

Born in 1954 in a small town in Pennsylvania, Elmaz Abinader has always felt as if she lives in two worlds: one in her home and the other outside the doors. Her home life was very much rooted in Lebanese tradition. She, her parents, and five siblings ate Arabic food, spoke in Arabic, and were brought up with Lebanese sensibilities. Her childhood activities contrasted with those of the other children in her community. Instead of playing with Barbies or gossiping about boys, Abinader and her siblings helped out at home or in one of the family's stores, attended a Catholic church twice daily, and worked hard at school. Her parents believed in, "Devotion to God, obedience to our parents, and good grades in school. A sliver of an error in any of these areas was punished with swiftness and severity" (Abinader, *Just Off Main Street*).

Although her home life was relatively happy, at school Abinader and her siblings were often teased and bullied because of their ethnicity. At college, Abinader decided to embrace her heritage and began to write about her family's history. However, her writings remained private until she discovered the book *The Woman Warrior*, in which Maxine Hong Kingston expresses the feelings of loneliness and struggle to find a cultural identity with which Abinader was familiar. Abinader's first published book, *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon*, is about cultural belonging and family strength.

In addition to *Children of the Roojme*, Abinader has published a collection of poems, *In The Country of My Dreams*, which won the Josephine Miles PEN Oakland award in 2000.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1954
- * Self-identifies as an Arab American author
- * First book published was *Children of the Roojme*

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Biography continued

She has also written and performed three plays: “When Silence is Frightening,” “Under The Ramadan Moon,” and “Country of Origin,” which won two “Drammies,” Portland’s Critic’s Circle Awards for Theater. “Country of Origin” is a one-woman show portraying the lives of three Arab-American females and their struggles with cultural pressures.

Elmaz Abinader is also deeply involved with political activism and frequently writes articles about issues affecting Arabs and Arab-Americans. She is opposed to the U.S. war with Iraq and spoke out against U.S. atrocities in the Middle East in a 2002 interview with the San Francisco Bay Guardian. She also published an article on the Living Issue, post 9/11 website in which she writes about her experiences as an Arab-American after 9/11 and her fears for the future. Other work includes “For Arab Americans, Pain in Familiar Faces,” an essay published on the Refuse and Resist website about the suffering in Palestine, and “In The Country of My Dreams. . . For Marcel Khalife & Khalil Gibran,” in which she offers her support for songwriter Marcel Khalife.

Elmaz Abinader teaches creative writing at Mills College. She is also a resident and hosts summer writing workshops on memoir and creative non-fiction at the University of San Francisco’s Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation, which sponsors workshops for published and developing writers. She also participates in the Hurston-Wright Writers’ Week West. One of her priorities when not doing her own work is helping young writers of color learn to express themselves.

Abinader’s outlook on life is visible in an interview with the San Francisco Bay Guardian’s Sylvia W. Chan. Throughout the interview, Abinader stresses that faith and action are crucial to everything she does. “You have to believe that if you say something, someone’s going to listen,” she says. “And faith is the only thing that’s going to keep you going. Then, you have to do your work.”



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Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon (W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

In the Country of My Dreams-- : poetry (Sufi Warrior Publishing Company, Inc., 1999).

"Just Off Main Street," essay in *Writers on America: 15 Reflections* (ed. George Clack) (U.S. Department of State, 2002).

"Under the Ramadan Moon," "Crossing Borders," and "Constructed Borders," in *Crossing Borders: The Immigrant Voice in American Literature* (Key West Literary Seminar, 2004).

Works about the author

Handal, Nathalie, ed. *Poetry of Arab Women* (Interlink Publishing Group, 2000).