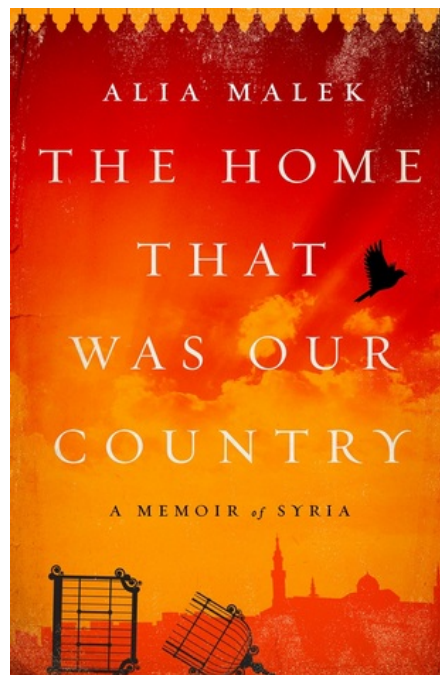




The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria

Alia Malek

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The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria Alia Malek

At the Arab Spring's hopeful start, Alia Malek returned to Damascus to reclaim her grandmother's apartment, which had been lost to her family since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970. Its loss was central to her parent's decision to make their lives in America. In chronicling the people who lived in the Tahaan building, past and present, Alia portrays the Syrians-the Muslims, Christians, Jews, Armenians, and Kurds-who worked, loved, and suffered in close quarters, mirroring the political shifts in their country. Restoring her family's home as the country comes apart, she learns how to speak the coded language of oppression that exists in a dictatorship, while privately confronting her own fears about Syria's future.

The Home That Was Our Country is a deeply researched, personal journey that shines a delicate but piercing light on Syrian history, society, and politics. Teeming with insights, the narrative weaves acute political analysis with a century of intimate family history, ultimately delivering an unforgettable portrait of the Syria that is being erased.

The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria Details

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From Reader Review The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria for online ebook

Bryn says

This book just never fully morphed into either the memoir about her grandmother, which the author kept referring to, nor a true memoir that captured anything really meaningful about Syria. The family members the author did spend a lot of time on were still never conveyed in a way that really got me invested in them. I was really disappointed!

Jill says

Book starts off slow with very detailed, but richly so, account of author's extended family and their lives in Syria up through the 1970s. But, book midway through slowly simmers and boils over as it transitions to contemporary coverage of Arab Spring and onset of Syrian civil war, and it reaches such heartbreaking and gutting levels. (This sentence, for example, made me briefly have to set the book down: "The regime had survived for years on an intricate architecture that made children out of adults. To remind anyone getting any ideas to the contrary, the regime began to make corpses out of children.") Doesn't politicize the war but makes it so emotionally resonant.

Jacquelyn Fusco says

♥ Syria

Zora O'Neill says

I really loved how Malek tells Syria's 20th-century history via Malek's colorful family. And she's very good at conveying how the dictatorship seeps into everyone's lives, and how (dis)information is routinely used. There were a few parts that fell tangential to the main story, but even those were very informative.

Nancy says

Malek deftly weaves together family lore, political history, and current events in this beautiful, sad, and illuminating memoir of Syria. She also devotes some nuanced and informed attention to the Armenians of Syria, including a chapter set in Yerevan where Armenians from Aleppo have found refuge from the civil war.

Mike says

An author's sentimental and painful journey to recapture the geist and trauma of life in war torn Syria. The author is faithful to her parents birth country, even though she would not acknowledge it.
A family oriented story mostly impacted by its history, and the recent Syrian turmoil and bloodshed.

Shannon says

Here's how much I didn't like this book: I quit reading it with twenty pages left. Malek is a journalist and while this book was called a memoir, it felt more like a political history of Syria interspersed with some of her family stories thrown in (journalism disguised as memoir).

I found Malek's writing scattered, her characters poorly developed and her plot nonexistent. I was worried before I started reading that this book would be too emotional given the setting. Instead, it held no emotion.

The only reason it merits two stars instead of one is because I did learn a lot about Syrian history and how it has led to the current conflict. I do not recommend this book.

Jeff Crosby says

Her name is Hana Abdullah, and at the age of 13 she has lived more than one-quarter of her life in a debilitating state of suspension as a Syrian refugee in Lebanon. I encountered her visage peering from the pages of The New York Times Magazine of 8 November 2015, and I've never been able to forget her.

Her face, her story, her life.

They are present realities for me - a privileged, middle-aged man in the Midwestern United States - in ways that books, investigative journalism and works of literature have rarely fostered before.

Since reading that piece in a larger NYT Magazine package labeled "The Displaced," I have been longing for a larger work that would give a greater historical understanding of what has happened in Syria throughout the ages, but especially since 2011. I've longed to gain a more robust understanding of how Hana Abdullah wound up in Lebanon, working in the Bekaa Valley among other refugee children who do farm work for hours on end every day to help support their families.

I've hoped for a clear awareness of how to respond.

I've hoped for reasons to hope amid the seemingly-hopeless headlines emanating from Aleppo and Raqqa; from Hama and Homs on a weekly if not daily basis.

Sadly, though I've read several books on Syria since 2015, I'd not found anything that helped quench those longings nor bring such understanding.

Until now.

Until reading Alia Malek's "The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria."

Malek, a civil rights lawyer and award-winning journalist whose work has appeared in the New York Times, Nation, Foreign Policy, and the Christian Science Monitor, among other publications, weaves a spellbinding

work that provides both centuries of context on the one hand and a vibrant, compelling personal narrative on the other. Her words are a blend of the best of journalistic precision and passionate narrative non-fiction, providing a compelling portrait of the country that she calls her home even though she was born in Baltimore to Syrian parents and educated at prestigious American universities.

The book's prologue, titled "Leaving," is set in Damascus in May of 2013 as Malek was leaving Syria (for perhaps the final time?), shoots out of the pages like a cannon and introduces the single most important figure in the book: Malek's grandmother Salma, whose home in Damascus she returned to and attempted to restore even as the country was descending into chaos. Its epilogue, titled "Bound," is set in Saarbrücken, Germany in March of 2016, and pulls more tightly on another thread related to Salma's home which is resident throughout the book.

In between those two poles, the reader encounters more than a century of Syrian history (Part I) and penetrating insight into the geopolitical forces that impacted a region, a country and a family (Parts II and III).

In his endorsement for "The Home That Was Our Country," bestselling author Dave Eggers writes:

"Alia Malek masterfully weaves together the personal and the political, and in so doing creates an unforgettable portrait of modern Syria....Completely engrossing and lucid."

Malek's book is that and much, much more.

Just like Hana Abdullah's story in 2015. Thankfully, The Home That Was Our Country made its way into my hands and my heart. It should make its way into yours, as well.

Scott Martin says

Decided to read/listen to this book based on a recommendation from my wife. Glad I did. This memoir follows the fortunes of a Syrian family as told through the eyes of a woman who is both a citizen of Syria and the United States. As she recounts her family and how they came to gain, lose and regain ownership of their apartment in Syria. Throughout the family drama, the story of the Syrian nation, especially suffering the various upheavals of the 20th century, from Ottoman to French to a constant stream of military dictators, all rule the world around that apartment, with various aspects of the change in rulers and culture encroaching on the family's life and property. Yet, it is when the Assad family finally laid claim to leadership of Syria does the connection between the family's fortunes and the country's start to mirror each others. Caught in the middle is the author, who must balance her American and Syrian heritages during times of significant turmoil and war.

It is as informative a work about the decline and fall of the current Syrian state, especially the impact that the long-standing civil war that kicked off in 2011. Malek describes the inter-relations between the various sects/religions/factions that make up the Syrian nation, and how those divisions became more polarizing as the nation descended into chaos. It is informative and conveys many details that combine major geo-political actions as well as localized family struggles. I gained some great insights into the situation, especially for those who are caught in the middle of the fighting.

It is not a hopeful or uplifting book, but it is worth the read/listen for anyone who wants to get some insight into life on the ground, especially in the early part of the Syrian Civil War. Highly recommend either the hard copy or the audiobook.

Bob Finch says

I struggle to rate this book with a simple system of stars. This memoir of an extended Syrian family, and of many peripherally connected lives, weaves a fascinating and tragic tale of a country's descent into chaos. The subject is timely and germane to understanding the greater human condition (not an entirely uplifting assessment). On these merits, I would select 4 or 5 stars.

Unfortunately, I found the writing painfully prosaic, plodding and flat. Especially in the first half of the book, where the reader is introduced to the family, going back 3 or 4 generations, I felt like I was reading an amateur's book report. It was all I could do to keep reading. Fortunately, the book's second half, where the current civil war looms and then overwhelms, improved, and I was finally drawn into the story. On writing style alone I would rate the book perhaps 2 stars. So my choice of 3 is a kind of compromise.

All the same, the author addresses crucial issues with a viewpoint not often available. Furthermore, the author provides an excellent review of and perspective on history that helps the reader appreciate the incredibly complex back story to current events. This alone is valuable. I was disappointed that it wasn't more compellingly told.

Fadi says

This is the book you should be reading if you want to know more about Syria. In her eloquent style, the writer tells a humane story of Syria through her family's saga. Syria is rediscovered not as just a country somewhere in the world where a too-complicated war is taking place, but rather as a home for people who loves enjoying life and whose destiny is affected by every historical turn of events. As a Syrian myself, I could identify with many of the anecdotes told by the writer, I was able to laugh with her clever comments, and mourn the lose of my country. The symbolism between Syria as a country and the writer's grandmother's home is very clever and summarizes the history of this country's struggles.

Jill says

I have tried casually for the last few years to understand the underlying principles of what's happening politically in Syria, with not much success. This book ended up on my list as a sort of project toward better understanding (probably due to hearing Malek speak on a podcast, or reading an article of hers, not sure).

The basic framing is: her family's been in Syria for generations, and for at least 4 generations has been affected by the political happenings there. She uses the family tree as architecture to tell the story of French control, Syrian independence from the French, turmoil after independence, Assad the elder taking power, and Assad the younger turning everything to shit -- and how her family was affected along the way.

About 1/3 of the way through, I nearly stopped reading, as sometimes the family history bits can get a bit... genealogical. (In that way where you're bored while your aunt tells you how great uncle Harold sold his car in 1907 to a notable performer at the time who you've never heard of, or whatever.) But for my money, it was worth sticking with it. I feel like I have a much much better understanding of the basics re: complicated

factions and loyalties, why Russia / Iran / Israel and the Muslim brotherhood are all implicated, and (even though I disagree) why the US hasn't taken a hard stance to try and help remove Assad from power. (tl;dr: would be replacing a Russian-backed former socialist secular leader with probably a theocratic Islamist government. Devil you know.)

Recommended if you're curious about Syria at all.

Reem Zakaria says

Every ounce of this book reminded me of home. I couldn't help but reminisce about my trips to Palestine. The authors writing made me think about the school my father attended while growing up, the house he was born in, the well he used to drink from; every inch of Palestine held my mind hostage. I longed to return back to the streets I used to walk at night and the trees I used to pick grape leaves from. I so wanted to relive my parent's childhood. Every night as I put the book down, I'd lay and think of my family and how they came to be. I reread the diary my grandmother kept while she lived in Jerusalem hoping to find a new pathway to her past that I hadn't found before. I wanted to feel connected to my grandmother the same way Alia felt connected to Salma. I say this all because of how meaningful this book was to me. It really made me miss my family and the memories that I made during my visits overseas.

As I reached the end of the book, I felt a deep sadness because I had lost myself within the words of her story. I was with Alia through her journey in Syria and I didn't want it to end. I was attached to Syria the same way I am attached to Palestine. They are both home to me. A Home That Was Our Country doesn't just dive into the history of Syria and what it used to be, but is also elaborates on how Syria lives within everyone who has felt the pain of exile. It's a memoir that sheds light on the pain that is carried through every Syrian that longs to go back home.

Alia Malek wrote a beautiful memoir that will leave you reminiscing about the place you call home. I know I did. If you appreciate a great memoir, give this one a read. You won't be disappointed!

Molly says

I just finished reading A Hope More Powerful than the Sea by Doaa Al Zamel which is her story of getting out of Syria - heart wrenching. The Home That Was Our Country gives a history of Syria through the lens of one family's history.

This is an excellent book to introduce one to the current political and historical situation as the history has a personal context. The writing is accessible (author is a journalist), but, also for non-fiction the descriptions of time and place are vivid and the reader can feel and taste the atmosphere.

Highly recommend.

Karyl says

I heard about this book on NPR and knew immediately that I had to read it. I like to think that I'm a very open-minded person, and I wanted to get a handle on what life was like for Syrians, aside from what we see on the news regarding refugees. After finishing this memoir, my heart hurts even more for this vibrant people, and I wish this were required reading for all Americans, especially those who insist that accepting Syrian refugees will make our country less safe.

Malek begins her story by showing that Syria as a nation hasn't existed all that long as we know, that as usual, it had its own borders before the Europeans arrived and inserted arbitrary borders as they carved up territories into colonies. When Israel was formed, it was the historical Syria that lost land. And the people of Syria came from all religions and denominations. Here in America, all we hear is Sunni vs Shiite, but there are many more brands of Islam, including Alawite and Druze. There are also quite a few Christians of the Orthodox stamp, and Jews had made Syria their home. Before the Assads came to power, all these peoples lived generally in peace, but under the authoritarian rule of the Assads, things began to fall apart. Peaceful demonstrations were quashed with violence until much of the country is now engulfed in a civil war. Malek's book ends in 2013, well before things got really terrible. But now Aleppo is on the news every night, and photographs of dusty and bleeding children are splashed about on social media to keep Westerners informed of the horrors of everyday life in Syria.

This book mainly focuses on Malek's family throughout the generations, starting with the matriarch of her family, her grandmother Salma, as well as the apartment that Salma and her husband bought soon after they were married in the 1940s. Unfortunately, once they rented out that flat, the new renter refused to leave for 40 years, and Syrian law was on his side. Malek's parents made it their goal to try to win the flat back for their family, something they weren't able to achieve until the 2000s. It was during this time that Malek moved back to Syria to restore and renovate Salma's home, giving her a front row seat to the deterioration of life in Syria.

It's shocking to me, as an American, when I read accounts of people who are calmly having dinner and can hear mortar fire in the distance, or automatic gunfire a few blocks away. I cannot even imagine not being safe in my own home, or having to walk past destroyed buildings with people's belongings spilling out onto the street. I see these images every night on the news, and it rips my heart out.

So why can't we accept people fleeing from this terrible crisis? We're told it's because they're terrorists, yet it's average people who are seeking asylum. Most Muslims are a peace-loving; it's like judging all Americans by the actions of the KKK or the Westboro Baptist Church. And now we have calls for more "extreme vetting" of people seeking asylum. I wonder how that would even work, considering the problems Malek's own cousin has in getting to Armenia on page 276. She writes, "my cousin had no passport, because she had no citizenship. Even though Kamal's [the cousin's father] mother was Syrian and Kamal himself had been born in Syria, his father was a Palestinian who got stuck in Syria on the wrong side of 1948. Since nationality in Syria is paternal only, and with Israel now where Palestine had been, Kamal had no passport. So unfortunately for his daughter, despite having a Syrian mother and having lived only in Syria, she, too, was Syrian solely in feeling." She would only achieve Syrian citizenship upon marrying a Syrian. Even as a member of the second generation, Malek's cousin still had no passport and no citizenship. It's not automatic at birth as it is in America or most European nations. With no passport, had Malek's cousin wanted to apply for asylum, how could she?

We Westerners seem to want to paint situations with very broad brushes, but we need to learn that there are shades of gray in everything. Muslims aren't the enemy; ISIS is. The Assad regime is stifling democracy and killing any opponents, as it has been since at least Bashar al-Assad came to power when his father died. Syrians want to come to Europe and America to get away from death and dying and shelling and being

imprisoned simply for asking that the killing stop.

This book should be read by everyone to get a better perspective on what is happening in Syria, knowing that it's much worse now than it was in 2013, when Malek was last there. I do hope her grandmother's flat is still standing, though now I wonder if it's just so much dust like much of the country.

Sheila says

An excellent memoir for anyone who would like to get a better understanding of Syria, the history of Syria, and the current conflict in Syria. This book made Syria "real" for me. The author is a Syrian American who traveled to, and lived in, Syria for years. The memoir is the story of her and her extended family, many still in Syria, many having moved to other countries for safety, told starting at her great grandfather. Much of the story focuses on her grandmother, and her grandmother's house, which the author eventually lived in as an adult. Very well written and engrossing. I recommend this book to anyone wanting to understand this country better.

Rebecca says

April 2017

Just heard a great interview with the author of this book on the podcast Politically Reactive (which I also highly recommend).

April 2018 Update

I just finished this book in the nick of time for my book club tonight, and it was my pick. As another reviewer stated, I would give this book 4/5 stars on the importance of the subject matter but 2 on the writing, especially in the first half of the book.

I usually speed through memoirs, but the first half of this book dragged for me. It read more like a historical nonfiction tome (reminding me of my experience of reading *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*) versus a memoir. I wish the author had focused more on her story, because once I got to Parts 2 and 3 where she described her experiences visiting Syria and following the uprising there, I was much more engaged.

That being said, I understand that the first 100+ pages provide important historical background for the current regime and divisions in Syria, I just wish they could have been condensed a bit more and/or better written. It's also so sad that finishing this book for our book club tonight is so timely, given the events of the last week in Syria. And I am glad I read this book because I do have a much better (though definitely not expert) understanding of the situation.

One thing that stands out to me particularly is how well Malek helped me to understand why citizens don't just pick up and leave their own countries when such horrible things begin to happen. I think it is way too easy as Americans to just say "Well, they should have realized how the wind was blowing, liquidated their assets, and left before they had to flee with nothing!" without really thinking about the implications of leaving a place have always lived and love with a fierce loyalty.

Some of this is due to the fact that we (I'm speaking of "we" as upper middle class white Americans) generally operate from an underlying assumption that America is better than any other place and of course

everyone would want to leave their home country and come here. But some of it is also, I would argue, that until recently many of us (again upper middle class white Americans) have never felt our home country starting to slip into patterns which we don't like or approve. And now that we have experienced this, we still aren't ready to pack up our belongings and move. Our lives, our histories, our families, our jobs are here. And this is also what many Syrians felt until there were literally bodies on their doorsteps and bullet holes in their doors.

Stephanie Moran says

Solid read.

This book is somewhat of a transformation. Malek starts off by introducing us to her family, starting with her great-grandparents. She takes us on the journey of her grandmother and her mother - she focuses on an apartment that her grandparents owned and intertwines that with history and society. Much of the book focuses on her grandmother and the changing atmosphere of Syria. She transforms her family history into the present and draws on how things have changed in just a handful of decades. Commenting on current political strife.

The beginning of the book is hard to get through. The writing isn't very inspiring, but as the book moves on and Malek is able to insert her actual experience, the book comes to life. I feel like the more connected she was with the people she describes, the more intriguing the writing.

What surprised me was the culture of Syria in the 1950's when her grandmother was establishing her family. It seems quite similar to the United States and even the one picture she shows of her grandmother in the book looks like the fashion at the time. There was one thing about Malek's grandmother, Salma, that I just fell in love with. "Salma had a deep love of poetry, which holds a cherished position in Syrian culture - memorization of poetry was an integral part of Arabic-language instruction." Apparently Salma was known to recite the poetry often, but in Syria, poetry is sung, not just said. How beautiful and uplifting that must be.

I also feel that Malek unknowingly included some alarming warnings - and I think Americans should pay attention to these, because some have appeared to take root in our country - and perhaps our stability (time will only tell).

"They had drastically changed the curriculum; where before students took math and science in both French and Arabic, now they were only permitted to study these subjects in Arabic. They were no longer permitted to study French history and geography, which was viewed as anti-patriotic. The new administrators got rid of their music and science lab classes. Lamyia detested the fact that, to equalize the education available in private and public schools, the new government had decided to eviscerate private education rather than improve public schooling" Doesn't this happen to some effect here?? Americans are so hellbent on everyone only speaking in English. Our art and music classes are always cut first.. now science is being attacked.

"The killings, though nearby, also seemed remote. The violence appeared contained, and the victims were still being targeted for specific political involvement... It was all happening to *other* people. In this way I think many Syrians learned to tolerate the regimes voracious greed for absolute power: they were too busy being grateful it wasn't them." While target killing may not be a problem here - I feel like this is also an American attitude when it comes to prejudice or injustice. We do not stand up against the government as we ought when things go awry - although I fear we have more of a problem with corporate control than government control..

"Unemployment had gone through the roof, and at the same time, the contraction of the public sector had deprived people of the state largesse - in the form of subsidies, salaries, and pensions - that they had come to rely on. Salary increases were evaporated by inflation. Although the calculated embrace of a private sector was supposed to stimulate trickle-down benefits, it was so handicapped that it was bound to only make the gap between the few rich and everyone else much starker." If this isn't America, I don't know what is. Is this a warning sign of tougher times to come in our own nation?

On seeing a political billboard, "I understood 'I am with the law' - seemingly innocent - to really seem something entirely different and menacing: 'Submit.' " How many times do you read, if they just obeyed the law they wouldn't have gotten in trouble. Aye!

What bothers me is, although she clearly illustrates the regime's wrong doing - Malek does not really mention how the outside world reacted and played apart in current events. She does briefly about Germany being very accepting to refugees, and comments on some help in Turkey - but Malek never comments on the realities of bombing done by outside countries against the regime. I am going to assume this is why even more people left Syria - but this is not even considered - we just hear of the rising death toll. I would have appreciated some analysis on that from her perspective of living there for so long and also being American. Also, I have read other books by immigrants or 1st generation Americans that travel back to their country of origin and comment on the history of the country to explain why their parents left and some of the damning things that the people have to put up with. But they NEVER draw any parallels! It sounds from their accounts that there are parallels... how can the American people use this knowledge to prevent mayhem from happening here?

Jane says

Excellent!!

Francine says

This book took a month for me to read because it was hard work. Malek clearly spent a long time thinking about and researching this book -- her whole life it seems -- but she needed a better editor, someone who would have asked her to do a rewrite, who would have slashed the long, dull, chapters on the ancient history of Syria and helped her build more robust connections between what was going on in Syria and how that linked to the apartment. It reads like a dozen different interviews and trips strung together as a book and the apartment ends up, near the end, being incidental. I kept at it because well, it was a \$24 e-book, and also I did learn a lot and she did such a tremendous amount of work and this was clearly a passion project. I don't know what the editing process looked like -- maybe she had good editors and they ran out of time, maybe she didn't want to be edited, but this book needed more revisions. It needed to be tighter.
