



BOOK OF THE MONTH



The Blue Between Sky and Water

By Susan Abulhawa
Bloomsbury USA, September 2015
304 pages, \$14.30

Reviewed by Joyce Peel, The Educational Bookshop

In her latest novel, Susan Abulhawa tells the story of the Baraka family over four generations, creating an image of resilience among the Palestinians in a generous story that avoids becoming judgmental and remains somehow hopeful.

As in her previous book, *Mornings in Jenin*, Abulhawa depicts, through the experiences of a family, Israeli-Palestinian tensions and violence, and their consequences on human lives, as well as how political events affect their lives and those of their descendants. She manages to show the links between domestic daily life, which goes on, and tragic political events.

The reader meets the Barakas in 1947, in their quiet village, Beit Daras. In May 1948, the village is destroyed, which results in the forced flight of the family to a refugee camp near Gaza's southern shores, where most of the story takes place. We then follow the Barakas up to the present day, which sees their reunification, after the family was divided when some of the members migrated to Kuwait and then to the United States.

Focusing mainly on female characters, Abulhawa depicts the roots that exist among Palestinians despite the diaspora. The two main characters, Nazmiyeh and Nur, represent different faces of today's Palestinians: those who have been raised in refugee camps and those who have grown up abroad. Hence, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* demonstrates what statelessness really means.

Highlighting the belief that "[to] die naturally is a blessing," the author reminds the reader of the violence of the conflict and its current impact on younger generations of Palestinians who have grown up with it.

Nonetheless, this novel is certainly not only a story of displacement: Abulhawa writes about love and hatred, loneliness and family bonds, identity crisis and belonging, loss and return, sex and rape, survival and death. As in any life, Nazmiyeh, Nur, and their relatives face joyful events and celebrations as well as periods of mourning and fear. The author manages to mention tragic events without falling into pathos, creating a lively story and therefore enabling the reader to fully relate to her characters.

Moreover, the magical aspects included in this story – some members of the family who live at different times and places are able to communicate in a space *between sky and water* – make it a poetic and spiritual journey. It once again reminds us of the bonds that exist between Palestinians, irrespective of their place or time of birth. This latter point is crucial, for much of the literature, academic or not, often forgets the existence of a historical Palestinian culture.

The Blue Between Sky and Water contains every component necessary to make it an enjoyable yet educative read: it evokes human aspects that embrace political and historical events on a broader level, enabling the reader to learn about the conflict from a different perspective and to understand another reality created after the *Nakba*.