



# The Story of Zahra: A Novel

By Hanan al-Shaykh

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Zahra's mother uses her as a cover for her meetings with a lover; Zahra's strict father mistreats her for being complicit in her mother's affair. Fleeing from Beirut in search of solace, Zahra stays with her uncle in West Africa—and then uses marriage as another kind of escape. Back in Beirut, love finally comes to her, but with terrible consequences. Banned in several Middle Eastern countries since its original publication, *The Story of Zahra* is an intoxicating, provocative story of a young woman's coming of age in a city torn apart by war.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

Banned in several Arab nations, this rich tale mesmerizes with its frank sexuality and scenes of war-torn Beirut. Zahra is a misfit mistreated by her mother, who brings her along to secret meetings with a lover, and by her father, a harsh disciplinarian who reacts angrily to her habit of picking at her pimpled face. She leaves her parents to stay with an uncle who has fled to Africa to escape being arrested for political activity. When his affection for her grows sexual, Zahra agrees to an unsuccessful marriage with his friend Majed.

Eventually, she returns to Beirut, where "the war was like a weevil that had found its way into the heart of a huge bag of white flour and settled there," and begins meeting secretly to have sex with a man who may or may not be a rooftop sniper. A rotating first-person narrative gives everyone a voice; Zahra's is the most striking, but each character has memorable moments, as when Majed describes his adolescent arousal while reading *Jane Eyre* and seeing an illustration of the heroine kissing Mr. Rochester. Al-Shaykh ( *Women of Sand and Myrrh* ), a Lebanese writer now living in London, has a focused and original style.

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#### From Library Journal

This harsh 1986 novel traces several years in the life of Zahra, who attempts to escape her brutal existence in Lebanon by visiting an uncle in South Africa. When that venture proves equally empty, she returns to war-torn Beirut in hopes of finally finding inner peace.

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#### From Kirkus Reviews

Arab writer al-Shaykh (*Women of Sand and Myrrh*, 1992) details a cool, almost clinical journey to the heart of a young woman imprisoned within herself by family deceit--and liberated finally amidst the violence of war-torn Beirut. The story this time--reflecting the author's feminist sympathies, as well as her preoccupation with the contemporary Arab world--concerns Lebanese Zahra, who as a child had been used as cover for her mother's liaisons with another man. After a severe beating from her brutal father, who suspects Zahra's role in his wife's deceit, the formerly bright student retreats into herself, obsessively scratches her pimple-laden face, and embarks on a meaningless affair with a married man. She has two abortions and a nervous breakdown before her family sends her off to West Africa, where an uncle once active in Lebanese politics now lives in exile. The homesick uncle is delighted to see her, but Zahra, frightened by the intensity of his attentions, hides out in the bathroom ("the only thing I have loved in Africa") and in desperation accepts the marriage proposal of a local Lebanese man. The marriage is a disaster: Zahra becomes even more withdrawn, then returns to a Beirut devastated by war. As the war intensifies, her parents move to their native village, and Zahra, struggling to survive, falls in love for the first time. But her lover is almost certainly the lone sniper--"the only god of death, the only threat in their locality"--who shoots innocent passersby from a nearby apartment roof. As the two make love, little is said, and for the first time Zahra wants a normal life. But it's too late, as she--left only with "promise of menace"--becomes a victim of the city's mindless violence, personified by the sniper. A powerfully haunting portrait of innocence destroyed by violence both at home and in the larger world. More than just a novel about the contemporary Middle East. --  
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