

**SUSAN ATEFAT-PECKHAM, ed., *Talking Through the Door: An Anthology of Contemporary Middle Eastern American Writing*. Foreword by Lisa Suhair Majaj. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014). Pp. 244. \$34.95 cloth. ISBN 9780815633471.**

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Susan Atefat-Peckham died, with her son Cyrus, in a car accident in Amman, Jordan in 2004. She was only thirty-four years old and at the beginning of a promising literary career, poised, as a talented writer and critic, to be one of the most important literary voices in the post-9/11 world. However, Syracuse University Press has ensured the completion of her last project, an anthology of writing by Middle Eastern Americans about identity, the meaning of home, and the challenges of living in the United States. This book collects diverse voices, such as the humorous tone of Diana Abu-Jaber, the wrenching imagery of Samuel Hazo, the sage wisdom of Naomi Shihab Nye, and the wit of Roger Sedarat.

*Talking Through Doors* was intended for publication over a decade ago, and yet, as I read through Peckham's careful ordering and arrangement of sixteen literary voices—poetry, memoir, fiction—from writers of Middle Eastern origin, I was struck by how relevant this book is today. A week after I finished reading it, the Islamophobia that had been simmering for several months on the American political scene boiled over in the most startling pronouncement by presidential candidate and billionaire real estate mogul Donald Trump to date: in short, he stated publicly that the government should halt all immigration of Muslims to the United States as an immediate security measure. What was even more discouraging was that a crowd, numbering in the thousands, that had gathered to hear Trump speak, broke out in loud cheers and hoots.

Atefat-Peckham's anthology, it seemed to me, has been published at the most appropriate and most necessary moment. The book offers readers a taste of the diversity of voices that constitute the label, whether it's accurate or not, "Middle Eastern." Her introduction to the anthology tracks the negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims from medieval Europe through the modern day, and she says, "The images projected by literature or the media, in journalism, film, or television, have slowly, over the centuries, become, for some, a reality" (12). Indeed. And yet, as Joseph Geha states in his essay, "Where I'm From—Originally," the answer, the only method, to combat hysteria and ignorance is literature:

Most fiction, if it's any good at all, asks that the reader use at least some measure of empathy—that particularly frail human faculty whereby one can appreciate what an experience must feel like for someone else. . . . Empathy . . . has a maturing effect and leads us into the world" (102).

The voices Atefat-Peckham collects in *Talking Through the Door* offer the reader an opportunity to identify with the Middle Eastern American, and they are testaments to the variety of experiences of this community in the United States. In the opening story, an excerpt from her memoir *Children of the Roojme*, Elmaz Abinader presents America as a place of refuge for Mayme, who is trying to survive in war-torn Lebanon. Once the wife of a well-to-do businessman, she is now living in squalor, beaten down by Turkish soldiers, tax collectors, and her own family members. She is reminded that, here in Lebanon, "Nothing is yours anymore" (34). On her way to America, huddled in a ship with her two daughters, she has one thought: "Start over" (23). For other writers, such as Nahid Rachlin, America represents loneliness: in this fiction excerpt, Mohtaram, who has been in the United States for years, is thrilled to be visited by her sister Maryam from Iran:

A few passers-by turned around and looked at Maryam in her long black chador and some smiled at her but just as often they acted as if they did not notice anything different. "See, they leave you alone here," Mohtaram said. "No one interferes in your affairs."

“But it’s so lonely, it’s like everyone has crawled into a shell,” Maryam said (228).

There are also the tensions of feeling unable to quite fit in to the American social fabric, as depicted wonderfully in Barbara Bedway’s story, “Why We Are in the DAR.” Two girls, one blonde like her American mother, and the narrator, who is “date-colored like my father, with coal-black hair and brown eyes” (86) represent the double consciousness of being half American and half Arab. Their mother is intent on joining the Daughters of the American Revolution, and much emphasis is placed on the importance of belonging: “She has followed directions to track down what is needed for her to join, based on PEDIGREE and PATRIOTISM, the DAR. She has proved lineal descent from a Patriot of 1776” (87). The idea of belonging plagues this family, since their father, a Lebanese immigrant, suffers from religious discrimination because his employer distrusts Catholics.

Roger Sedarat and Diana Abu-Jaber use humor to depict the Middle Eastern American experience. In Abu-Jaber’s excerpt from her novel, *Crescent*, a shop owner’s characterization is both touching and hilarious: “[Odah’s] big soft nose looks slightly squashed against his face and his eyes are huge and dolorous. The happier Odah is, the sadder he looks” (51).

Meanwhile, in his poem “Outing Iranians,” Roger Sedarat offers an instructive list of Iranian Americans, both celebrities, such as Andre Agassi, and everyday people, such as teachers and restaurant owners, almost as proof that they exist in American life. His list is marked by his humor:

“The Soup Nazi in New York.

A curiosity on Seinfeld, he’s any one of  
my uncles who take their cooking seriously.

Henry Kissinger. (Just kidding.)” (240)

Class issues, which complicate identity, are depicted beautifully by poet Joseph Awad in his “For My Irish Grandfather” and the mirror poem, “For My Lebanese Grandfather,” and also by the distinct, clear voice of Joe Kadi, whose moving essay on cultural

appropriation emphasizes the “need to talk – across cultures and classes” (141). These selections, and especially Awad’s poems, posit Middle Eastern Americans as a long-entrenched community in American life, and one which faces the same challenges and economic upheavals as all Americans.

In her own essay, “Them?”, editor Susan Atefat-Peckham writes, “I’m tired of our country ripping itself apart over racial tensions,” but concludes hopefully, “Our stories can save us” (59–61). Meanwhile, more than a decade after she wrote these words, the news headlines speak of pigs’ heads being thrown at mosque doors and girls in hijab being beaten up on their school playgrounds, and it is clear that no message needs to be delivered more urgently than this one.