Looking for Palestine, by Najla Said

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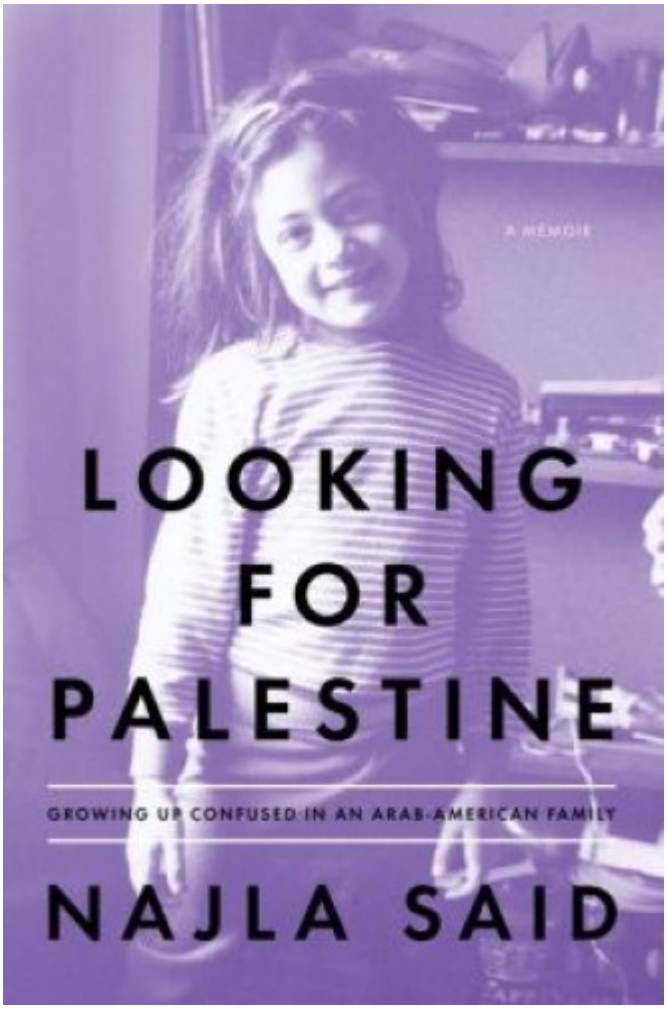
In Review



Looking for Palestine

By Najla Said
Riverhead Books

Najla Said has had every reason to be confused. She explains in the opening lines of her memoir: “I am a Palestinian-Lebanese-American Christian woman, but I grew up as a Jew in New York City. I began my life, however, as a WASP.”

Najla Said is the daughter of the famous literary critic Edward Said, whose book *Orientalism* contributed in the 1970s and 1980s to changing the way we think about, talk about and claim identity in American society. Edward Said noted that Western society, literature, culture and politics have tended to make vast generalizations about the East, viewing a mysterious and exotic but dehumanized “Orient” through its own warped lens. In part because of Said’s work, Americans started to say “Chinese-American” or “Arab-American” instead of “Oriental.” We started to rethink the melting-pot premise of previous generations and to grapple in greater depth with what it means to be a diverse society.

But the nuances of *Orientalism* did not make Najla’s struggle for identity any easier. Religion was one of many sticking points for her in forming a coherent identity. Najla’s parents were both secular humanists with little interest in religious labeling. Najla, however, was baptized an Episcopalian as a baby. When she asked her mother why, she explained, “Your grandmother insisted. . . . I agreed so she wouldn’t get upset. It was only water on your head, so I didn’t mind.”

Najla’s paternal grandfather was an Episcopalian who had studied in the United States and lived in Cairo after exile from Mandatory Palestine. Her paternal grandmother was raised an evangelical Christian; her father (Najla’s great-grandfather) had been ordained a Baptist minister in Waco, Texas, before returning to Nazareth for his ministry in the early part of the 20th century. Najla’s maternal grandparents were Quakers in Lebanon. Their parents had converted from Orthodox Christianity after being “taken with the idea that God is accessible to us all and requires no intermediary.” Of all the various religious strains, Najla suggests that Quakerism was the strongest in her family—equality, peace and freedom being as central tenets of her family’s life as any other.

But as a family they practiced no religion. Najla “clung joyfully” to an Episcopal identity as long as she could because her parents sent her to a private Episcopal school for upper-class girls on New York’s Upper East Side. She happily said the prayers and learned the rituals, desperately wanting to “be” something and “believe” something like other people. But she never felt she belonged there. Her dark hair and eyes set her apart from the other girls at the school. She lived not on the Upper East Side but on the Upper West Side, a difference that signified class and ethnicity. By the age of seven, she had decided that she was “fat, big, hairy, and weird,” and she was desperate to fit in.

At the same time that Najla struggled with being Arab in school, her family's ethnic and geographical identity provided a richness of warmth and love at home. She loved her family's summer trips to Beirut, Lebanon, where they were surrounded by a welcoming extended family. Her parents were connected to a diverse intellectual community. She loved her family's food, their stories, their laughter and their global community of friends, even as she was ashamed of saying in certain contexts that she was an Arab.

Despite the fact that her father was a prominent intellectual voice for Palestinian rights, Najla confesses in her conclusion that she is uncomfortable with politics and political statements. Anyone turning to this book looking for Najla to carry on her father's political legacy is looking in the wrong place. Najla establishes her own voice, which is light, funny, balanced and self-deprecating.

She tries to get her reader to see the world from the perspective of a young child growing up in a sophisticated and complicated world beyond her comprehension. She recounts the week during Lebanon's civil war that she spent in an unlit stairwell of her beloved grandparents' house—the house with the pine log ceilings and the wicker stools where she ate *labne* and rice. "The experience was enough for me to understand that every war ever fought, every violent act ever committed, and every trauma any child has ever endured is utterly horrifying, and that's all you need to know for now."

This passage, in which Najla directly addresses the reader from the perspective of a young child, is one in which we see the origins of the book as a stage play that she has performed for high school students as well as off-Broadway. Of course, for the reader, that isn't all we need to know for now. But in a play about coming of age, it is enough to imagine the political through the eyes of a young child trapped in a stairwell in complete darkness listening to the world fall apart.

Later, writing about the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war, another conflict in which she was caught, she points out that in the trauma of war people drop all nuances and descend into hatred and fear. When bombs are falling on you, you do not think, *"Oh, I know that not all Israelis agree with this,"* she writes. "Just as there is no time for them to think that it is not all Lebanese attacking back." Instead, pure hate has the opportunity to rise up and take over.

Ironically, Najla began to claim her identity using the very means that her father derided in *Orientalism*. She decided that instead of being “weird,” she was “exotic.” “I knew what *Orientalism* was about, and I was perfectly happy to let a nice all-American boy see what I was like for a minute or two, and then go back to his girlfriend,” she writes. By embracing her exotic identity, she was gradually able to begin to construct an identity for herself.

She began to find her closest friends among Jews on New York City’s Upper West Side who shared many of the intricacies of family, identity and values that were familiar to her. She writes that she still feels like an Upper West Side Jewish princess and that she has friends whose parents refuse to believe that she isn’t a Sephardic Jew. Her father tracked all the Jewish holidays. “*‘Happy Simchat Torah!’* he’d yell into the phone to a Jewish friend, who had no idea what he was talking about.”

Najla takes us briefly through her struggle with anorexia, her sense that she was less important to her family’s story than her brother was, her attempts to establish herself as an actress and her father’s death. She seems not quite ready to address in depth the questions surrounding her anorexia, her relationship with her much-admired older brother or her role as a woman in her society. But as we watch Najla stitch together an American identity from the patches of cloth that have been given to her, we begin to see that the wounds inflicted on Najla by a complex family history and a misunderstanding culture are the source of her gifts. Identity is never as simple as who our parents are and where we live, and the work of finding out who we are is as necessary as the hyphen in *Arab-American*.