
Sumia Sukkar’s debut novel, *The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War*, delicately entwines a young boy’s experience of Asperger’s syndrome with the setting of the Syrian war. The novel discusses grief, violence, mental illness and the difficulties of living during war. The novel is written from 14-year-old Adam’s perspective (except for three chapters where his sister, Yasmine, narrates) and centres on his relationship with art and his family. Painting is a vivid motif throughout the book and Sukkar expresses Adam’s emotions through colour. Purple is pain: ‘I close my eyes and everything turns purple. Did I press a purple button in my body by accident? Yasmine says I twisted my ankle’ (64). Green is portrayed as a colour of illness and death; Adam thinks, ‘She usually talks a lot and is ruby red, but now she is green’ (29) after Yasmine’s suicide attempt. Red is also a strong repeated image throughout the book. Sukkar uses it dually, juxtaposing life and death through red. Adam sees ruby as the colour of his beloved Yasmine when she is happy. He says, ‘When we play like this, she becomes my favourite and most vibrant colour, my colour ruby’ (12). Alternately, red is also used to portray death, especially when Adam paints blood with blood: ‘I have a part of me that is pushing me to take some blood and paint. So I do’ (152).

Colour, then, is a running theme; each chapter is named after a colour and the author repeatedly describes Adam painting war scenes. Adam’s art works to show the state of the war in his hometown, Aleppo, as well as the state of his mental health. As the novel progresses, Adam’s mental health worsens and this is conveyed through his art when he begins using the blood and hair of people who have died in the war in his paintings. Sukkar portrays art as Adam’s lifeline; it keeps him alive and is his coping mechanism. This is portrayed quite literally in one scene where Adam eats his paint. Adam consumes green paint, a colour which Sukkar has portrayed as representing illness. Adam makes this clear, stating, ‘It’s a weird feeling but it tastes green’ (154). *The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War* contains graphic portrayals of violence. Yet Sukkar manages to balance this against Adam’s endearing and childlike personality. While the book is emotionally dense, it isn’t unbearable for the reader. Sukkar crafts this impressively because she does not water down the violent circumstances of the Syrian war.

However, in one instance Sukkar, in an attempt to maintain the balance between portraying the war truthfully yet uplifting the reader, is too light-hearted: ‘There is still dry blood where the ear was cut off but it isn’t a lot. I pull it up to my mouth and start whispering about what I dream of doing in Damascus’ (270). Through this she portrays how violence has become normalised in Adam’s eyes and the isolating effects of war, yet the scene also risks being glib.

Laura Guthrie’s afterword refers to *The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War* as a ‘young adult novel’ (311) but the dark themes and graphic depictions of violence and sexual violence contradict this. Even though it is from the perspective of a 14-year-old boy who thinks in a quite childlike way, Even though it is from the perspective of a 14-year-old boy who thinks in a quite childlike way, the content may be too mature for many young people.

Sukkar puts forward a clear representation of the murder and kidnapping that is occurring, yet is purposely vague about the participants of the war. Through Adam’s eyes, the reader doesn’t understand why the war is happening. Yet Adam has a strong but perhaps simplistic sense of who is ‘good’ and who is ‘bad’: those who are violent are ‘bad’ and those who help him and his family are
‘good’. The simplistic notion is powerful to read; it highlights the damaging effects of war without giving way to the opinion that war can be a political necessity.

Sukkar keeps her discussion of Syria’s political climate purposely vague. Traditionally, Adam would be considered an unreliable narrator. He is a boy who has difficulty interpreting social interactions that are not explicit in nature. However, in this situation he is a reliable narrator; he interprets the war and violence around him and reaches no clear conclusion of why this is happening. He says, ‘This war is unfair, there are no uniforms or clues’ (89). Sukkar also addresses the political through Adam’s brothers: Isa, Khalid and Tariq. They attend war protests and their involvement in the war results in violence. Khalid describes the effect violence has on his stance on politics, stating, ‘Has anybody from your family died? … That’s why you’re still interested in politics and I’m not’ (292).

The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War also extensively deals with themes of women’s autonomy during wartime. Sukkar breaks the continuity of the book, set in Adam’s perspective, to give voice to his sister, Yasmine. Yasmine is kidnapped, tortured and raped. Through Yasmine’s hardships, the character states, ‘I want to die and let go of all my worries and pain’ (201), Sukkar highlights the particular difficulties faced by women in war zones.

Sukkar also comments on women’s agency in everyday life through Yasmine. After her mother’s death, Yasmine becomes the carer for the family; she looks after Adam, cooks, cleans, works and is denied a life with the man she loves. She states, ‘I have always looked after my family from day one and have never had a day for me. I don’t even have a family of my own. No child to name or laugh with, my only child is Adam, and he isn’t even mine’ (202-03). Sukkar also touches on career opportunities for women, Yasmine telling Adam, ‘I wanted to be a photographer but mama told me to be a nurse. It’s more feminine.’ (96). Notably, Sukkar addresses issues that women face worldwide, not just women in war-torn Syria.

The author comments on the erasure of Yasmine’s identity through the literal erasure of Yasmine in her father, Baba’s memory. As a consequence of the stress of the war, Baba loses his mental capacity. He often mistakes Yasmine for his deceased wife and, in one scene, is violent: ‘Yasmine is on the ground with her hand on her face and Baba is standing up shouting at her’ (94).

The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War is short for a book that addresses themes of gendered violence, war and family dynamics. The novel has an impressive range and depth beyond Adam’s light-hearted musings. Sukkar’s writing is skilful, layered and includes insightful cultural details. This works to disarm the singular image of violence the media has painted of a war-torn Syria; Sukkar portrays love and culture as well as violence.

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