

Nada Awar Jarrar. *Somewhere, Home*. Vintage, 2004.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*Somewhere, Home* is another ambitious first novel. It is patchy and on the whole not well written, but it has some effective passages. The author, Nada Awar Jarrar, is a Lebanese woman who has spent much of her life away from war-torn Lebanon, in Australia and elsewhere. This kind of exile from home and family is a persistent theme in the book.

The novel is in three parts, each dealing with a completely different set of characters. The unifying thread is intended to be provided by a house in a village in the hills above Beirut, which provides an unattainable symbol of home to characters in each of the stories. However, the thread is not pronounced enough in the second and third parts and though the intention is stated on the back of the book, it is not realised between the covers.

The first part is the weakest. It concerns generations of women living in the house, their men constantly absent. I don't usually make such distinctions, but this is surely very much a woman's book. I imagine many men, and probably some women too, would be irritated by the surfeit of what Doris Lessing referred to as "womanly certitude" in Part One. These women *know*. They are always right about the sex of their unborn children. They suffer patiently, and always know the right thing to do – when to stay and when to leave. They wash their clothes with hand-made soap. There are at least four women described in this first part – too many for the reader to distinguish clearly.

The second part concentrates on one woman, Aida. She is more interesting, having escaped Lebanon with her parents and 2 sisters at the beginning of the war, leaving behind a manservant, Amou Mohammed. When Amou Mohammed is killed by the militia, she develops a kind of obsession with him. He appears to her as a kind of guardian angel throughout her years abroad. She returns to Lebanon but can find no-one or nowhere to keep her there, and as the story ends she leaves again to seek his shadow, which it seems is dormant in their homeland. This makes for an intriguing small-scale psychological character sketch. The house makes just a brief appearance, as an object of longing, a place from which Aida is excluded.

The third part alternates the present life of an aging Lebanese woman, Salwa, in a nursing home in Australia, with her childhood memories. Abandoned by their father, she and her sister grow up with their mother in a village in Lebanon. At 15 she is married off to a middle aged man who carries her off, against her will, to America and then to Australia. She appears to have become fond of her husband, nevertheless, and her life hasn't been too bad. But she is old and tired and full of regrets. She sees the house in a photograph, and thinks she recognises it as her childhood home. She may or may not be right, but at any rate the house represents her past, and the photo heightens her melancholy nostalgia.

Like many first novels, *Somewhere, Home* tries too hard to be poetic and evocative. Adjectives like 'endless' are overused and finally mean nothing much. There are some appallingly constructed sentences which need to be read many times before yielding up their sense. The chronology is unclear, especially in Part Two. Writing beautiful poetic prose does not have to entail leaving the reader bewildered. If the prose really were beautiful, rather than a clumsy throwing-together of unlikely images and incongruous epithets, then perhaps we may forgive a lack of clarity. *Somewhere, Home* contains the seeds of an interesting novel, though perhaps not an original one, but in the end, like the old

lady in the nursing home, all we are left with is a wistful but ineffectual nostalgia.