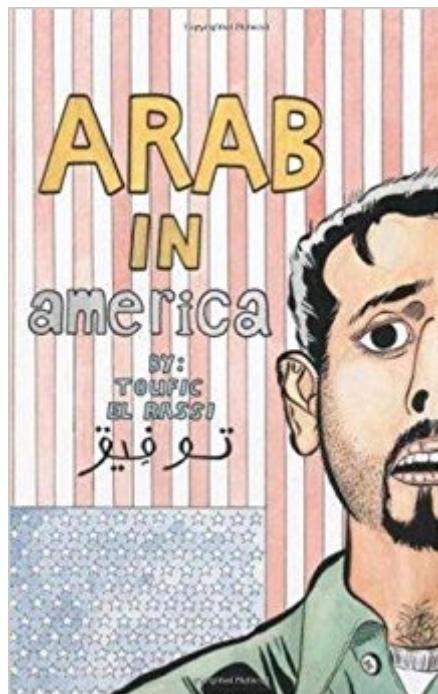


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Arab In America



Synopsis

Through his own life story - from childhood to his life as an adult, Toufic El Rassi illustrates the prejudice and discrimination Arabs and Muslims experience daily in American society. He contends with ignorant teachers, racist neighbours, bullying classmates and a growing sense of alienation.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Eloquent despite rather humdrum art and too many misspellings in the copious, hand-lettered text, El Rassi's autobiographically based plaint couldn't be more timely. As many as possible need to know what being an Arab in the U.S. is like, and El Rassi meets that need comprehensively. He portrays an existence harried by name-calling, threats of bodily harm, pervasive ignorance about Arabs and the Middle East, and such casual insults as being asked whether he speaks English after having spoken it first. Brought to the U.S. by Lebanese immigrant parents when an infant, he appreciates the injustice of that bigotry more keenly than older immigrants perhaps could, for, raised entirely in the U.S., he was able to presume normalcy until, in eighth grade, his typically Arab dark beard grew in (he draws himself with stubble throughout, starkly differentiating himself from non-Arabs, ultimately to poignant effect). Besides moving us with his personal testimony, El Rassi does a lot of teaching, some of the most devastating of it about the U.S. --Ray Olson

The eye-opening story of the life of an average Arab-American struggling with his identity in an

increasingly hostile nation. Using the graphic novel as his medium, Lebanon-born Toufic El Rassi chronicles his experience growing up Arab in America. Keen observations, clever insights and painful honesty make El Rassi's work shine as a critical 21st century memoir. From childhood through adolescence, and as an adult, El Rassi illustrates the prejudice and discrimination Arabs and Muslims experience in American society. He contends with ignorant teachers, racist neighbors, bullying classmates, and a growing sense of alienation. El Rassi recounts his personal experiences after the 9/11 attacks and during the implementation of new security and immigration laws that followed. El Rassi gives context to current world events, providing readers with an overview of the modern history of the Middle East, including the Gulf wars. He also examines the roles American films and news media play in creating negative stereotypes of Arab-Americans, showing how difficult it is to have an Arab identity in a society saturated with anti-Arab images and messages.

Toufic El Rassi was born in Beirut in 1978 to an Egyptian mother and Lebanese father. He immigrated to Chicago a year later as his family escaped the civil war in Lebanon. He is a college lecturer in history and political science, a writer, and a graphic novelist and commentator on Middle Eastern affairs. He lives in Chicago.

I would say that I experienced prejudice as an Arab-American before. I think if I hadn't mentioned that I was Arab-American, it wouldn't have happened. They would have thought I was Italian or Greek since I'm light. Generally, I have not faced problems since I don't fit the profile that Toufic El Rassi fits that profile. Ray Hanania wrote a book called, "I am glad I look like a terrorist". If you look like some conceived stereotype you will get stopped sometimes by the authorities, people might say derogatory things to you, but if you are light skinned like many people from Lebanon and Palestine, then they don't bother you unless you have a name that's stereotypical. That's why many Arab-Americans changed their names when they came to America a long time ago. It's not only since 9/11 that Arabs have had problems. When the US attacked Iraq in 1991, many Arabs were treated like enemies because the American education system is horrible and doesn't teach people about geography and cultural differences. Also, people like Toufic El Rassi are Christian and many Arabs if they are not Christian, are often secular. And if something happens in Iraq, why should someone from Syria be harassed? Iraq and Syria technically have been enemies. When there were hostages in Iran in 1979, people who were swarthy were often suspected of this or that even if they weren't Iranian. I am sure Jews who fit the profile also have been harassed, and some of them hate Arabs. I liked the comic by Toufic El Rassi. I didn't experience so much harassment like he did, but I think the stereotypes are too much. Many people from Damascus, Beirut, or Amman don't fit the

stereotype. Also, not all the countries are the same. Such old ideas need to go. Since Americans don't get much of an education, and they see a lot of TV and Hollywood as Rassi seems to say, they, of course, will stereotype people from that part of the world. El Rassi embraces Left politics, because he wants justice for all. I think Toufic exaggerates somewhat. Immigration is overwhelmed. It deals with so many non-speakers of English. They can't know how long he lived in the U.S. They have a tough job. As far as Israel and racism against Arabs, pro-Israeli groups promote anti-Semitism against Palestinian Semites, which is one reason people like El Rassi faced discrimination, and Walter Mondale returned the money of Arab Christian donors because it seemed risky to take their money. Hillary Clinton had to return money to an Arab donor, I believe. The Left in the US, with some exceptions, ignores the occupation and suppression of the Palestinians. However, that's a generalization by El Rassi. Plenty of the very Left wing of the Democratic Party dislike what Israel is doing to the Palestinians and that includes many American Jews. I think El-Rassi generalizes too much, but I understand it's hard not to with a comic. I can understand how many Americans will be paranoid about security and freak out about a t-shirt that says "we don't be silent" and they don't know what's written in Arabic. People are going to be paranoid, and in the Middle East in some of the countries people would do worse than some Americans, but, America, as an advanced, Western country that is supposed to have a good education system should have people who are more knowledgeable about the world. However, as Cronchite said Americans are woefully ignorant, and that's why so many American soldiers died in Iraq. It was so easy for Bush to mislead people and lie to them. I think El-Rassi should be more understanding as an Arab-American, IMHO. At least, that's the opinion of this Arab-American. I can understand why El Rassi is mad. I mean his home was searched without a warrant, it appears, because an ex-boyfriend of his aunt had a visa violation in Canada? In the climate of ignorance and paranoia many people who fit a stereotype could face problems including Sephardic Jews. You're swarthy, then you are dangerous. I don't see this everywhere. In my town, I don't really see it. I know a guy from Saudi Arabia, and he tells me he loves how Americans are so kind to him. We do need books like El Rassi's because stereotypes need to shatter, but Americans need not be stereotyped too much, either.

This graphic novel is a powerful tool that tells the story of Arab Americans being raised in post-Cold War America. El Rassi uses art, humor, historical fact, cultural awareness to show the reader how this generation of American Arabs viewed the redefinition of enemy in American culture to include them. I would highly recommend this book for anyone who wants to learn some really deep political,

emotional, sociological concepts in a fun, fast and almost movie-like way. This graphic novel is an appropriate introduction to new students and a therapeutic confirmation for Arab Americans who share this story. Thank you El Rassi.

Graphics help depict the emotion behind a serious problematic stereotype. Loved it, enjoyed it and there should be more graphic biographies similar to this one.

The GuardianOn the defensiveCraig Taylor rounds up recent releasesSaturday March 22, 2008Arab in America: A True Story of Growing Up in America by Toufic El RassiThose looking for lush artwork and nuance will do well to skip El Rassi's autobiographical tour of his troubled American existence, but Arab in America is more complex and rewarding upon closer examination. The scrawled black and white drawings track a journey from El Rassi's birth in Beirut to his struggles with and in America. He understands he's different after a childhood production of The Wizard of Oz places his face among his classmates - a "dark splotch" beside the white. From there he examines his family and his role in this eternal war against terror that seems to have shuffled him into the opposing camp. Why do they have to be referred to as "our troops", anyway, he asks. Not only does El Rassi feel the sting of racial slurs, but he often receives the wrong ones altogether: "Americans don't even know who they're supposed to hate."He explores the different degrees of Muslim activism through the reactions of the friends around him. Throughout El Rassi remains an inert figure, held in by the constraints of his personality and his culture. The struggle to find an identity is kickstarted finally by Rage Against the Machine and a reading list of revolutionaries. Even then El Rassi questions the best intentions of the liberals around him. He decides to become a US citizen to save himself from a possible one-way ticket out. The work is most powerful when El Rassi is recounting his own failures, his missed opportunities and outrages, petty or otherwise. The post-9/11 context he's gathered to illustrate his thesis seems to be snipped from newspapers. At its best, his personal history is enough to illustrate a life lived constantly on the defensive.

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