

An Algerian Childhood: A Collection of Autobiographical Narratives

Leila Sebhar, Editor

Marjolijn de Jager, Translator

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"I'm lying a little: that goes without saying." Nabile Fares, unabashed and undeterred admits his tactics in an essay entitled "The Memory of Others." He proceeds with his story, as each of the authors in this collection must, despite memory's gaps, or else in the full embrace of them. Such is the business of autobiography: what really happened merges into the memory of what happened, each version being different than the other.

Several generations of Arab, Jewish, Kabyle and French writers—sixteen of them in all— were invited by the editor to write on the theme of childhood. While each piece offers glimpses into highly individualized experience, what makes the collection cohesive is an overall preoccupation with the historical and political circumstances of the time each came of age. For most, this meant the treacherous and confusing years prior to Algeria's liberation from French colonialism.

A lyrical tone prevails in these essays, juxtaposing often violent or intense imagery with the language of childhood memory as reconstructed by adult desire and dream. The French feminist, theorist, and playwright Helene Cixous leads the reader down alleyways of association: a story about class differences, and a little girl's encounter with a shoe-shine boy drifts into other things: "One day I will also tell about water, need, thirst, the verb to quench, the country that was the source of sources and was not called Algeria." More than anything, one gets the sense that childhood was, for these writers, a time of great richness, even if the consciousness and words to describe that time didn't arrive until adulthood.

Clearly compiled with literary readers in mind, this book of lessons about a time and a place is an opportunity to read rarely translated voices, including Mohammed Dib and Fatima Gallaire.

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING (May / June 2001)

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