

★ Country of Origin

Dalia Azim

A Strange Object (Apr 12, 2022)

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A mother's shadow looms large in Dalia Azim's contemplative novel *Country of Origin*.

Halah is on the brink of adulthood. Her only worries should be finishing school and warding off her parents' attempts to marry her off. But Cairo is burning, and her education is cut short. When she meets a young officer, Khalil, she becomes infatuated, convinced that she's in love with him. She persuades him to spirit her away to New York. They marry and give birth to a daughter, Amena. Amena's arrival makes them seek reconciliation with Halah's parents through yearly trips to Egypt. On one such trip, Halah goes missing.

Up to her disappearance, the story is narrated by Halah and suffused with her teenage angst, burgeoning womanhood, and understandings and misunderstandings of the world. It includes intense highs and deep lows. After she goes missing, Khalil takes over and, in the space of a single chapter, fills in all the pieces that are missing from Halah's telling. His desperate love for his wife, his guilt, his deepening realizations, and his unspoken fears for his daughter become apparent.

When the narrative focus shifts again to Amena, the novel jumps forward in time by nearly a decade. Amena's suppressed grief manifests in creative ways, foreshadowing her arts career, which is derailed when Khalil's fears are realized and Amena sinks into depression. The parallels between Halah and Amena's stories are deliberate, subtle, and crisp. The distant sheltered quality of Halah's story butts against the frank tone of Amena's, resulting in a story that is just as much about a young woman finding herself in the midst of psychological turmoil as it is about a mother's absence.

Country of Origin is a rich, character-driven novel about personhood, enduring love, and immense grief.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (March / April 2022)

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