

Perplexed: Where the Beginning and the End Meet

Angie Eissa

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Adultery, abortion, suicide, money, religion, AIDS, and drugs—all are major issues in Western society, and they are also the central themes in Egyptian debut author Angie Eissa's *Perplexed: Where the Beginning and the End Meet*.

The novel follows the separate lives of four Egyptian women: Mai, Leila, Dina, and Malak. Through these women's intense inner conversations, readers learn what it means to be a woman in Egyptian society. Yet the reader has a nagging feeling: when will these lives intersect? Ultimately, these women, polar opposites in personality, age, lifestyle, and appearance, unite in a surprising twist that makes the story completely worthwhile.

Through her characters' conversations, Eissa offers a lingering look under the burka and behind the walls and locked doors of a male-centric culture, exploring issues front and center to Egyptian women, including sex, postpartum depression, physical and mental abuse, child rearing, divorce, marriage, faith, and adultery.

The author's narrative voice soars in the chapters focusing on Malak's experiences in a psychiatric hospital. "In your companionship, I can close my eyes. It is such a great freedom to be able to close your own eyes and not be afraid," Malak says to her visitor, a lover from two decades earlier. Fear is an undercurrent in the novel—fear of society's cold eye, fear of one's husband and other authority figures, fear of not being married and not producing male heirs.

Perplexed is not without humor amidst the pain: "But we women can imagine love existing in a dead tree," says Malak, as she tells her doctor the story of what led her to the hospital. Readers follow Malak's evolution from sane to raving mad. The sentences speed along, dragging the reader down the rabbit hole along with Malak. The doctor finally determines that Malak has been incorrectly diagnosed as insane and, instead, suffers from the "little understood condition described as perplexity."

The author's first language is Arabic, and the reader sometimes feels the strain of her writing in her second language, but the final portion of the book is strong, clear, and full of messages about life in Egypt today. Despite the sometimes awkward phrasing, the story remains compelling. Western readers will bristle at the macho behavior of the men and long for each woman to escape her plight.

DINDY YOKEL (January 24, 2013)

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