

★ Planet of Clay

Samar Yazbek

Leri Price, Translator

World Editions (Oct 5, 2021)

Softcover \$16.99 (336pp)

978-1-64286-101-3

The life of a sheltered, neurodivergent girl is shattered by the Syrian civil war in Samar Yazbek's novel *Planet of Clay*.

Rima's world has always been limited to the apartment she shares with her mother and the library at the school where her mother works. After a visit to a friend turns deadly, Rima is plunged into a war that she doesn't understand. Trapped in a cellar with boxes of paper and a blue pen, she records her story so that neither she nor her loved ones will disappear.

Rima is creative and intelligent, but because she can't speak or control her physical movements, those around her dismiss her as "crazy." She tries to make sense of her experiences—the bombings, the disappearances, and the horrific aftermath of a chemical attack—through books she's read and colors and shapes that she loves. She grapples with hunger and death for the first time, finding a strange happiness in knowing that, after a lifetime of being the odd one out, she now has something in common with others.

Alone in the cellar, Rima dreams of returning to the apartment where she left her box of stories, and of leaving in the company of the young man who promised to bring her to safety. As her situation worsens, she clings to the secret worlds she has created for herself. And, as the story winds its way toward the inevitable conclusion, it is perhaps as much a blessing as a curse that Rima does not fully understand what is happening. The real tragedy—the one that Rima cannot grasp—is that innocent lives can be snuffed out by forces beyond their control.

Planet of Clay is a devastating novel about human resilience and fragility in a time of war.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (September / October 2021)

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