

★ **The Cat I Never Named: A True Story of Love, War, and Survival****Amra Sabic-El-Rayess****Laura L. Sullivan, Contributor**

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Amra Sabic-El-Rayess's account of her youth during the Bosnian War is a timely personal testimony on the strictures of survival. Gripping and achingly humane, *The Cat I Never Named* captures what it means to face an ideological tide bent on your personal eradication.

Amra and her family “are Muslims of birth, of ethnicity, not religion, really.” Amra is also a devoted and gifted student, not just at the top of her class, but in the top tier of her country. But then war springs—not “all at once. Instead, like a cat, it stalked” in, and Amra didn’t “believe it was there until it pounced.” She’s betrayed when her Serbian teachers destroy her records before fleeing ahead of invading Serbian forces. It’s then that Amra realizes, “Only one kind of test matters now. The test of survival.”

Amra does survive, both ethnic cleansing and “more than 1,100 days under the Serb’s military siege.” Nonetheless, Amra’s war is shaped by the destruction of dreams, both physical and metaphorical. Her parents’ dream home decays; her childhood, then her future, are swallowed by human darkness. What lingers is Maci—“cat” in Bosnian. This feline refugee adopts Amra’s family even though a cat isn’t something they “need.” Maci is a narrative anchor and a constant reminder that, even during times of horror, life contains inexplicable softness—elements that are gentle, protective, and loving.

The Cat I Never Named is immersive, and Sabic-El-Rayess’s visual imagination is a slipstream. Amra’s words have a subtle, relentless force, creating a world where life is a danger, a demand, and a warm, calico presence. In the face of violence, death, and creeping despair, Amra and her family find ways to keep their bodies and spirits together.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (September / October 2020)

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