

Dancing into the Light: An Arab-American Girlhood in the Middle East

Kathryn K. Abdul-Baki

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A lively memoir that captures the happiness and confusion of being part of two cultures at once, Dancing into the Light is celebratory and affecting.

Kathryn K. Abdul-Baki's powerful memoir *Dancing into the Light* is about the joy and confusion of being pulled between two worlds.

Abdul-Baki was born in the US in 1952. Her mother was American; her father was an Arab immigrant. When she was four years old, her family moved to Tehran for her father's career. Thus, Abdul-Baki spent most of her childhood in the Middle East. Because her mother's side of the family remained in the US, she also took yearly visits to Hawaii to spend time with her grandparents.

Family and its value are prominent themes in the book, which celebrates Abdul-Baki's strong family ties with both sides of her family. It evinces love and respect for both cultures, religions, and a range of practices, using sensory descriptions to bring each place to life: "I slipped in and out of these two worlds, familiar with and at ease in both." But it also acknowledges cultural contrasts throughout her life, leading to some confusion around her personal identity.

The book captures Abdul-Baki's feelings of internal division and the pain of being pulled in two different directions well. Questions about whether she was Muslim or Christian, Arab or American, or combinations of both arose for her. Tension grew as such experiences built up, though the self-understanding Abdul-Baki developed as she came of age helped to ease it. The book unfolds at a gradual pace, matching her process of coming into her own. There are some minor daily inconveniences covered, and a few harsh realities; at a few times, Abdul-Baki felt like she was facing down utter destruction. Nonetheless, the book maintains an even tone, prioritizing tales of personal growth, healing, breaking cycles, and becoming strong. Its chapter titles function as a road map of sorts, providing clues regarding what is to come.

Also of interest is the book's coverage of the particular joys of music and dancing as forms of release. Indeed, in one moving sequence, dance is used as a way to release memories. This feeds into the narrative's overall form: when the dance ends, the story has come full circle.

Dancing into the Light is an impassioned memoir by a woman who grew up between two cultures—and loved both.

SHARI MARSHALL (August 7, 2023)

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