

The Story of Liam: The Promise

Wedad M. El Hajj

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The Story of Liam is a modern fable whose hero's struggle becomes an illustration of universal ideals.

In Wedad M. El Hajj's novel *The Story of Liam*, a Lebanese man rises above challenges throughout his short life.

When his parents get divorced, Liam leaves his childhood home with his younger brother, sister, and mother. His grandmother decides to return the boys to their father; their mother and sister are separated from them. But Liam receives no support from his rich father. Instead, he and his brother work and go to school, achieving success in their careers so that they can support their mother and their own families.

Liam marries and has four daughters. A patriotic military officer, he's captured in 1975 by the invading Syrian militia. Despite his tumultuous past, imprisonment, and ensuing illness, Liam remains a model of dignity and goodwill to everyone around him.

Focused most on its character sketches, the book emphasizes Liam's stalwart qualities, juxtaposing them to other characters' nefarious traits. The more money that Liam's stepbrother makes, the more corrupt he becomes; another brother is a double agent during the war. Liam's stepsisters are described as greedy for their father's attention and inheritance, and Liam's sister, who is raised as an illegitimate girl in a conservative land, has difficulty maintaining relationships; she raises her daughters to be spiteful and cynical. These daughters and others make fun of Liam's mother as she becomes senile. Still, Liam remains loyal to all of family members, with faith that one day, good will come of his actions.

The book's chapters are short, covering many years in a few pages. They are shared in chronological order, though some deviate from the timeline to illuminate past events. That the book takes place in Lebanon is revealed several chapters into the story. Scenes focus on crucial moments, including Liam's return to his father's household and his time inside of prison, though such events are referenced without elaboration.

Within the story, commentary and analysis takes precedence over action. The domineering narrator toggles between calling herself "I" and "we;" she addresses both "you" and "we," and her surprising intimacy results in a moralistic tone. A brief outline of her story begins the novel, asserting that she is important in the tale, but without clarifying her relationship to Liam. The novel's only dialogue is devoted to her questions about the meaning of others' behaviors. Karma is discussed; so is the notion that experiences teach people important life lessons. But although the narrator asserts that actions speak for themselves, her conclusions are at odds with the actions of Liam and others, which are often inconclusive.

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MARI CARLSON (January 4, 2021)

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