

The Summers

Ronya Othmann

Gary Schmidt, Translator

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In Ronya Othmann's captivating novel *The Summers*, a German Yazidi girl comes of age in a time of political crisis.

Syria is "found on maps, globes, and official documents," but Leyla, who spends summers there with her grandparents, knows the place as Kurdistan. She is intimately familiar with the village's nooks (its kitchens, snakes, and storied buried mines). She also hears and absorbs information about the wars of its past, her father's stateless years, and the persecution of its people. Meanwhile, Leyla's diligent grandmother instills admiration in her for Yazidi customs.

During the school year, Leyla lives in Munich; she comes to regard its practical culture as a shadow imitation of the life that her father could have had. Moving between her two worlds makes her acutely aware of how she is different from her classmates. Her Kurdish language skills are imperfect; she feels shame over the privileges of her European education. But her love for her relatives is powerful, too. She comes to recognize how they are indebted to her generous father.

As Leyla grows older, she experiences grief: Syria is struck by civil war. Her sharp nostalgia for the village leads her to realize that her identity—tied as it is to a disappearing place—has to be reconsidered. Leyla's aunt finds asylum in Germany; her efforts to resettle are marked by struggles, too. Leyla, though she bears witness to all of this in vibrant terms, seems helpless to alleviate her Yazidi family's pain.

The Summers is an intricate, powerful novel in which a woman comes of age between two worlds.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2023)

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