

We Walked On

Thérèse Soukar Chehade

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A girl comes of age in a time of war, holding on to memories of her city as it once existed, in the poignant historical novel We Walked On.

Lebanon's civil war unites a teacher and student in Thérèse Soukar Chehade's illuminating historical novel *We Walked On*, about life-affirming relationships that help people to survive.

In 1975, Hisham teaches Arabic in a Catholic school. A bookish dreamer, he favors Rita, a bright pupil whom he enjoys challenging in the classroom. At first, their alternating views depict life in Beirut through warm sketches: He is married, and his wife finds him impractical; Rita discusses her friendships and her rivalries with her siblings. Hisham narrates in the third person and Rita in the first, underscoring their personalities: Hisham is more distanced and perceptive, responding to political changes with apprehension and through his writing; Rita filters her experiences through her shifting impulses, and Hisham responds with empathy to one of her essays. Early on, the book covers school days, visits to family, Rita's delight in watching American television shows, and shared meals in multicultural Beirut, where Arabic, English, and French influences intertwine and religious differences simmer.

The novel's intimate setup emphasizes strong relationships and the exquisite scenery of Lebanon's mountains, gardens, and trees in prewar Beirut. There are nostalgic reverberations of this peace once the routines of people's lives erode. Indeed, holding on to memories of the city as it once existed becomes a way for people to endure the war as political unrest rises.

Though from Rita's perspective, "none of these things were happening to me," there are foreboding implications that the changes brought on by war will come to all. The pull between Rita's once-innocent focus on her family and her increasing awareness of citywide strife progresses with ramping unease. When gunfire and bombings break loose, they nonetheless feel abrupt to Rita and hasten her need to mature. Around her, uncertainty wears on Lebanon's citizens, who stay in shelters and hunker down during lulls in the fighting. Political differences within families are covered in the course of tense conversations too.

The book's abrupt pivot to cover Rita's life in 2019 is also used to summarize the fates of the other characters and to reveal a tragic occurrence. It's an elegiac but swift ending to an otherwise careful exploration of coming of age under stress. Even here, though, the small kindnesses of others remain memorable.

Lebanese people confront the hardships of a war that changes them in the haunting historical novel *We Walked On*.

KAREN RIGBY (February 24, 2025)

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