

Nelda Lateef Interviews Intriguing Women of Lebanon

In *Women of Lebanon: Interviews with Champions for Peace* [McFarland & Company, Inc., North Carolina, 1997, \$37.50 (paperback)], author Nelda Lateef brings to us her interviews with 42 of the most prominent and interesting women of Lebanon.

The interviews are short and succinct – most are about 4 or 5 pages long – but they give us an insight into each woman's philosophies and tell her unique story of life before, during and after Lebanon's brutal 17 year civil war. The women explain how they coped with the war, maintaining their hope, their vision of life and peace, and how each sought to bring about peace and healing, understanding and compassion from within the country and from without.

Their stories of loss and recovery, of undying hope and vision, of love of family and country, are inspiring and can serve as a guide us all. They help us put our own lives into perspective, for most of our problems seem quite small and surmountable when compared to the trials endured by these women and their compatriots. That they came out of such a long and awful war still feeling love and hope and even joy, seems amazing, if one looks only at the surface. But upon closer view, one finds that the common thread in all of their lives is the character that they received from Lebanon, itself. There is something special about Lebanon – something that made these women strong, passionate and compassionate. It was something that all them recognized as worth saving, and they dedicated themselves to doing just that.

The author says it best in her introduction to the book:

This book is about human endurance. The Lebanese women who speak to us about their trials during seventeen years of war were at once witnesses to the destruction of their society and the glue that prevented its total disintegration. Culture is of prime importance to many of the women in this book. Samia Saab traveled throughout the world setting up cultural exhibitions to remind Lebanese expatriates about their rich historical and cultural heritage. May Arida, president of the International Festival of Baalbek, routinely drove to Baalbek, in central Lebanon, to exhort the townspeople to protect the Roman ruins and stayed in contact with performers all over the world in anticipation of the day the festival could be brought back to Lebanon. Leila Badre, curator of the American University of Beirut, Archaeological Museum, kept the museum open to remind the Lebanese people of their past. Nora Joumblatt, wife of politician Walid Joumblatt, opened an art gallery to display the works of contemporary artists and thereby help to reestablish Lebanon's historic role as a cultural center. Sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair and artist Juliana Seraphim continued to work, channeling their anguish into art. Poet

Houda Al-Naamani, among the first to return to her old neighborhood, poured out her feelings about her beleaguered country in spirited poetry and fiery works of art. Novelists Emily Nasrallah and Leila Osseirane, through their writings, gave voice to the trauma of those forced to leave and the suffering endured by those who stayed.

The disastrous impact of the civil war on the economy and social services was mitigated by the efforts of women who rolled up their sleeves and went into action. Judge Arlette Jreisatti established a free clinic in her neighborhood and founded vocational schools for boys and girls. Rhanda Berri, wife of parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, established a center to rehabilitate the handicapped. Zahra Bissat founded a home for the destitute elderly. Bahia Hariri, who heads the Hariri Foundation, annually awards hundreds of academic scholarships to qualified Lebanese students. And first lady Mona Haraoui raised funds to build and operate a medical center.

Other women interviewed include singer and actress Fayrouz, singer and actress Sabah, professor and activist Hala Salaam Maksoud, parliamentarian Nayla Moawad, journalists Souade Karout Al-Ashi and Sonia Beiruti, doctors Majd Ariss-Timani and Muna Matta-Muallem, fashion designer Papou Lahoud, University counselor Mariam Ghandour, and more.

The women interviewed come from every walk of life and represent the multitude of faiths in Lebanon, yet, in the end, they all have in common a deep love for their country and its people and the desire to rise above diversity to bring about peace and healing. Their stories are inspiring and poignant, hopeful and sometimes joyful, and we learn from them how to keep hope, how to teach tolerance, how to love even those we have been told to hate. *Women of Lebanon* puts a very human face on a country and a people that seemed so remote and hopelessly mired in war to many Americans. The stories of these women should be treasured as a diary of survival and a celebration of "champions for peace"

-Laura Dorn