

Real Lives

Real People, Real Stories.



Alia Yunis: The first time novelist on defining herself, and her people.



I think that since 9/11," says Alia Yunis, author of *The Night Counter*, "many Arab Americans have started exploring the nature of their relationship with the country they call home." She is speaking to us from Abu Dhabi, where she currently calls home, teaching film to university students. Throughout her life, she has travelled a lot: she was

born in Chicago, studied and graduated high school in Athens, Greece, and has lived in Beirut, LA and Washington. She says that her travels are typical of many Arab Americans: "As a result of the 'troubles' in Lebanon and Palestine, my extended family live around the world, and I have first cousins I have never even met. In many cases our commonality is limited aside from a shared love and passion for those places."

She says that since 9/11 the Arab American experience has been about "defining ourselves, not in defence of the idea that we are all fundamentalists, but in the sense that we are a millions strong community in the United States that has been there for over a century; it has been about defining ourselves in terms of what we have contributed to the US."

The Night Counter is Yunis' first novel, a format that offers "more freedom than the screen writing and PR I had been doing for years before that." On the other hand, "without that background, I would never have had the discipline to write the novel." Yunis says she has always wanted to write a "multi generational novel that expresses how important family is - or should be." Her own family, she says represents the full range of cultural sensibilities: "some are more liberal than me, others more conservative."

"This is a work of fiction, and I can't honestly point to any character and say 'that's my bestfriend or 'that's my grandmother' but I know the people in my book very well just the way they came out of my head, and they wouldn't come out my head if they weren't a conglomeration (subconscious and/or conscious) of my reality."

Alia Yunis will be signing copies of The Night Counter at Jashanmal Bookstores on 24th October. Contact: +973 1722 5998 for more details.

Sidd Kamboj and Bryan Malone: Building on their dreams.

For manager Bryan Malone and part owner Sidd Kamboj, Aqua Fuego represents a complete change of life for the pair of them. Raised in Bahrain to Indian parents, Sidd studied hotel management and hospitality in the states. "After graduating I was working in Palm Springs; I had a great job, a nice house - I was settled there." He says that he had no plans to return to Bahrain but, "things happen, plans change," and what started out as a holiday back to Bahrain became a more permanent move back.

For Bryan, a native of San Diego in California, "the call from Sidd was the chance to try something new, to live somewhere new. I viewed it as an adventure." Like many expats coming to the Middle East Bryan says he was "asked all the usual questions" by family and friends who could not shake the region's more troubled images from their minds: "Why would you want to go there; don't they hate Americans there?"

He says that he experienced "complete and utter culture shock" when he arrived in Bahrain but "not for the reasons I thought I

would." For Sidd too, despite being raised here, "returning to Bahrain was akin to moving to a country I had not known before." For Bryan, "it was the warmth and helpfulness of the people that came as a surprise; I was not expecting that at all." For Sidd, "I thought I had everything I wanted and needed in the US; coming back showed me that there was a whole other side to me - and to life - that I wasn't getting in California."

Sidd had worked with Bryan in the States and, upon his return to Bahrain and conceiving of the Aqua Fuego concept, called Bryan "on the off chance," a call that came "completely out of the blue." After, "not that much discussion" Bryan got on a plane. "He arrived in Bahrain a few months before we opened," says Sidd, and the two of them have wrought the club from the drawing board to a reality. "It has been a labour of love," they both say, but "well worth it."

Now in its "second season," the Ramadan break affording them the opportunity to "rethink and plan for year ahead," Aqua Fuego represents a belief that both Sidd and Bryan epitomise: "what's for you won't go by you."



Sidd Kamboj and Bryan Malone

Nabil Al Busaidi: Athlete and adventurer.

Nabil became involved with the 'Ride for Remembrance'- an attempt by his friend, US Navy Commander Rick Ryan, to traverse from Land's End in Cornwall, the southernmost tip of England, all the way up to John O'Groats on the northern tip of Scotland - in a wheelchair.

He says, "It wasn't much of a decision, more of a reflexive impulse to assist a friend."

Ryan decided to do this in memory of those in the military who lost their lives whilst he was recuperating in hospital; and raise money for charities associated with the injured and their families.

The Bahraini-born Omani accompanied Ryan and his team last August on the 1429km trip - slashing the previous record of 17 days in half - completing the route in just eight days and ten hours.

Nabs' motivation to be part of the challenge was, "primarily to give moral support to my friend and contribute to his fundraising efforts for worthwhile charities. At the same time, I also wanted to start building up my fitness for my attempt to be the first GCC national ever to go to the Winter Olympics in February 2010."

The team had several challenges. Nabs says, "It's hard to describe but if anyone could see the effort that Rick had to put into pushing his wheelchair up a hill, then they would feel how hard this challenge was." They had several flat tires, a few traffic incidents, and the gears in Ryan's wheelchair broke, and he found it difficult to continue pushing.

Nabs says he felt so proud of Ryan when the challenge was over. "He worked so hard, and overcame so many difficulties to get to where he was. There's a tremendous amount of effort and commitment required to be a world record holder. Almost everything needs to

be taken to an extreme, from diet to rest, exercise and contingency plans. Nothing can be left to chance - every advantage you can gain must be taken, even if it seems extreme and unnecessary to the average person. After all, what we tried to do was not your average event."

Involvements like this are now a full-time job for Nabs. Twelve months ago, he worked in aviation, but gave it up to concentrate on his attempt that made him the first Arab to walk to the magnetic North Pole.

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