



On the Swing, The Secrets are Scattered

Written by Arwa Khumayes

Arwa Alarabeia (Saudi Arabia), 2009, 111 pp.

ISBN: 978-6020024650

This book tells stories about two sides of the same coin. 14 secrets are shared by a mother and her daughter with each secret told in a short story. Each secret is told twice, switching between the mother's and daughter's voices in a feminine revelation. They both share their thoughts about some daily life event that every mother and daughter goes through. The secrets they share are from the heart of the Saudi society. As the secrets are told, the time passes by and we notice the growth of both the mother and her daughter. The secrets start with the little girl trying really

hard to grow up by adding three years to her age at once and ends with her becoming a teen and feeling like Cinderella as she experiences love for the first time.

The secrets vary in their topics and concerns. In one secret the mother wonders how children can be like their parents, yet different, as she sees her daughter act exactly like her, preferring to eat the rind of a watermelon rather than flesh, which is something that she, the author, used to do when she was little. In another secret the mother watches her daughter turning into a teen and going through hormonal changes. The mother explains to her daughter in an intimate conversation about the circle of life and how girls become women, a topic that is usually private and not discussed in public. In another secret both the mother and daughter describe what they feel when the mother feels "blue" and want to be a "snail." She does not want to leave her bed or do anything including being a mother for that day. While this is a syndrome that all mothers might experience every now and then, they usually do not have the courage to say so. This book speaks about the Saudi society in particular, but also speaks to any mother or daughter around the world. As Carl R. Rogers (1961) said, "What is most personal is most universal" (p. 26).

Speaking as a citizen of Saudi Arabia, I agree that the secrets that the author shares are truly secrets, because in the Saudi society, rarely would anyone interfere with a mother-daughter relationship, and the doors behind such a relationship are not discussed. In this book, the mother opens the doors to build a beautiful friendship with her daughter, yet we can notice the respect that holds the relationship between them. This kind of friendship is what challenges the traditions of the Saudi community. The Saudi community in general is very conservative, and values family relationships. The mother should always be obeyed and never questioned following the Islamic traditions. For that reason, mothers in Saudi Arabia find it hard to accept a book that challenges and questions their powers as mothers. However, there is nothing in Islam that contradicts such a friendship, but to the other extent it is a demand and duty for all Muslims to befriend their mothers as an order from Our Prophet Mohammed PBUH.

What is so unique about this book, other than the dialogue between the mother and her daughter, is the written language. The author used a simple, yet elegant, language. The metaphors and detailed descriptions of daily life events, make reading this book a pleasure to the senses. The author's ability to tackle such sensitive topics from Saudi society in such a satisfactory manner make it accessible to readers of all ages and genders.

Rawaa Bakhsh puts her touch on the book with unique illustrations. In the beginning of each story there are pencil drawings that are related to the topic of the secret. These unusual illustrations in the Saudi literature world give a different nature to the book and add to its authenticity. Some of these illustrations are just doodles while some relate directly to the secret being told and Saudi society. For example, there are two coffee beans in the beginning of each story, a symbol from the heart of the Saudi society that really appreciates Arabic coffee.

The author, Arwa Khumayes, who is Saudi, has a PhD in fashion history and is an assistant teacher in King Abdulaziz University. She is married with two girls and one boy. She has written several children's books and has many other publications. This one was her first attempt to write for young adults. As an insider from the Saudi society, I can assure that readers will have authentic insights as Arwa shares her motherhood experience and her wisdom dealing with the difficulties of being a mother.

Recently Arwa published a children's book called *I am Roomi* illustrated by Hanane Kai (2013), that also discuss the mother-daughter relationship with a different twist. *My Girls* by Salman Al-Ouda (2008) is another book that discusses issues of girls in Saudi society but with a more conservative approach as it is written by a male Muslim Scholar. A book written outside the Saudi community with a similar theme that might be interesting to compare is *Dear Mother, Dear Daughter: Poems for Young People* (Jane Yolen & Heidi Stemple, 2009).

This book is in Arabic, but a limited edition in English is published. To have the English copy of the book you can contact Arwa Khumayes by email: arwa@arwaalarabeia.com.

Reference

Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

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