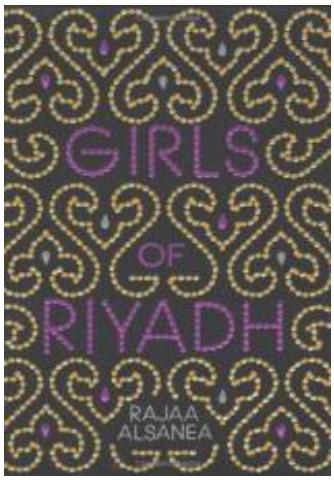
Girls of Riyadh

by Rajaa Alsanea



About the Book

Through a series of emails on a Yahoo subscription list, an unnamed narrator relates the adventures of her four young friends as they confront the challenges of adult life in the privileged society of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. While the urbane clique shares fashion tips, the occasional sip of champagne and a dream of true love, each of the girls has her own individual story: Gamrah has moved to the United States with her new husband in a union their families have arranged. Lonely and confined to a Chicago apartment, she wonders if she made the right choice. Her best friend, the romantic business student Sadeem, is fixed up with Waleed, a handsome civil servant from a prominent lineage, and they are soon caught up in a romantic whirlwind that might be a bit too intoxicating for their own good. Michelle, the half-American member of the group, is at the mall when she meets her own seemingly perfect paramour --- the one man who can truly understand her Western values --- but who, unfortunately, comes from a less tolerant family. Rebellious, headstrong medical student Lamees finds herself attracted to the brother of a Shiite classmate, even though the relationship may jeopardize her friendships and her freedom.

What Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle and Lamees soon learn is that falling in love might be easy, but finding lasting romance in Riyadh is a much more difficult proposition. As sophisticated as they are, they, like all Saudi women, must contend with their culture?s conflicting attitudes about sexuality and its deeply rooted class and religious prejudices --- social pressures that can doom even the most auspicious-seeming match. Nothing seems to turn out exactly as they planned, but as the girls of Riyadh struggle to maintain their moral integrity in a modern world, they learn to find happiness on their own terms.

Originally published in Arabic in Lebanon in 2005 and now translated into English for the first time, Alsanea?s debut novel exposes the private world of Saudi Arabia?s most cloistered citizens to uncover young women who ultimately share the same hopes and dreams as their Western counterparts. Her honest portrayal of controversial subject matter made Alsanea a literary sensation and a public enemy, sparking fierce debate in the media and online discussion groups. Addictively readable yet deeply political, **Girls of Riyadh** has been called the first modern Arab novel and its comic but

poignant accounts of contemporary Saudi life make it an instant classic.

Discussion Guide

1. Gamrah?s mother believes that ?woman is to man as butter is to sun.? Do all the men in this novel have a corrupting influence on the women who love them?

2. In what ways are Michelle, Gamrah, Lamees and Sadeem restricted by tradition and how do they work around it?

3. This story of young women looking for love has been compared to books like **Bridget Jones?s Diary** and **Sex and the City**. In what ways does **Girls of Riyadh**?s geographic and social context set it apart from its Western counterparts?

4. When she discovers her husband?s secrets, Gamrah desperately attempts to hold her marriage together. Do you think she is a victim of circumstance or is she guilty of dishonesty in her own right?

5. What role does the widow Um Nuwayyir play for the girls? Is she a positive or negative model for them?

6. What are Michelle, Sadeem, Gamrah and Lamees?s individual relationships to religion and religious law? How do they differ?

7. After a couple of romantic disappointments, Michelle realizes she can never replace her true love with another man. Do you agree with this conclusion and do you view her ending as a happy one?

8. Does this novel have a moral point of view and if so, what is it?

9. During the scene where Lamees graduates from medical school, the narrator describes her joy of ?having it all?: love, a career, a new baby on the way. How did Lamees manage to pull off this feat --- was it skill or simply luck?

10. The narrator says early on that every one of her friends ?lives huddled in the shadow of a man, or a wall, or a man who is a wall.? Is this true for all of the characters, and is it true even at the end of the story?

Author Bio

Rajaa Alsanea grew up in Riyadh, the younger of two daughters in a family of doctors and dentists. She is currently living in Chicago, where she is pursuing a degree in endodontics. She intends to return to Saudi Arabia after obtaining her degree. She is twenty-five years old.

Critical Praise

"A rare glimpse into ordinary life for young women in Saudi Arabia."

Girls of Riyadh

by Rajaa Alsanea

Publication Date: July 5, 2007
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 304 pages
Publisher: Penguin Press HC, The
ISBN-10: 1594201218
ISBN-13: 9781594201219