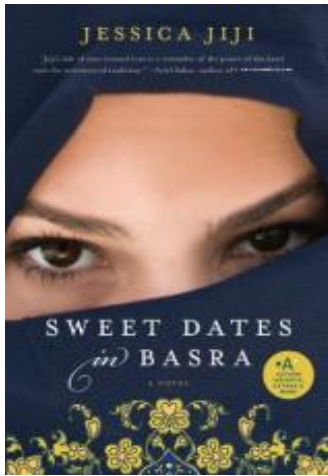


Sweet Dates in Basra

by Jessica Jiji



About the Book

Just when her family should be arranging her marriage, Kathmiya Mahmoud, a young Marsh Arab maiden, is sent from her home in Iraq's idyllic countryside to the unfamiliar city of Basra, where she must survive on her paltry earnings as a servant. Her only asset --- her exquisite beauty --- brings more peril than peace. Worse, her mother appears to be keeping a secret about her own mysterious past, one that could threaten Kathmiya's destiny forever.

In this lost Iraq of the 1940s, a time of rich traditions and converging worlds, Kathmiya meets Shafiq, a Jewish boy whose brotherhood with his Muslim neighbor Omar proves that religion is no barrier to friendship. But in a world where loss of honor is punishable by death, the closeness that grows between Kathmiya and Shafiq becomes dangerous as a doomed love takes root. When British warplanes begin bombing Iraq and the country's long-simmering tensions explode, the power of an unbreakable boyhood bond and a transcendent love must overcome the deepening fractures of a collapsing society.

Set during the tumultuous years surrounding the Second World War, **Sweet Dates in Basra** is the redemptive story of two very different cultures, and a powerful reminder that no walls can confine the human spirit.

Discussion Guide

1. Shafiq is born into a different religion from Omar's, but as a boy he is barely aware of this fact, thinking only that the various pastries their mothers cook on holidays prove that "religious diversity is good for dessert." How do his feelings change over time? Did you have any childhood friends with very different backgrounds --- and if so, did your feelings evolve as you got older and became aware of society's attitudes?

2. Despite the imminence of war in Iraq, Shafiq and Kathmiya find a measure of peace in their early friendship; but after he hears Ezra's warning, he stays away from her. Was Shafiq right to keep his distance from Kathmiya?
3. During the riots, "The sound of the prayer competed with the banging of the men making weapons. Both disturbed Shafiq in equal measure." Why?
4. When Shafiq hears about the Muslims who helped Jews during the riots, even at their own personal risk, he thinks of the Kurds at his father's warehouse. "These were people of faith, but it didn't divide them, just made them stand for what was right." What role does faith play in the novel? Do people of true faith by definition act to help others who are suffering?
5. After Leah gives birth to a girl, she tells Kathmiya about expressions in her tradition meant to convey that it is better to have a boy. What other ways does the society portrayed in the novel favor boys over girls? How do the girls cope in response?
6. Ezra says to Shafiq, "You have to ask yourself, am I an Iraqi who happens to be Jewish? Or a Jew who happens to live in Iraq?" What does this mean? What does Shafiq decide?
7. Trying to get information from her older sister about the three mysterious objects she finds, Kathmiya is exasperated to learn that Fatimah thinks she had a more difficult childhood. Do you sympathize with Fatimah's point of view? In the long run, is Kathmiya better off for all of the suffering she endures?
8. As Shafiq's family deals with Marcelle's estrangement and, later, Naji's disappearance, his mother adheres more and more to traditional tribal practices. Why does she behave like this? Is it an appropriate way to cope with loss?
9. When Naji decides to escape, Shafiq realizes that the danger comes not from any person but from Communism, "this outsized cause that had stolen his brother's soul." Is Naji's idealism admirable or harmful? How does Shafiq deal with his brother's fanaticism?
10. Shafiq's father, Roobain, lives by the philosophy that "in Iraq, neighbor leans on neighbor and friend on friend; these ties of intimacy were all that was meaningful. Without them, society's fabric would be completely torn." How do the characters in the novel forge ties by leaning on one another? Is this the best way to hold society together?
11. Shafiq has memorized a statement by Iraq's founding king: "There is no meaning in the words 'Jews,' 'Muslims,' and 'Christians' in the terminology of patriotism. There is simply a country called Iraq, and all are Iraqis." Was that true of the society where he lived? Is it true for Iraq today, or any other country?
12. Jamila tells Kathmiya that Ali doesn't accept her because she was spoiled by foreign missionaries when she was very young. Even though this is only part of the real story, is there any truth to the link between Kathmiya's unusual upbringing and her rare outspokenness?
13. Shafiq has two men who influence him to be patriotic. "Sayed Mustapha believed in his students, whatever their religion --- believed in a pluralistic Iraq. Salim put this doctrine into practice, mingling freely with anyone interesting --- to him that meant everyone. Both loved Iraq, and both had encouraged Shafiq's future there." But both are eventually

silenced by the authorities. Does Shafiq lose his patriotism?

14. When the old widow Nafisa tells Kathmiya to just accept her station in life, Kathmiya feels "endlessly grateful." Why should she feel grateful to someone who is suggesting that she give up on a better future?

15. When Shafiq tells Kathmiya he is going to America, she becomes angry, but he feels no sympathy for her, saying, "You act like you have no idea that you are brilliant and beautiful." Is he showing her respect and compassion, or is he being callous and unsympathetic given the constraints she faces?

16. Shafiq's mother explains why the sapphire ring is so special: "it only becomes pink because it tries to be a ruby. It doesn't succeed, but it doesn't fail, either, because in the process it becomes even more rare and beautiful." When he gives it to Kathmiya she feels understood for the first time in her life because "she may never have the rewards that society prized, but rather than making her less worthy she could be more rare, more precious, more beautiful." Is Kathmiya like the ring? Is it magical, or does its story just inspire her?

17. Honor is a powerful concept throughout the novel. A girl is killed because she damaged the family's honor. Shafiq gets into a fight over a man's honor and has to go to court. When Jamila calls Shafiq a "man of honor" at the end of the novel, he can only think: "Honor. What they had all lived through in its name, what they had all nearly lost." Is the emphasis on honor beneficial to the society, or harmful?

18. When Salim's friend helps Shafiq obtain an exit visa, he tells the officials to do it for his "nephew." Shafiq calls Omar his "brother" and Salwa his "auntie." Roobain calls Salwa his "sister," telling her son, "We are not strangers, we are relatives." What is the significance in their society of calling someone a relative? What does it say about them?

19. When Shafiq hugs Omar goodbye before leaving for the United States, he thinks to himself, "Even America could not compete for this affection." How is the significance of their friendship greater than the pull of adventure and success?

20. When Shafiq says good-bye to Kathmiya, he tells her, "The world is changing. Someday, all of us can live in peace, and I can come back to Iraq, to rejoin my family and return to you." What makes him say this? What future can they have?

Author Bio

The daughter of an Iraqi immigrant, Jessica Jiji is a speechwriter for the secretary-general of the United Nations. Her first novel, **Diamonds Take Forever**, was published in 2005. She lives in New York City with her husband and three sons. Visit her web site, <http://www.jessicajiji.com>.

Critical Praise

"The cultural perspective and setting are a nice break from the wartime norm, as is the unexpected ending."

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