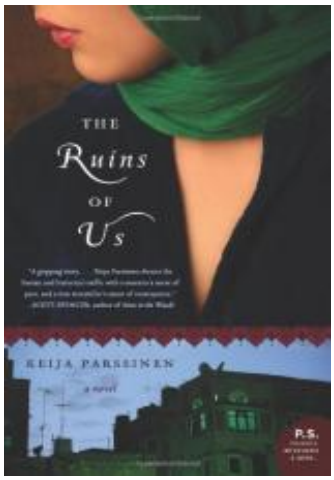
The Ruins of Us

by Keija Parssinen



About the Book

More than two decades after moving to Saudi Arabia and marrying powerful Abdullah Baylani, American-born Rosalie learns that her husband has taken a second wife. That discovery plunges their family into chaos as Rosalie grapples with leaving Saudi Arabia, her life, and her family behind. Meanwhile, Abdullah and Rosalie?s consuming personal entanglements blind them to the crisis approaching their sixteen-year-old son, Faisal, whose deepening resentment toward their lifestyle has led to his involvement with a controversial sheikh. When Faisal makes a choice that could destroy everything his embattled family holds dear, all must confront difficult truths as they fight to preserve what remains of their world.

The Ruins of Us is a timely story about intolerance, family, and the injustices we endure for love that heralds the arrival of an extraordinary new voice in contemporary fiction.

Discussion Guide

1. The Ruins of Us is a fascinating twist on the infidelity story in that Abdullah is in some sense justified in his decision to take a second wife. What would you have done if you were in Rosalie?s shoes? Do you believe Abdullah truly thought he could have both Rosalie and Isra, or do you agree with Faisal when he says to Abdullah, ?I pity you . . . You have forgotten what family means? (p. 217)?

2. On p. 76, Faisal expresses his hope that Abdullah can teach Faisal how to operate ?in the world of men.? Did you view the world portrayed in the novel as a world of men? And how does this world --- and Abdullah?s teaching of Faisal --- impact the fates of the characters?

3. The title, **The Ruins of Us**, echoes throughout the book (even in Abdullah?s musings about the erosion of age on p. 319). Who do you read as ?us?? Describe the ways that you see the title applying to various situations and characters.

4. Physical signifiers play a symbolic role for certain characters: Majid?s scar, Rosalie?s red hair, Abdullah?s prosthesis. How did these visuals inform your reading of the characters? personalities? And how did your initial view of these characters evolve as the story progressed?

5. The geography of the Gulf comes alive through the novel?s prose --- the dry heat, the desert, the sea. Did you read the expansiveness of the landscape in sync with the characters? inner lives, or in juxtaposition? Explain your answer.

6. Abdullah criticizes Rosalie for surrendering to her surroundings and losing herself in certain Saudi ways. Do you agree with his assessment? Do you think it?s possible for expatriates to maintain their ?native? ways of life in a foreign land?

7. On p. 100, Abdullah ruminates, ?People changed over time and love vanished without warning, without mercy.? Do you see vanishing love as the cause for the schism between Abdullah and Rosalie? Can you think of times in your own life when this statement has proven true?

8. How did you read the nature of Dan and Rosalie?s relationship? What do you think they needed, and gained, from each other? What do you imagined would have happened had their plan worked?

9. Did you identify with Rosalie?s ?mysterious child-love for a left-behind place that?s larger than the time spent there? (p. 141)? Can you think of a place that has held the same significance for you?

10. The Ruins of Us features very timely themes of intolerance, martyrdom, and political changes in the Middle East. How did the novel make you think differently about 9/11, terrorism, and Saudi Arabia? Could you be sympathetic to Faisal and Majid in spite of their violence?

11. All of the characters view the relationship between faith and modernism differently. Based on what?s in these pages, do you see the two as complementing each other or as conflicting tenets? If you could write the future for these characters in Saudi Arabia after the novel?s end, what would it look like?

12. The matter of ?home? and ?country? is paramount to the novel and to the characters. Where do you think ?home? is for Dan, Rosalie, and Abdullah? When Faisal walks through an American airport he thinks, ?Imagine. To live out your life in a country not your own. Imagine it.? Can you imagine it? If Abdullah hadn?t strayed, do you think Rosalie could have easily lived out her life in Saudi Arabia?

13. The last scene leaves Rosalie?s path somewhat unknown. What do you anticipate is her next move? What would your ideal ending for her look like?

Author Bio

Keija Parssinen is the author of THE RUINS OF US, which won a Michener-Copernicus Award. Raised in Saudi Arabia and Texas, she is a graduate of Princeton University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was a Truman Capote

Fellow. Parssinen directs the Quarry Heights Writers' Workshop and lives in Missouri with her husband and son.

Critical Praise

"Parssinen convincingly inhabits the shifting moods of her characters?. Throughout, her prose is artful without being showy, forced, or melodramatic, and her knowledge of Saudi culture informs the story?. A fine debut."

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