



E-mails from Scheherazad (Contemporary Poetry Series)

By Mohja Kahf

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"Perhaps Kahf's most impressive accomplishment is her ability to bring together beauty and pain in the same breath, to write poems that encompass history and human endurance as well as joy, that testify to the fragility and power of the human heart. . . . This is Kahf's ultimate message: that religion and ethnicity and color and nationality are as nothing in the face of simple humanity; that spirituality and life are beyond all of these, that no creed or ideology may be taken as justification for harm."--Lisa Suhair Majaj

Kahf establishes herself as a new voice in the tradition of ethnic American poets, blending the experiences of recent Arab-American immigrants into contemporary American scenery. In her poems, Muslim ritual and Qur'anic vocabulary move in next door to the idiom of suburban Americana, and the legendary Scheherazad of the *Thousand and One Nights* shows up in New Jersey, recast as a sophisticated postcolonial feminist.

Kahf's carefully crafted poems do not speak only to important issues of ethnicity, gender, and religious diversity in America, but also to universal human themes of family and kinship, friendship, and the search for a place to pray. She chronicles the specific griefs and pleasures of the immigrant and writes an amulet for womanly power in the face of the world's terrors. Her poetic energy is provocative and sassy, punctuated now and then with a darker poem of elegiac sadness or refined rage.

Mohja Kahf is associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas.

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Editorial Review

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Kahf is an earthy, playful, and purposeful poet who writes with as much sass as sensitivity about what it's like to be a woman, a person of color, an immigrant, and a headscarf-wearing Muslim in a non-Muslim country. Born in Damascus, Kahf came to the U.S. as a child, and her empathy is incandescent for all who have had to leave their homes to save their lives and those of their families, and for those whose homes have been destroyed, expressing particular commiseration with besieged Iraqis. Whimsical, colloquial, and disarmingly witty, Kahf conjures a reincarnated Scheherazad "living in Hackensack" and newly divorced so that she's free to pursue her writing. "Words are to die for," after all. Kahf astutely considers the myriad conundrums and frustrations of women's lives in general and Muslim women in particular, and she is brilliantly wry and utterly irresistible in such showstoppers as her poem about a walkout staged by all the chilly and hungry female nudes and odalisques in a Matisse retrospective. *Donna Seaman*

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Review

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About the Author

Mohja Kahf is associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas. Her poems have appeared in the Paterson Review, Atlanta Review, and other journals, and in various poetry anthologies. She is the 2002 recipient of the Arkansas Arts Council Award for achievement in poetry.

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