House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East Study Guide

House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East by Anthony Shadid

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Plot Summary

Anthony Shadid, a reporter for the Washington Post, covers the eighteen-day war in Lebanon in 2006. After covering conflict for fifteen years in places like Baghdad and Beirut, including surviving a shot to the shoulder five years before, he is exhausted by destruction and tension. He leaves Beirut and travels to Marjayoun, the ancestral home his grandparents left in the early twentieth century as the Ottoman Empire was sliced into individual nations. He seeks the house his great-grandfather, Isber Samara. built and finds it damaged by an Israeli rocket. He imagines his grandmother growing up there, picking fruit from the ancient olive trees around the house. He plants a young olive tree himself, a promise to return and reinstate the grandeur and sense of home that house once possessed. He wants to bring his daughter Laila, herself dispossessed by his divorce from her mother, to Marjayoun one day to teach her about her heritage.

Shadid returns in August of 2007, with less than a year's leave of absence from the Washington Post, and a dream to completely resurrect the house. He soon learns that Lebanese time and scheduling is not the same as it is in America. The project, under the guidance of foreman Abu Jean, moves at a snail's pace for months, and nothing Shadid does speeds things up. He must contend with workers who don't show up when they say they will, the shrewd negotiating skills of merchants selling him supplies, and a town that thinks he is either crazy or a spy.

Despite the frustration of the reconstruction, Shadid makes some good friends in Marjayoun: Shibil, a pot-smoking arthritic middle-aged man, who vacillates between love and hate for his hometown; Hikmat, a local councilman, who wants to believe Marjayoun can return to its former glory; and Dr. Khairalla, a man who has long cared for the ills of Marjayoun's residents without receiving payment, who is now dying of cancer but still has the patience to teach Shadid a lesson in appreciating the value of taking one's time and learning a craft well. Shadid is reunited with a cousin, Karim, who gleefully treats Shadid like true family, guilt trips and unsolicited advice included. Marjayoun, a town that was once the crossroad of several cultures, is now dying a slow death, as more and more people leave empty houses for better opportunities in countries not plagued by violence. Shadid wonders if it can be revived.

Throughout his own story, Shadid intermingles the narrative of his great-grandfather Isber and how the house came to be built: Isber worked hard as a merchant and landlord on the ancestral plains of the Houran in a time before the Middle East had borders. The Ottoman Empire joined cultures, ethnicities, and religions under a common banner in a time of tolerance. But just as Isber had enough money to build a house that will raise his family's social status in Marjayoun, the end of World War I collapsed the Ottoman Empire. As Europeans carved the Middle East into arbitrary nations, creating boundaries and conflict where none before existed, Isber recognized the best opportunities for his children laid elsewhere, and he sent three of them to America. Shadid traces the history of his grandparents' journey toward each other in Oklahoma, and their struggles in their new land, while also relating the history of war in Lebanon that has kept the nation from every truly prospering.

Against all the odds, Shadid's house is essentially complete by the time he must return to Washington, DC. Despite the setbacks and culture shock, as Shadid moves through the house now restored to his great-grandfather's specifications, he feels a sense of belonging he never thought he would find. He is finally bayt, a word that means house in Arabic, but has deeper resonances of home.

Part One: Returning: Chapters 1-2: What Silence Knows, Little Olive

Part One: Returning: Chapters 1-2: What Silence Knows, Little Olive Summary and Analysis

In July 2006, Anthony Shadid is covering the latest attack by the Israelis against Hezbollah (an extremist and belligerent group of Shiite Muslims) in Lebanon, the country of his ancestry. The unexpected Israeli attack has left survivors picking up rubble and corpses. He travels from Qana to his ancestral town of Marjayoun, following the Israeli path of destruction, unable to drive in directly because the Israelis have destroyed the roads and still occupy the Marjayoun.

Shadid finally makes it on foot to his great-grandfather, Isber Samara's house, built in the 1910's but long abandoned. Shadid's family uprooted itself to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma to escape the instability created by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. On a previous visit a few months prior, Shadid had felt no spiritual connection to the ancestral home. Now as he witnesses the half-exploded Israeli rocket dangling from the upper floor, he wonders how old the surrounding olive trees are and how long they will survive. He finally feels a sense of the importance of the place, and the necessity of preserving it to pass it along to his daughter. He buys and plants a young olive tree.

In August 2007, almost without realizing it, Shadid decides to take a yearlong leave from The Washington Post and move to Marjayoun to rebuild the house for the sake of his entire extended family. But there are setbacks. As an American, the locals are suspicious of him, or simply think he is stupid. His temporary landlord tries to overcharge him rent, an elderly neighbor asks him strangely invasive questions. Yet in a gesture of hospitality she brings him a candle to navigate the often flickering electricity.

Isber Samara's house has been rented out and looted over the decades of civil war and Israeli occupation, and requires a great deal of work to resurrect. Some people, including his local friend Shibil, thinks he is making a mistake as he has no actual claim to owning the house (the archaic Lebanese ownership laws divide any property into 2,400 shares; Shadid's portion, once it is divided down the generation is a hardly sturdy 35.) In a nation of shrewd negotiation and family feuds spanning generations, his initiative is risky. But he and his local cousin Joumana believe the family will appreciate it for generations to come. In a town that has become ghostly, Shadid only has three neighbors on his street.

After many delays, Joumana's husband Fouad, an engineer, and an architect named Armando, take over the project, with a man named Abu Jean to act as foreman of the project. Worried about budget and schedule, Shadid manages to extract from Abu Jean

a promise to get the work done for seven hundred US dollars by May of the following year, nine months hence.

Throughout the chapter, Shadid intersperses the origin story of the house and his family. His great-grandparents Isber and Bahija married in 1899; they were a perfect balance as her soft placating nature complemented his hard, demanding personality. The first of his family arrived in the United States in 1894, settling in Texas and Detroit before moving to Oklahoma. Shadid further layers the story with a broad history of the Ottoman Empire, which spanned three continents and mingled more cultures and religions than even the Roman Empire, lasting five hundred years before World War I fractured it. This left Lebanon a nation of various sects of Islam and Christianity, in a destabilized state further exacerbated by Israel's formation in 1948. The country fell to civil war in 1975 and was occupied by Israel for eighteen years beginning in 1982.

Analysis

Shadid begins his story in 2006, right after returning to Isber Samara's house for the first time. He uses this structural device to draw the reader into his moment of deepest crisis. After years of work as a war correspondent, a dangerous and depressing career, Shadid has experienced a near deadly sniper shot and the dissolution of his marriage. Shadid uses Lebanon's escalating combat zone to mirror his personal crisis point. Both he and the country have seen too much violence and lost their sense of home as a comforting, stable place.

Shadid reflects at length on the community that his family has built for itself in its displacement in America. All his relatives live within blocks of each other in Oklahoma City. Shadid contrasts this with his own rootless, itinerant lifestyle covering war. He plants an olive tree at the end of Chapter 1 as a symbol that he desires to set down roots, to embrace the Lebanese idea of "bayt," an Arabic word for house. Bayt has a much deeper semiotic meaning connoting home or a place where one belongs, and to create a sense of continuity with the century old olive trees that already surround the house where his grandmother grew up. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Shadid references the olive tree he planted the previous year, and his disappointment that it has not grown sturdy enough to be invulnerable. The tree now symbolizes Shadid's greater frustration with the slow process of getting his familial house rebuilt, and with his own snail-paced spiritual growth.

Qana is the town apocryphally believed to be where Jesus turned water into wine. Shadid includes this detail to emphasize the Christian roots of the landscape, despite the dominance of Muslims in contemporary times. Lebanon's history of religious diversity will become an important theme throughout the memoir. He further emphasizes this by tossing in the detail that Shibil, a Greek Orthodox Christian married a Sunni Muslim. Their divorce had nothing to do with religious ideology, but because their astrological signs were not compatible.

Beginning in Chapter 2, Shadid juggles three narrative threads: his own story of making the decision and moving to Marjayoun, the beginnings of his family history, and a broad

overview of the Ottoman Empire's history. He offsets descriptions of his great grandparents and family in italics, to guide the leader into the past. Marjayoun means "field of springs" in Arabic. It is a lush, watery community. Another name for Marjayoun and its region is Jedeida.

The main narrative focus is simple: the building of the house. Without a dynamic and human antagonist for the main action, Shadid emphasizes the May deadline to finish construction, trying to create a sense of urgency surrounding the plot.

Shadid must also get used to a set of rituals different from his own. The sharing of coffee is an honored tradition between friends and neighbors, and making coffee correctly can take an hour, just as drinking it can. A man with deadlines and a formerly harried schedule, Shadid must get used to a slower pace of life that he cannot bend to his will. This is the first indication of the culture class he will experience in Lebanon, despite his Lebanese roots.

Chapter 3-4: Three Birds, Our Last Gentleman

Chapter 3-4: Three Birds, Our Last Gentleman Summary and Analysis

Shadid describes the history and geography of Marjayoun, explaining the mythology of its residents' ancestry. Centuries of war and lack of economic opportunity drove them from present day Yemen to the Houran steppe in modern Syria, and finally to what became Marjayoun. The town is also on a plateau, close to Mount Hermon, which forms the nearby border with Syria and Israel. Marjayoun is populated by Sunni Muslims, Greek Orthodox Christians, Maronite Catholics, and Protestants. The surrounding villages are peopled by Shiite Muslims and other Christian sects. Though more than 3,000 people lived in Marjayoun before WWI, only about 800 remain. Shadid describes what the Saha, the main town square and meeting ground, would have been like during its heyday during Isber's youth. Isber and his brothers were ambitious, traveling across the Houran steppe earning money by working as landlords, herders, and moneylenders. Isber finds himself drafted at the age of forty-three due to a clerical error, and ignores the call to arms, staying on the Houran to work. When he returns to Marjayoun he is arrested and sentenced to death. It takes the savings of all of his brothers to bribe enough authorities in Damascus to secure his release.

In the present day, September 2007, Shadid visits local distinguished residents of Marjayoun, such as the Kalim Salameh, a sort of mayor of the town, and Dr. Khairall Mady, a beloved retired physician who would let his patients pay with food, and who ran the local hospital efficiently for years. Dr. Khairall remembers Shadid's great-grandfather Ayyash Shadid, and takes Shadid to see the former family house, which is much poorer than the Samara side of the family.

A while later, Shadid visits Shibil, the friend he met just before the war began in 2006. Shibil is in his late 50's, and complains of his many physical ailments, but maintains a placid temper through the use of marijuana and whiskey. Unlike many other residents of Marjayoun, he still maintains the ancient customs of hospitality. Shadid watches as years of bad construction fall away and Isobar's original house emerges. Isber had been able to build the house at the end of World War I because of a shrewd business move: he and his brothers refused to accept paper money from the Turkish army for a supply of grain, knowing the Ottoman Empire would inevitably fall. By demanding payment in gold sterling, Isber was able to raise his social standing in Marjayoun, at least superficially. Just because he had a big house did not mean all the social elite accepted him.

One Friday, Shibil and Shadid wander through Marjayoun's market. Though Shibil has spent time in Oklahoma as well and considers himself American, he takes Lebanese superstitions seriously (bad luck for a black goat to cross one's path, the

untrustworthiness of blue eyes or split teeth). He also succumbs to the Marjayouni system of ever increasing grievances, resentments, and grudges. He bears a grudge against the grocer for his lack of hospitality; Hikmat, a mutual friend of Shibil and Shadid, bears a grudge against Shibil for a perceived verbal slight, though he still offers Shibil customary hospitality.

Shadid is accosted in the market by his cousin Karim Shadid, who is offended by an article Shadid wrote for the Washington Post characterizing the Shadids as "crazy." Karim, an educated lawyer, acts the part of a busybody old woman, constantly dropping by Shadid's apartment unannounced and nosing out the details of the reconstruction. He is contemptuous of Shadid's relationship with Hikmat, with whom he has an old grievance. Still, Hikmat shows nothing but kind hospitality to Shadid, regaling him with Marjayouni wisdom and local philosophy.

Analysis

Chapter 3 starts with an ancient fable of a war-weary people, Isber's ancestors, asking their leader for advice on whether they should move on to calmer land. He shows them three birds, one with plucked wings, one with clipped wings, and one whose wings are intact. They receive the message that "a bird with wings can travel as far as it wants" (Page 36), and flee. Shadid, descended so many hundreds of years later from the Hourani, still fits the metaphor. Despite being shot in Iraq, he still has the use of his wings, and he still seeks a place where he can belong.

Shadid has more moments of culture clash: he watches Abu Jean negotiate with a Syrian to assist with the construction project; the importance of shrewd, almost ugly, haggling becomes evident in their exchange, a skill he will have trouble mastering himself. Shadid learns another cultural taboo: the Marjayounis never speak the word cancer; Dr. Khairall is dying, but will not speak of the extent of his illness.

The themes of religious tolerance and strong community continue as Shadid runs through the great diversity of religions that live together in Marjayoun. He shares an anecdote in which a local restaurant, owned by a Sunni Muslim family named Akkawi, played the prayers of Good Friday over its loudspeakers, and Hana Shadid, a Greek Orthodox Christian would return the favor by singing the Muslim call to prayer, a touching moment many of Shadid's relatives in Oklahoma remember. Abu Jean, a Christian, and Faez, a Syrian worker and Muslim, exchange a simple prayer between them.

Similarly, in the time of Isber Samara, religious views were accepted with tolerance. On the other hand, Marjayoun had a rigid class system, and money defined status. Families who had been in Marjayoun the longest snubbed those who had come off the Houran steppe a mere four hundred years previously. Isber's goal in earning his fortune was to build a house that would catapult his low-status family into the realm of the upper class of Marjayoun. Isber and his brothers often interacted with the Bedouins, and had more in common with them than with the upper crust society of Marjayoun. Like the nomads, hospitality and honor were of the utmost importance to them.

Shadid includes the incident of Isber escaping death to parallel his own near death experience in Iraq. Isber saw himself as destined for greatness because of his narrow miss, and Shadid, seeking a sense of continuity with his great-grandfather, wonders if he too feels special or "chosen" because of his survival. He is self-aware enough to recognize the arrogance of such an attitude, but still feels he is perhaps reliving a familial cycle.

Marjayoun is having an identity crisis as it tries to maintain its existence in modern Lebanon, with so many natives now expatriated and so many houses empty. It is a case of history repeating itself; Marjayoun was unsure of itself in the wake of WWI, as borders were being drawn and people separated artificially from their spiritual or tribal kin.

Despite all the naysayers who insist on telling Shadid he is making a mistake rebuilding the house, Shadid admits he believes, "I can bring back something that was lost" (Page 51). The line of fantasy is blurred. Shadid mourns the loss of the Ottoman Empire, and it seems he hopes the gesture of rebuilding Isber's house will somehow reverse time to that era, and the Empire itself can be reborn, bringing with it open borders and tolerance.

People voicing their opinions on every move Shadid makes is yet another cultural quirk Shadid must get used to, and the opinions most frequently rained on him are those of his cousin Karim. Karim proves that family can say things that outsiders may not say or acknowledge. There is an irony that though he berates Shadid for writing that the Shadids were "crazy" in The Washington Post, Karim himself frequently insinuates that their family has an odd history of bad tempers.

Shadid writes with a sense of self-awareness, acknowledging the irony of leaving his daughter Laila just as is he seeking stability, family, and home. He feels he must absent himself from her one more time in order to provide her with a lifelong home. A house is not enough, he wants "bayt" in ever semiotic sense of the word.

Chapters 5-6: Gold, Early Harvest

Chapters 5-6: Gold, Early Harvest Summary and Analysis

As October arrives, construction on Shadid's house has stalled after the initial enthusiasm of destruction. Shadid contends with the Lebanese concept of time compared with his own American impatient adherence to deadlines; a ten-minute meeting with Abu Jean quickly becomes an hour, and Abu Jean wonders why Shadid is always in a hurry.

Shadid's friend Hikmat and his wife Amina give birth to a daughter, and suddenly Hikmat, faced with this vulnerable life entirely dependent on him, begins to worry more about the constant instability of Lebanon. There is an uneasy peace between the pro-Israeli government in Beirut and Hezbollah, the anti-Israeli resistance movement following the 2006 war that brought Shadid to the region, and the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Violence could break out again between the groups at any moment, as Hezbollah has threatened surprises for Israel. Amina is determined to leave if war breaks out.

Connecting all the dots of the present to past, Shadid relates how Isber encounters obstruction in building his house, he is reviled by both those richer and poorer than he is because of his newfound wealth. The Samaras are part of a greater group of people known as Hawarna, from the Houran steppe, and despite having settled in Marjayoun for four hundred years, they are looked down on as newcomers by local families who have been there much longer, such as the Shadids. Undeterred, he builds a house to reflect his own sense of status and permanence, incorporating elements that will emphasize the grandeur of the house and family, such as a triple arcade and colorful cemento tiles.

Having completed the house but bored by the provinciality of Marjayoun and the superior attitudes of its upper class, he returns to the Houran steppe for work. But as famine and the Ottoman power vacuum leave the region unstable, Bahija, Isber's wife, is left to flee to Mount Hermon with their six children before violence breaks out in Marjayoun. Isber returns home and is confronted with the option to leave for America, a mythical land described in familial letters, where no one fails and everything is modern and wonderful.

Obsessed with the two ancient olive trees that frame his great-grandfather's house, Shadid ignores everyone's advice on when to harvest the olives. He picks them at the end of October, before the first rain (and most people recommended waiting until the second). He tries to follow Shibil's "expert" advice on how to cure the olives, but the instructions are convoluted and change frequently. Shibil wants to feel important and relevant, but ends up frustrating Shadid - as does Abu Jean, who is still dragging his feet on the construction project. Everyone has an opinion on what he should do, how he

should do it, how much he should pay. Hikmat sympathizes, having gotten much unsolicited input when he rebuilt his own house. Yet Hikmat offers too much advice too when he tours Bayt Samara, blaming the engineer and Shadid's cousin in law Fouad for the hold up rather than Abu Jean, whom Hikmat recommended.

Shadid gets used to the local customs: distant cousins who lay guilt trips for infrequent visits; having to bite his tongue with Abu Jean out of respect for the older man; and the incessant interference in how he lives his life. But despite it all, he realizes Marjayoun is becoming home. He beats Karim to an inevitable guilt trip, he gets his olives preserved, and he imagines Laila in her great-great grandfather's house. Shibil tells him, "Be with folks for forty days, and you'll be a part of them or you'll leave" (Page 83). Shadid has been in Marjayoun for more than forty days, and feels more connected to Isber and his homeland than ever before.

Analysis

Shadid uses the present to reflect on the past, considering the cyclical nature of life. He ties his own building woes back to the story of his great-grandfather Isber: Shadid is obstructed by incompetent and lazy workers, while Isber was held back by a social system that did not want him intruding on its ranks. He compares the birth of Hikmat's baby and his sudden concern for the possibility of war with the decision Bahija has to make alone whether or not to flee Marjayoun in the face of impending violence. Shadid sees patterns in history, and finds some comfort in the consistency of human nature.

Shadid's main struggle between his American identity and the Lebanese state of mind is their widely differing concept of time. He wants things done quickly and according to a schedule, but his crew proves he cannot control the calendar. This disparity is the main conflict in the present-day narrative of the book, and Shadid seems incapable of getting used to it. The underlying quality this conflict brings out is Shadid's impatience, a character flaw that he addresses throughout his time in Marjayoun. Shadid's impatience also manifests when he harvests his olives on his own schedule rather than following the advice of those with years of experience. Yet he does not regret the decision, as the olive trees and harvest give him a feeling of connection to his past. He can imagine his grandmother Raeefa picking olives as a girl. The olives symbolize his growing sense of belonging and continuity with his own history. He spends a great deal of time imagining Isber and Bahija living in the house, and his fantasies further heighten his sense of community with his family.

As Shadid describes the conflict between Lebanon's government and Hezbollah, and the concurrent conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, he does his best to utilize his journalistic background: he presents a clear picture of the situation without becoming partisan and plugging a particular agenda. One can imagine which side Shadid would take, but he never explicitly states it. He simply laments the state of the Lebanese people, pitying their constant fear of war and inability to control their own destiny.

Time and again, Shadid presents silence as something to be valued. He claims Isber believed "spoken words were best when rarely uttered" (Page 73), instead simply

listening and evaluating a situation in solitude. Shadid himself appreciates the midday silence as he harvests his olives alone, the rest of his neighborhood napping. This common appreciation once again connects Shadid to his great-grandfather. After the noise and chaos of all the war Shadid has witnessed, he has an extra appreciation for meditative solitude.

Chapters 7-8: Don't Tell the Neighbors, Abu Jean, Does This Please You?

Chapters 7-8: Don't Tell the Neighbors, Abu Jean, Does This Please You? Summary and Analysis

Shadid contends with a sour neighbor - who also happen to be a cousin, though the familial bond means little: Wissam demands Shadid pay cleaning expenses on Wissam's house, dusty from the construction work. Shadid worries that another neighbor, Massoud Samara, will try to claim the fringes of Shadid's land, or cut down a fig tree from his grandmother's time. When he worries he has been too aggressive in fighting off Massoud's demands, Shibil educates him about the true meaning of aggressive; anything short of calling someone the "brother of a whore" is still polite.

All of Marjayoun thinks Shadid is crazy, rich, or an American spy. He fields bizarre requests - such as one from a local grocer, George Deeba, who wants Shadid to announce his political candidacy in The Washington Post - but finally builds a team of dedicated staff to work on the house, or "workshop" as it is now known. A seventy-six-year-old stonemason named Kamil Haddad, better known as Abu Salim, leads this group. Abu Salim is from a generation that was passionate about craft, and the art of building. As he continues to tear down the nearly indestructible stonework that went into the house originally, he recites poetry and rhapsodizes on the lost art of creating with the materials of the earth itself.

Shadid continues to navigate the tenuous relationships between Hikmat, Shibil, and Karim. Shibil wants to congratulate Hikmat on the birth of his daughter, but can't get over what he perceives as Hikmat's ego. Karim worries that Hikmat is poisoning Shadid against him. He blames Shadid's behavior on the infamous Shadid temper. Though the petty bickering frustrates Shadid, it is nothing compared to the time following the Ottoman Empire's collapse when a variety of political groups - Arab nationalists, liberals, Communists, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party - all jockeyed for power in Marjayoun and fist fights in the street were not uncommon. After Lebanon's civil war, political ideology faded and people self-identified by religion. As Christians in Marjayoun, they were a minority within Lebanon. But Shadid laments these artificial means of uniting communities; the national borders created after the Ottoman Empire separated people from the communities they naturally identified with, and created false hostilities by rousing nationalist pride. This was the world into which Isber had built his house, which offered some respite from the turmoil.

As the end of November arrives, Shadid awakens early each chilly morning by the owner of a red Renault across the street from his rented flat, revving its engine needlessly. But in happier news, there is progress in the house and Shadid is impressed by the quality of the work. (He demonstrates his lack of shrewdness by verbalizing his compliments, disabling his ability to negotiate a lower price for shoddy workmanship

later on.) A quirky character named George Jaradi joins the crew and works on a wall separating Shadid's property from Massoud Samara's. He speaks about himself in the third person, drinks too much, and walks awkwardly due to an accident in the civil war, but he cheerfully keeps the team motivated and moving forward.

At the same time, Shadid often finds himself paralyzed when it comes to making decisions; he wants to stay true to his great-grandfather's vision of the original house, but cannot find enough information to be sure of his choices. He worries the house project will stall because of his indecisiveness. He connects his own difficulties making decisions on the house to the enormous choice of his great-grandfather in 1920, as Isber contemplated the choice between Lebanon and America. Lebanon was getting more and more dangerous, and the arbitrary border-drawing of the British and French imperialist separated Marjayoun from the Houran, where he had made his fortune. Though he had saved money to send his oldest son, Nabeeh, to medical school, he worried about the safety of his family and the quality of education available in such an unstable country. The early death of his brother Said made him intent on keeping his family safe.

Later, Shadid spends time with Shibil, listening to a speech by the too-eloquent Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Shibil seems to simultaneously approve and worry about Nasrallah's violent rhetoric against Israel. Shibil is considered a disgrace by his own family, who barely acknowledge him even when living in the same house. Shibil was once a respected English teacher, but Shadid does not know why he stopped. Now Shibil has sunk to the level of an unabashed charity case.

Analysis

As Shadid gets used to Marjayoun's quirks, he claims, "There was a gamesmanship to it all, the jousting of a town that seemed to relish, even celebrate, such contests against a background where war might lurk" (Page 89). There is a pettiness about his neighbors that is almost endearing. In the face of the constant threat of war, they find conflicts they can control, a way to simplify and make the world small and manageable. Though sometimes irritating, Shadid seems to appreciate the frail humanity in their choice to over-dramatize small town struggles.

The character of Abu Salim personifies Shadid's romantic vision of the past. Though too young to have lived through the Ottoman reign Salim's appreciation for old world construction and things that were built to last makes him act as a link for Shadid between his great-grandfather's world and the present. Abu Salim is a symbol of the Ottomans, proclaiming, "Back then was purer than today ... There wasn't this hatred, this revenge that we have today. People lived honorable, simply. There were no worries, no wars, no fear for your children. It was simply another time" (Page 94). Abu Salim reinforces Shadid's own thoughts on the past, and strengthens his feeling of regret that that time has passed.

In a passage relating to Isber's world, Shadid tries to recreate the inner workings of Isber's mind as he decided whether to stay in Lebanon or move to America. Just as

Shadid can't know what the house looked like originally, he cannot know what his great-grandfather's actual thought process was. As a memoir writer, Shadid must attempt to adhere to the truth, and he must rely on family oral tradition to recreate this scene. But he effectively draws the reader into Isber's thought process treating the scene like one in a novel, and creating tension about whether Isber will stay in the homeland he loves and the house he has proudly built, or to go to a place where his children will have a better chance to thrive. Interestingly, Shadid mentions his great-grandfather had started smoking more frequently in 1920, mirroring his own return to cigarettes despite multiple attempts to quit. He uses this small detail about Isber to create a connection and sense of the cyclical nature of life.

Shadid paints a portrait of Shibil and his mysterious past: he went to university in Oklahoma, but returned to Marjayoun. He was once a respected English teacher, but now he is not. His family was once well known in the community, but they have lost status, none more so than Shibil, whose own brothers shun him. By comparing Shibil's past to his present, Shadid effectively uses him as a metaphor for Marjayoun itself: once important and bustling, and slowly intent on its own destruction.

Chapters 9-10: Mr. Chaya Appears, Last Whispers

Chapters 9-10: Mr. Chaya Appears, Last Whispers Summary and Analysis

Shadid, wanting to make his house as traditional as possible, hunts out cement tiles for all the floors. Handmade and old, no two are alike, and an important way to maintain the continuity of Isber's house. He visits three cement merchants, Michel Maalouf, who cannot be bargained down from less than $25 a square meter; a sort of black market dealer named Abu-Ali, who takes the tiles out of houses he demolishes following their ruin from the wars, who sells for $12 a square meter; and Mr. Chaya, who at the age of 66, after a successful career as a money exchanger, taught himself how to pour the tiles, and created a successful business making new tiles for buildings around the Middle East. Despite their newness, he also charges $25 per square meter. Having gotten what he needs, Shadid spends days sorting, cleaning, and designing patterns with his stacks of tile, investing himself more deeply in the process of rebirthing his house.

In an ironic twist of fate, Abu Jean hires the owner of the red Renault that wakes Shadid up every morning as the tile layer. His name is Labib Haddad, and he is one of very few maalim (expert) tile layers in Marjayoun. Because Labib knows he is in demand, he can afford to procrastinate and fails to get anything done on Shadid's house, and Abu Jean refuses to compel him to. When he does eventually appear, he says the tiles need to be cleaned and polished before he can set them. They eventually hire another tiling maalim, Malik Nicola Jawish, to replace Labib, and Shadid finds his precise, even work a revelation. Though when Labib finds out he feels betrayed and curses Shadid in original way - "He fucks ants and milks them" (Page 141) - Shadid is only concerned that it took four months to get a single room tiled.

Continuing the trajectory of his ancestors, Shadid intermingles more history into the story of Isber: on September 1, 1920, French Commission General Gouraud declared Lebanon an independent nation, along with four other Middle Eastern countries that had never before had borders. By cutting people off from their tribal or historical hinterlands, the French and British created a sense of dispossession, destroying people's sense of identity. The Houran was now part of Syria, at some points two borders away. Isber, though Greek Orthodox, felt more comfortable with Arabs than his Maronite Catholic neighbors in Marjayoun, and because of his ties to the Bedouins, felt more Arab than many Muslim neighbors. Interloping colonialists denied the people's desire for a united Arab nation under a strong leader named Feisal. In Marjayoun, the French formed a tight alliance with the Maronite Catholics, forming a political situation that no one in Marjayoun was comfortable with. Marjayoun feltless and less like home to Isber.

Isber continued to debate whether to send Nabeeh, his eldest son, to medical soon when things were so precarious in Beirut as local Christians allied with the French fight with Muslims. Isber wanted Nabeeh to go to America, and Nabeeh wanted to leave as well. Isber decided to send his daughter Nabiha with Nabeeh. Brother and sister leave Marjayoun in February 1920, and neither would see the house again for ten and forty years, respectively. They sailed to France and take a ship, "La Savoie," to New York. As soon as he saw the Statue of Liberty, Nabeeh thought, "This is God's country. This is home" (Page 139).

Shadid befriends a man who "lived the last whispers" of the Ottoman Empire: Cecil Hourani, a man in his 90's who was born in England and wrote a memoir about growing up in Manchester and Marjayoun. He has had a rich diplomatic life in Cairo and Washington, DC, Tunisia and Albania. He is Marjayoun's biggest advocate, working hard to restore the town in the wake of the 2006 war. He tried to turn the war into an enthusiastic opportunity for self-improvement. Though elated that Shadid has returned to restore a piece of Marjayoun, Cecil, like Shibil, thinks he should keep family out of it and start on a whole new house of his own.

Analysis

Shadid, in his negotiations for the tiles, tries to haggle like a true Lebanese but quickly realizes he cannot hack it - the merchants have his desperate desire pegged before he starts talking, and the merchants get exactly as much as they want from him. Despite his growing sense of belonging Shadid still does not quite fit in.

Mr. Chaya, like Abu Salim, represents a theme throughout that text of admiration for those who are passionate about craft. These men exhibit patience in wrestling nature's materials into a desired form, and treat their work as art more than business. Shadid, creating vivid portraits of these men, clearly appreciates their dedication, in stark contrast to his own impatient nature. In his own efforts to sort, clean, and arrange the tiles, Shadid tries on this mantle of craftsmanship, and he feels "as though he is lifting history and putting it back in place" (Page 126). Shadid may not fit into the mold of the shrewd, modern Lebanese man, but he continues to try to create continuity with the past and increase his own sense of belonging. He imagines the tiles laid and covered with carpet to warm the rooms in winter, but also as a means of "muffling time" (Page 127), shrinking the existential distance between himself and his roots.

On page 130, Abu Jean describes to Shadid how the landscape has changed: the land was once covered in fig trees, but as people left the area never to return, olive trees replaces the figs. Olives are a less demanding tree, and Shadid recognizes the irony of something gentle taking over in direct reaction to the increased harshness of human lives in Marjayoun. The olive tree is a symbol of peace, thriving in a time when war seems ever imminent. This irony is tied with the irony of Isber's life: just as he had the house and social status he longed for, he had to send his children away in order to keep them safe. As he became stable in his fortunes, the rest of the nation destabilized and Isber lost what he valued most: his family.

Cecil Hourani embodies the Ottoman Empire for Shadid, and for good reason: he is the only person alive that Shadid knows who lived through the Ottoman Empire. His life in diplomacy encapsulates the best qualities of that era: he tries to bring people together and create goodwill rather than sharpening divisions and crying for nationalism. Cecil's garden has fig, olive, and pomegranate trees that are older than Cecil himself, trees that saw the peacefulness of the Ottoman reign. Finally, Cecil literally creates continuity for Shadid with the time he is obsessed with, the time of his great-grandfather: he gives Shadid a piece of darabzin (iron railing) from the house of Isber's brother Rashid.

Readers should take note again in Shadid's italicized passages relating Isber and his familial history how Shadid uses the literary devices of a novel to create a scene between Isber and Nabeeh. He is imagining the scene, likely with the help of Nabeeh or some primary documents left behind. Ultimately Shadid must recreate the scene carefully and stylishly in order to maintain the reader's trust that he is accurately representing the words and thoughts of a person he never met. Reader should remain critical as to how well Shadid achieves his goal, how credible his accounts seem, and why.

Chapters 11-12: Khairalla's Oud, Citadels

Chapters 11-12: Khairalla's Oud, Citadels Summary and Analysis

December arrives in Marjayoun. Rumors of more civil war abound, and the Lebanese government delays picking a president for the seventh time. A General Francois al Hajj is assassinated. Shadid describes how "To the culprits, shrouded in anonymity, killing was part of the country's political calculus, the cheapest way to reach the audience" (Page 143).

Shadid moves his ancestral narrative to the other side of his paternal grandparents during a similar time of unrest, recounting how his widowed great-grandmother, Shawaqa Shadid, sent three of her children to America in 1911 in order to avoid being drafted: Miqbal, Abdullah (Shadid's grandfather), and their sister Adeeba. They traveled on the ship "Latso" to Boston. At the end of WWI, when the Bedouins raid Marjayoun, Shawaqa and the rest of her children (Najiba, Nabeeha, and Hana) went to America as well, traveling via the Red Star Line to Marseilles, and then on the "Leblanc" to New York. A Greek Orthodox priest named Reverend Shukrallah Shadid, who took them all the way to Oklahoma, led their group. Isber almost sent Raeefa to America with the Shadids, but still thought she was too young. He finally sent her with his sister Raheeja and her husband Mikhail Abla. Raeefa didn't know she was leaving until the day she left, and Isber sent her in a shiny buggy as a parting gift. Raeefa had no choice but to go quietly and in obedience to her parents. She couldn't help crying silently as she traveled across Lebanon, her eyes downcast and unseeing of the landscape she had never traversed before. Raeefa bribed her way into a passport and ship passage, and the grueling trip across the Atlantic left her wanting to go home.

In the present, Shadid visits Dr. Khairalla, who is building a violin for his wife Ivanka. He shows Shadid the multitude of instruments he has built, a traditional pear-shaped thing called an oud as well as bouzouki. He has no training in instrumentation; he followed his intuition and taught himself to build, even making an oud out of thousands of matchsticks. On another day, he visits Dr. Khairalla to learn to make a dish called awarma, consisting of mutton and fat and able to last through the cold winter months. Dr. Khairalla has a pessimistic view of the future of Lebanon and the Christians within it. During the 2006 war, he was caught in an Israeli attack on a civilian caravan trying to get to safety, and he believes as long as such malice exists, there is no hope of an end to war in the region.

January arrives in Marjayoun and with it endless rain and electricity shortages. The team of maalims (experts) continues to make progress on the house, though frustration mounts against the ineffective leadership and general incompetence of Abu Jean, who always promises to do things "tomorrow," behaves rudely to the Syrian workers, and curses like a sailor. George Jajardi believes Abu Jean drags out the work to get paid more. The team begins to fray, and Shadid worries that in any case, as soon as the

house is done, war will begin. Shadid spends time with Shibil, whose health remains bad despite a diet of greens. He discovers that Shibil's oldest brother, whom he worships, is dying of lung cancer. The rest of his brothers care so little for Shibil that after an earthquake they call only to inquire after the state of the house. On a different day, Hikmat confides to Shadid that Shibil acts like a loser because everyone treats him like one. His humiliation fuels his temper.

Rumors that Shadid is a spy persist, due to Lebanon's long history with CIA espionage. The situation intensifies when word leaks of the piece Shadid wrote for the Washington Post about Marjayoun before he embarked on his yearlong leave. Two years after it was published, a rebuttal is printed in the local paper without Shadid's work as a reference. His friend Cecil Hourani and Nabil Rahal dispute Shadid's belief that Marjayoun is "dying," and their editorial sets off an uproar against Shadid. Though Dr. Khairalla and Abu Jean support Shadid's point of view, Shadid begins to feel distant from the town, and frustrated that they would get so disgruntled by his article yet have done nothing to clean up the damage done by the Israelis in 2006. They profess to a pride in their community that they do not act on. He sums up his feelings of disenchantment: "I no longer had illusions about Marjayoun. It fell short, as had I. The town's rejection of its history, its lack of interest in itself and in a past no longer deemed important, was not just an indicator of decline but a cause" (Pages 167 - 168). Their apathy disgusts him, and Shadid feels at an all-time low in his project.

Analysis

Shadid points out the ways that Lebanon is unsure of its identity, and who, if anyone, it owes allegiance to. He intertwines his own search for self with the uncertainty of the nation around him, using them as mirror and metaphor for each other. But the most critical he gets about Lebanon's problems comes within the following statement: "Tired clichés reappeared again and again, month after month, in a discourse too inflexible for the inclusion of possibilities not already tiresomely rehearsed" (Page 143). Shadid does not use his memoir as a platform for voicing his ideas on how to resolve the country's inner turmoil, nor does he even state which side of the argument he is on. Like the practiced journalist he is, he leaves his personal views out of it. He just wishes, nebulously, that things could change, and he leaves it at that.

Like Abu Salim and Malik, Dr. Khairalla connects Shadid to a different time through his joy in and attention to craftsmanship. He is a Renaissance man, teaching himself any skill he finds compelling. When Shadid asks how long it takes him to make an instrument, Dr. Khairalla responds that he doesn't measure the time. It is simply a hobby that gives him pleasure, and it takes as long as it takes. Here Shadid encounters his antithesis, a man as patient as he is impatient. Dr. Khairalla teaches Shadid a subtle lesson in what it means to be Lebanese, or an "Ottoman gentleman." If Shadid truly wants to connect with his ancestral roots, he has to learn to break his own bad habits and open himself to a slower and more appreciative pace of living.

Shadid uses a slightly different tack when writing a passage about his grandmother Raeefa's departure from Lebanon. Rather than imagining the scene in full, he can only

ask questions: he wonders what her parents said to her, he wonders how she felt and what she remembers of that final ride away from her family. Shadid obviously did not have any eyewitness accounts of the moment, and Raeefa had probably never spoken of it to anyone Shadid could interview, and thus he retains his credibility by not putting words or thoughts into his family's mouths. He simply asks questions, evoking for readers the possible thoughts and feelings and actions of that day without pretending to know definitively. Shadid finds more resonance within his own family history. As he frets that he may never get to move into the house, he feels the plight of his grandmother, also adrift as she travels to America, with no family or home to anchor her. Their common desire for home and belonging connects them across decades, and reinforces the universal quality of Shadid's quest, and the cyclical nature of life.

Shadid learns a different kind of lesson in patience from Abu Jean than from Dr. Khairalla. Abu Jean never does things on the schedule he claims he will do them, and Shadid is frustrated. The two men simply have a different sense of time. After months, Shadid continues to hit his head against a wall and let his impatience get the best of him.

Shadid ends the first section of his memoir on a low. He is tired of the small-minded apathy of Marjayoun, and the lack of appreciable progress on his house. His negative feelings reflect the despair of midwinter, when the section ends, and try to create a cliffhanger for the second section: will Shadid's faith in the town he wants to call home be restored? Will he find a "bayt" that resonates through the generations?

BOOKRAGS

Chapters 13-14: Homesick, A Bush Called Rozana

Chapters 13-14: Homesick, A Bush Called Rozana Summary and Analysis

Shadid spends time with Assaad Maatouk, a Lebanese-American chef who returned from the U.S. to be with his siblings who still live there. He left a restaurant in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, to live in his grandmother's refurbished stone house, trusting a nephew to do the reconstruction before he arrived. But upon returning to Lebanon, Assaad discovers his nephew did a cheap job and he feels his family betrayed him. Rumor has it that he came to find a wife, and though he won't admit it, he does claim to have been on a series of dates with women who don't get him. Shadid and Assaad feed each other's self-pity as they fish one day. In addition, Shadid finds himself drawn to Hikmat's upstairs neighbor Fahima. Like Shadid, she is an outsider in Marjayoun, originally from Quneitra across the border in Golan Heights and she vocally criticizes her adopted hometown. Shadid finds solace in the negative solidarity of these ex-patriots. Shortly after, Assaad announces he is leaving, and he and Shadid go fishing for the final time. Assaad again laments his lost childhood, remembering his father Tannios as a legendary shopkeeper in the Saha, and proclaiming he will only miss the food. He further disparages the political use of two martyrs by the opposing parties: the government still mourns the powerful but corrupt Prime Minister Hariri, killed in a car bombing almost three years previously, while Hezbollah celebrates the assassination of its leader Imad Mughniyeh in a 2007 car bombing in Damascus to rally supporters to their cause. These two cynical competing views of Lebanon pull the country closer to civil war.

In the past, Raeefa's Aunt Raheeja takes the gold her parents gave her for safekeeping and loses it to an unethical inspector at Ellis Island. They discover they can't enter the country because Uncle Mikhail has a contagious eye infection. Before they can be deported back to Lebanon, they decide to go to Mexico and smuggle themselves across the border into Texas.

But back in the present, spring arrives, and the seasonal change cannot help but bring a renewed sense of hope and confidence. The springs for which Marjayoun is named bubble up all over the surface of the earth, inviting thoughts of baptism and rebirth. Though Abu Jean works harder than before, he and Shadid still fight, and Shadid once loses his temper with the older man, breaking all rules of conduct and throwing his car keys on the ground. After this, Abu Jean claims Shadid is like a son to him, and Shadid knows he means it. He finally learns to pace his requests to Abu Jean and to let the old man talk when he needs to talk. On the other hand, the crew is entirely fed up with the foreman and little work gets done when Shadid is not around. Each side tries to catch the other in an act of incompetence.

Dr. Khairalla comes to Shadid's house to help him plant his garden. Shadid is almost intimidated by the depthless well of Dr. Khairalla's knowledge. Interlopers give him conflicting advice on how and when to plant his garden ("haqoura" in Arabic) but he only listens to Dr. Khairalla, who again displays his Renaissance man skill at anything he puts his hands to.

Shadid reflects on a photo taken in the winter of 1926. Isber is dressed in dishdasha and a western jacket, a country gentleman engaged with the greater world. Bahija sits away from him, practicing the reserve that existed in their public (and possibly in their private) relationship. They are surrounded by the three children who still live at home: Hajib, Ratiba, Hada. Two years later, Isber died on January 29, 1928 of pneumonia. He was 54 years-old.

Analysis

Shadid drops in details to create a truthful sense of the reality of living with war: he and Assaad fish in the Litani River near an Israeli artillery piece that has been turned into a shrine. The wars have touched every family in Lebanon. During this fishing expedition, Assaad fishes for ten minutes before giving up because he sees no fish. His despair symbolizes his general attitude toward Lebanon, where he has come to expect nothing, and where he finds nothing matches his memory. Like Shadid, Assaad has returned to Lebanon to find a sense of home. Also like Shadid, Assaad nostalgically laments a time long gone - his own childhood in Lebanon. Upon returning he feels nothing is the same. Both men demonstrate an American's impatience, giving up on the fish before they have really even begun to try to catch any, and disdaining Lebanon because it did not live up to an idealized fantasy of itself immediately. They are obsessed with a dream like the American Dream, and refuse to admit nothing in life can be perfect.

Shadid uses his constant battle to quit smoking as a symbol of his feelings for Lebanon and his house project. At the low point when he spends time with Assaad he has picked up the habit again. Shadid deftly juxtaposes his lowest point in Lebanon with his grandmother's lowest point in her journey to America: having arrived she loses her gold and is almost deported. Their sorrows mirror each other as they both continue to seek but not find a place to call home.

Shadid has a small breakthrough in his journey to understanding the ways of the Lebanese: he finally realizes that when Abu Jean says "tomorrow," he actually means some nebulous time in the future. Once Shadid learns to adapt to Abu Jean's ways, he can relax and trust things will get done. It is a small compromise of cultural differences and a lesson learned for Shadid on the virtue of patience. Shadid's inability to mediate the conflict between his crew depletes his confidence as the employer, and he even fears asking Malik the tiler to change a pattern on one floor. But Malik, even-tempered and hard-working, takes the change in stride. Malik, like Abu Salim, is a true maalim, appreciating craftsmanship as an expression of grace and respecting the material as much as his own skill. The tiles connect Shadid to the past in and of themselves, but Malik's handling of them also resonates with that time when work was artistry, and mastering a craft was always the goal.

Shadid interrupts his narrative to give a piece of Lebanese history that is not related to his family in any direct way: In July1925, Druze farmers in the Houran revolted against the French under the combined pressures of inflation, drought, and high taxes. Many groups unite but ultimately an insult among them turns the Druze against the Christians, ending with a massacre of Maronite Catholics. The French regained momentum and brutally killed 6,000 rebels, leaving 100,000 homeless. Shadid uses this anecdote to describe the beginning of the end of Isber's world, the Ottoman Empire, as well as Lebanon itself. The time of religious and cultural tolerance has ended, and community lines are formed along new systems of self-identity.

As Dr. Khairalla teaches Shadid about gardening, his lessons finally seem to take hold. Shadid says, "I learned to respect the garden, where rituals and right actions prevailed. Patience was the requisite. There was redemption in silence. Seasons were restorative. A garden, I realized, heals" (Page 194). Spring has restored Shadid's faith in the community he has adopted as home, restored his faith that things can and will work out. Dr. Khairalla's subtle nudging toward patience start to take root in Shadid, just like the seeds of spring. Shadid sets his hopeful tone and belief in redemption against the tragically young death of his great-grandfather. Using the Druze/Christian conflict as a final springboard into the breaking of Isber's spirit, his death seems inevitable as the world he has loved dies around him. The way Shadid plops his own happy garden interlude between a scene of bleak mass murder and the personal loss of his great-grandfather is jarring, yet resonates. Life is cyclical, and creation and destruction constantly work to keep each other in check.

Chapter 15-16: Stupid Cat, Sitara

Chapter 15-16: Stupid Cat, Sitara Summary and Analysis

At the end of February, the USS Cole arrives on Lebanon's coast in support of Lebanon's government against Hezbollah. Rumors fly about the increasing likelihood of war.

Shibil and Assaad, who did not leave after all, become fast friends. They are sympathetic to each other's misery and don't try to cheer each other up. But even Shibil has his limits as Assaad continues to obsess about this backstabbing family. He wonders how loyal Assaad could be to him (Shibil) if he calls his cousin a whore. Assaad can find no good in Lebanon, not even a free meal, but keeps postponing his departure. He finally sets a date, but reveals his true fears: He has no home and no restaurant in America, and he doesn't know what he'll do. He's already planning a trip back to Marjayoun to avoid winter in Wisconsin.

Shadid returns to the story of his great-grandmother Bahija. A wealthy widow in her 50's, she has raised her children, sending another daughter overseas to Brazil to marry a cousin. Nabeeh, now thirty-two-years-old, returns to Marjayoun in 1931 to find a wife, staying three years. He takes his mother traveling for the first time in her life. They visit the Convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya near Damascus, where Bahija finally makes good on a promise to Mary to keep Nabeeh alive when he was deathly sick at the age of two. They travel to Palestine and Beirut, but prefer Damascus. While attending a wedding there, a cousin's wife plays matchmaker and sets Nabeeh up with a girl half his age named Adeeba. They marry on December 24, 1933, and return to America in 1934. Bahija has seen her favorite son for the last time.

Shadid begins to pivot his ancestral narrative to the first immigrants in America. While Lebanese immigration peaked in 1913-14 with 9,000 new residents, the Quota Limit Acts of 1921 and 1924 reduced the number of Lebanese allowed into America to 100. The Lebanese flocked to the Oklahoma Territory, where there was cheap land and coal. They mainly ran grocery and dry-goods stores.

Nabeeh, now settled in Oklahoma, meets Raeefa at the train station with fifty other Marjayounis. He and his uncle Faris open a grocery store with money borrowed from Aunt Khalaya. Raeefa moves in with them all, but is quickly pulled out of school despite the protests of her principal. Her aunt Khalaya wants her to work more and do family chores rather than become educated; Raeefa, used to a pampered life in Isber's house, has trouble acclimating to the new lifestyle.

Her aunt forces her to marry a seventeen-year-old named Faris - his wealthy father Jacob Rashid wants to keep him from marrying a white woman. Faris promptly abandons Raeefa when she becomes pregnant. Determined not to rely on her in-laws,

she sells their grocery store and peddles items door-to-door. Like her parents, she suffers her pain in silence, only allowing herself the solace of a fur coat and hat with her earnings. Faris returns to demand a divorce because he married another woman, but Raeefa cannot stand the shame of it and refuses. Faris threatens to drown their baby Elva and Raeefa is forced to sign the papers. She returns with Elva to Oklahoma City to her brother Nabeeh. The Reverend Shukrallah Shadid, who celebrates the liturgy from his own home for eleven years, suggests Raeefa marry Abdullah Shadid, who is also divorced and has one child.

Back in modern day Marjayoun, Cecil returns to town and takes pride in his rebuttal of Shadid's Washington Post article. Shadid uses his now-ingrained respect for his elders to allow Cecil's smugness to pass. Cecil shares with him a story about Dr. Khairalla: after the liberation of Lebanon from Israeli occupation in 2000, a corrupt Shiite sect took over the hospital where Dr. Khairalla was director and accused him of collaborating with the Israelis. He was put on trial in 2003 and only because of Cecil's intervention with the Druze judge did he not serve jail time. None of Marjayoun's residents stood up for him besides Cecil.

Shadid spends time with Dr. Khairalla, wanting to know more about his unfair trial. He slowly opens up about it, revealing that he stood up to the Shiite sect Amal who tried to take over the hospital for a year before it was privatized. They retaliated with the false charges. He was convicted but credits Cecil for keeping him out of jail. Dr. Khairalla admits his anger at the Marjayounis who did not come to his assistance. He dislikes their tendency to exclusively look after their own interests.

Analysis

Shadid's describes Assaad's displacement by saying, "He was a man caught between two places, one where he would always be a stranger, one where he was no longer a native. Time and change had made him a perpetual traveler, never comfortable again" (Page 200). Shadid could just as easily be talking about himself in this passage. Assaad is a reflection and symbol of his darkest inner turmoil, just as Dr. Khairalla is the manifestation of Shadid's most idealistic, hopeful sense of himself.

The "stupid cat" in the title of Chapter 15 is a feral cat that Assaad adopted while in Lebanon. Like the country itself, Assaad lavishes too much attention on the cat, expects too much of it, and is resentful when the cat rejects him. The cat symbolizes Assaad's desperate need for acceptance, but the cat merely views him suspiciously, just as the community is wary of Assaad's American-ness.

Privacy is important to the Lebanese, almost to the point of being untruthful in their outer lives. They take pride in concealing unpleasant things - bad marriages, money problems, and other setbacks. The sitara referred to in the title of Chapter 16 is a symbolic curtain behind which the Lebanese keep their secrets, buried in their own customs and traditions. The newly immigrated Lebanese in America refuse to speak of their past. Whereas his ancestors were forced to leave their home to seek better opportunities, Shadid himself has the luxury of running from his past, airing his dirty

laundry across the planet and even in a memoir. This is one more cultural point of tension for him to contend with.

Shadid uses the Raeefa's familial betrayal in the far away land of Oklahoma to mirror Marjayoun's betrayal of Dr. Khairalla when he stands trial for collaboration. Both communities must rely on each other for support and assistance in order to avoid extinction as a group, yet neither group can rise to the occasion, instead seeking whatever is in their own self-interest.

That the ever-generous Dr. Khairalla can express contempt for his fellow Marjayounis illustrates another important tension: Shadid's conflicted view of the community he is trying to assimilate to. The Marjayounis are apathetic and self-absorbed, and Shadid, searching for a sense of home and a group to self-identify with, cannot be sure this is the right group to belong to. His desire to live in the town of his ancestral roots speaks to an idealized vision of the community rather than the reality of what Marjayoun has become. He must question whether this is actually the town of his great-grandfather. Despite his nostalgia, Shadid does not view his neighbors through rose-colored glasses. He maintains his journalistic vision when describing the generosities and imperfections of his community. This tension in the search for both self and group identity comprises an important theme of the book.

Chapters 17-18: Salted Miqta, Passing Danger

Chapters 17-18: Salted Miqta, Passing Danger Summary and Analysis

Unexpected projects pop up around Shadid's house. A cistern that Bahija used to water her tomatoes is uncovered, and unfortunately filled with sewage. Shadid industriously uses the contents to fertilize his garden, which grows many of the same plants as his grandfather Abdullah's garden in America. Shadid uses this segue to summarize his grandfather's life in America. He began as a peddler in Texas with his brother Miqbal, dragging trunks of goods door-to-door and enjoying their freedom. He briefly works in the oil fields and does military service before marrying a woman named Vera and moving to Oklahoma. She soon abandons him and their son Ayyash, named for Abdullah's dead father. He joins his mother Shawaqa and siblings in Oklahoma where Miqbal gets them all jobs working in a farm. Shawaqa is horrified at her new life in America. They move to Detroit for better opportunities but after three years they can no longer afford their rent and they return to Oklahoma.

A study done at Columbia University after WWII condescendingly points out "Syrians" desire to fit in and emphasize aspects of their identity in order to do so. Abdullah changes his name to Albert and his brother Miqbal becomes Mack. Yet they hold to their main traditions, weddings and baptisms followed by table-bowing feasts, miqta, and khibiz marqooq, a thin bread that the neighbors mistake for napkins. Changing names does not help them fit in. Miqbal's family in the small border town of Brinkman experience a great deal of racism at the hands of the Klu Klux Klan, including a cross burning in their yard. Miqbal calls the progressive governor Jack C. Walton, who had to declare martial law in Oklahoma to counteract the KKK, to complain about the cross, and miraculously the family is no longer tormented.

Not only do conflicts arise from the outside world, but Miqbal's own mother-in-law, Rahija stirs up trouble at home, including burning her daughter Hafitha's nipple with acid when she gives birth to a girl named Gladys. When Rahija dies her son Frank takes over as head of the family. His iron rule leads to the death of Miqbal's son when he treats the boy's illness with bad home remedies. He further causes the suicide of Miqbal's daughter Pauline and her boyfriend when he tells them they can't marry because he is American. Life is not much easier in America than it was in Lebanon when familial structures and traditions remain intact. Yet the Lebanese thrive, using all their cunning to make their cookie-cutter dry-goods stores successful.

Back in the present, a carpenter named Camille Salomen commences slow work at the house, preferring to talk than work. He is waiting for an American visa, and freely admits he preferred life under the Israeli occupation because they poured money into the community. A Maronite Catholic, Camille doesn't care for Israelis but prefers them to

Muslims, who never hire him. He's angry that he can no longer meet up with his friends who live in the Israeli border town of Metulla. Another worker named Fadi Ghabar returns again and again to clean the newly laid tile. Shadid joins him in trying to scrub out the muck of construction. The downstairs is nearly complete and Shadid is ready to move in. But each decision causes a chain reaction of decisions that cause further delays. Finally, in April, nine months after starting, Shadid moves into the ground floor of Isber's house. Abu Jean, Toama, and even Cecil, who was against the project from the start, all admire the house, with its Levantine arches, cement tiles, and stone walls built straight from the gifts of the earth itself.

Later, Shadid spends time with George Dabbaghi, the son of his neighbor Maurice, who is the principal of Marjayoun National College. They rent a car and George gives Shadid a lesson in the history of the land, which is still marked by the battles between the British and the French-Vichy in WWII. An old farmer, Abu Ali Wansa, joins their conversation. He admits he was jailed for collaborating with the Israelis. Like Shadid, he laments a lost era, when intermarriage was acceptable, people were tied to the land and cared for it, and everyone was more concerned with co-existing than dogmatism. Arab Christianity will never have a voice in government, and will have trouble keeping itself from extinction without a voice.

As spring progresses, the Lebanese crisis reaches a stalemate: no fighting but also no communicating and compromising. Fear still reigns, and no one believes Hezbollah can be defeated; the Shia are Lebanon's largest religious group, and Hezbollah is backed by Syria and Iran. But some, like Hikmat, are willing to fight them until the bitter end, warning a Shiite neighbor to leave immediately if war breaks out. Hikmat visits the house for the first time since the ground floor was finished, and he is suitably impressed. He is still driven by a sense of God's will ruling his life and he believes his purpose now it to protect his wife and daughter. Fatherhood has changed Hikmat, and his overflowing love for Miana, the baby girl, makes Shadid miss Laila and her unconditional love more.

Returning to the idea of the house as a home for Laila, Shadid wonders how it will ever be completed. It took nine months to finish the ground floor and he only has two months left of leave from work. One of his favorite crew members, Abu Jassim, optimistically believes they can finish the house in May. The upstairs is in chaos but there has been progress. The narrative returns to an earlier Marjayoun and a mother finished raising her children. Bahija, getting older, sticks to the house and her needlework, renting the bottom floor to her nieces and their husbands, and her own room to local military officers while she lives in Nabeeh's old room. She has lived for years in peace and solitude, the danger that drove her children away never quite manifesting as expected. But her children have created a successful life for themselves in another world.

Analysis

Another way Shadid treats his memoir like any piece of journalism he would write is by observing the people who live around them and letting each of them have his or her own voice. Though he controls the story, he does not silence voices whose opinions he

disagrees with. He allows Camille to proclaim his feelings within the pages of his narrative in order to illustrate the broad range of opinions in Marjayoun on politics and religion. On the one hand Shadid gets to demonstrate that though the withdrawal of Israelis in 2000 is referred to as the "Liberation," a word with positive connotations, some people preferred life under the Israelis, as opportunity has dried up without them. He presents to represent Marjayoun from as many angles as possible. On the other hand, Shadid has the chance to reiterate the religious divisiveness that roosts in Marjayoun, despite the longstanding diversity of the community.

Cecil's desire for an American visa contrasts ironically with the stories Shadid recounts in Chapter 17 of the hardships encountered by Lebanese immigrants in Oklahoma in the early twentieth century. In a post 9/11 world, those hardships are bound to be as bad if not worse.

Describing the walls inside his freshly refurbished house, Shadid admires the stonework, saying, "Monumental in stature, they sprawled, unmovable, a part of the house that could not be changed and could not lose its identity" (Page 225). Shadid is anthropomorphizing the house, giving it a personality and identity, projecting his own needs into the sturdy, implacable stone around him. He hopes to absorb the solidity of the house, to know as unshakingly as it "knows," that this is the place where he belongs.

People wander into Shadid's world at random, and sometimes reinforce his theses, as in the case of the old farmer Abu Ali Wansa. As a journalist open to talking to people, he is more apt to find people who share his nostalgia for a bygone era. Here he uses the farmer's words to underline his own beliefs, as well as mirror the intolerance Shadid has revealed in early twentieth century America through the stories of his grandfather and great-uncle.

The section Shadid includes in Chapter 18 describing Bahija's retirement to a small corner of the house, mirrors the decline of Marjayoun itself. The world of those left behind becomes narrower and more restricted. Shadid then contrasts that narrowness with the re-opened spaces of Bahija's house. He cannot identify with his great-grandmother's predicament, and instead his thoughts turn to Isber, trying to connect on the level of men worried about the practical concerns of construction. He tries to see down the years to Isber's thoughts, to wonder if they shared the same exasperations, disappointments, and delays. It is telling that Shadid identifies more with the plight of his great-grandfather in throes of construction than the decline of his great-grandmother who was left behind as everyone ascended to better opportunities.

While looking at pictures of the similar and successful dry-goods stores of the early Lebanese immigrants to America, Shadid contemplates their level of confidence as the look at the camera: "It was the cunning, the shatara, of Marjayoun, honed by the determination of a person who has surrendered everything - family and home - for the unknown. Nothing was given, nothing was assured" (Page 239). Shadid speaks of the immigrants but he could just as easily be talking about himself. He took the opposite journey from his ancestors, but it required the same steps: determination and the

surrender of family and home. Now, as the house nears completion, but perhaps not by the correct deadline, he is plagued by the part of fate where "nothing is assured."

Chapters 19-20: Home, Worse Times

Chapters 19-20: Home, Worse Times Summary and Analysis

Shadid visits an old mansion over the Saha, abandoned since its owner, a parliament member, died in the 1990's. Twenty-five relatives inherited it but none could decide what to do with it. He speaks to his old landlord, Michel Fardisi, who reminisces about the "good old days" of Marjayoun. He loves his hometown but knows his son will never work there. The decline of Marjayoun that Michel laments is echoed as Shadid summarizes the rest of the century in Lebanese history. The country built closer ties to the Anglo-American-Protestant world of Britain than the Catholic sensibilities of the French, and maintained these connections because of the British involvement with Palestine. Israel eventually closes that border, as well as completely cutting of the Houran in 1967 by making it part of a no man's land. Marjayoun is finally separated from all the lands associated with its history and people. There is no more crossroads, and no more jobs.

Back in the United States, Abdulla and Raeefa settle into their marriage. His bad temper doesn't diminish but he loves to sing and brag about her: they are opposites, as she inherited the reticence of her parents. She tends the store, and he tends the garden that is filled with scents that remind him of Marjayoun.

Shadid examines a family photo from 1942. Raeefa is now in her thirties and the mother of five. She and Abdulla have just moved to Oklahoma City and bought another grocery store. Abdullah's health is bad, and he dies suddenly of a heart attack at age 49. Raeefa has no choice but to continue in the grocery store alone. Her customers pay off their credit in a gesture of sympathy. Nabeeh helps train her sons to run the store. Raeefa has no car and has little social life. She only has her weekly trip to church; Reverend Shukrallah finally built an actual church building in 1931, and called it St. Elijah's. The church experiences a miracle, when some non-Greek Orthodox neighbors hear a church bell ringing over the course of a few nights and demand Shukrallah stop ringing it so late. St. Elijah's did not have a bell but Shukrallah took it as a sign to get one.

As summer nears, Karim returns from Beirut and Shadid sees him for the first time in weeks. Karim is impressed with the house but still offers a string of criticisms. They discuss the future and identity of Marjayoun, and Shadid expresses more sympathy for his cousin than he ever has felt before. Though he is excluded from the community as a whole, Karim still hopes Marjayoun can return to a better time. With only a few weeks left before he must leave Marjayoun, Shadid worries as Abu Jean heads up a project to install the stairway to the entrance. Workers continue to waste time waiting for each other to finish his part of the project, with the outcome that nothing moves forward. Determined to finish before he leaves, Shadid pushes everyone to work as hard as possible. Instead he causes a near melt-down when he throws his wallet at Abu Jean and Toama who are fighting about money. Only cheerful George Jaradi can mediate and get everyone back on track.

In May Shadid visits Dr. Khairalla, to give him a CD of a virtuoso oud player in thanks for all his help. Dr. Khairalla finally admits he does not feel good, as the cancer has spread to his spine. Even in his own suffering, he sees the son of a friend and asks for no payment. He continues to work on his instruments, and finally shows Shadid his bonsai collection: another self-taught passionate hobby he has cultivated over the years. As they talk, messages come in about possible violence at an opposition strike in Beirut. Dr. Khairalla expresses bitterness that Lebanon is merely a stage for outside groups to act on, while the people themselves have no control of their fate. Shadid escapes into the imagined memories of Marjayoun, and tends to his garden as it flourishes. Almost two years after he first visited the bombed out house, it is almost completely rebuilt.

Analysis

Shadid discusses the conflict of the Lebanese Diaspora: while Marjayounis are proud of their native sons' accomplishments, they are also resentful of being abandoned. They lavish prodigal sons with elaborate feasts and then they leave again, thinking the community is too wealthy to require assistance. Yet what Shadid is doing is no better, and he is forced to acknowledge it: "I had returned home and rescued a home, in a gesture to history and memory, in the name of an ideal, however misunderstood. But in time I would abandon it, leaving a relic, however functional or beautiful" (Page 243). He is not contributing to the revitalization of the community but to placate his own selfish needs. Though he disdains the self-interest-seeking of the Marjayounis, he has done exactly the same thing to them. Shadid has enough self-awareness that he can recognize this inner conflict and articulate it on the pages of his memoir as he teases out every aspect of his reconstruction of the house from initial inkling to repercussion. Generally in novels, protagonists' motivations and desires are often buried in the subconscious and only teased out by observing the characters' actions. In memoir, an author can speak more directly to his or her audience about the inner workings of the mind.

Shadid's relationship with Karim has evolved; he knows to have gifts for his cousin as Karim always has gifts for him. He understands that Karim's criticisms of the house are merely his way of seeking approval, trying to demonstrate that he also has good taste. He remains calm when Karim makes provocative and extremist statements about hating the Shia and Hezbollah, and sympathizes with Karim's alternating optimism and pessimism for Marjayoun and Lebanon. Shadid recognizes his cousin is too educated and generous for Marjayoun: he doesn't fit in but Marjayoun is still his home. What does a person do when they don't belong in the place they are born? Karim may not like the people of Marjayoun, but he likes the idea and memory of the community. Though they may be nothing now, he wants the town to survive because of its more glorious past. Karim shares Shadid's nostalgia for a Marjayoun that no longer exists, and perhaps never did. But he still believes in the power of the place to redeem itself, to become what it still is in memory.

In describing the marriage of Abdullah and Raeefa, Shadid puts up a bit of his own sitara: he does not make it clear whether theirs was a happy marriage, or if it remained the marriage of convenience it had been when it began. They are clearly different

people, but it is impossible to tell if these opposites attract. In a small way he here is demonstrating an assimilation of a Lebanese practice, shielding and protecting the privacy of his grandparents' marriage from public view.

By mentioning that Abdullah's garden in Oklahoma was filled with scents that reminded him of Marjayoun, Shadid underscores an implicit theme of the memoir: the old adage the grass is always greener. Most of Shadid's acquaintances are conflicted about whether to stay or go, where to settle and call home. Assaad Maatouk is the most prominent example of this, and Shadid himself wonders how to define and feel comfortable in a "home." Abdullah longs for Marjayoun from America, Assaad longs for America from Marjayoun, and Shibil and Karim never quite belong in their home but have nowhere else to go.

Dr. Khairalla gives Shadid one more subtle lesson in patience. After ten years of cultivating bonsai trees, he still considers himself a beginner. He imparts on Shadid the importance of constantly setting new challenges for oneself, staying passionate about life, practicing one's craft until it is perfect.

In Chapter 20, Shadid juxtaposes the news of impending violence in Beirut with the revelation of another disaster in Raeefa's life. The death of Abdullah is another unanticipated curve ball from the universe that Raeefa must field in silence. Shadid creates a sense of foreboding with his discussion of Beirut that is then fulfilled in the next section of text. This device helps keep the text moving forward despite the constant movement back and forth in time and location.

Chapters 21-22: In the Name of the Father, Coming Home

Chapters 21-22: In the Name of the Father, Coming Home Summary and Analysis

Shadid attends the baptism of Hikmat's daughter Miana at the Mar Elias Church in Beit Meri. St. George is the patron of the Marjayoun Orthodox.

Hikmat, a new father, seeks to emulate his own outstanding father George Mitri Farha, by treating everyone with respect so they will treat you with respect. Farha presided over Marjayoun before the civil war, and protected citizens from kidnapping during the war, no matter what religion. Hikmat's other role model, his maternal grandfather Hana Obeid, led a posse to enact retribution for any wrongs against them. Hikmat wanted to fight in the war but his father showed him that it wasn't their war to fight. Hikmat believes that Marjayoun is his father's house and thus it is his father. He cannot abandon it, and he seeks to serve it as his father did. Hikmat is grateful for what God has given him, especially the chance at a family later in life than most (he is 55). Shadid doesn't think Marjayoun can be saved, but Hikmat is as optimistic as Cecil, and wants to help preserve the town's values: he wants his community to have more people-centered values than money or tech-centered values. He believes that the shared history of Christians and Bedouins means they can get along with Muslims.

Shadid gets a water bill at the house for the years 2002-2008, and it is over $1,000. He asks Hikmat to accompany him to the water company to cancel the bill, and Hikmat agrees. Though Hikmat says all the right things, the bureaucrat behind the desk is unimpressed. Hikmat reads him as a Hezbollah supporter and criticizes the government, leading the man to write an absolution that needs to be signed by the mayor. Shadid and Hikmat know Shadid will still have to pay it. It pains Hikmat to admit that the Marjayoun of his father is probably gone for good because people have worse morals now. Malik, Assaad, and Shibil all agree with Hikmat.

The house is a beehive of activity. Every step forward is counteracted by a step back (Toama is colorblind and paints several walls the wrong color) and everyone still gets irritated working under Abu Jean, who continues to do everything, including drinking coffee, at his own pace, but progress is being made. Abu Jean is gleeful when Shadid already knows an insulting joke about neighboring town Qlayaa before he can tell it, and considers Shadid a true Marjayouni.

Shadid has the diary of Raeefa recounting her 1960 trip, at age 52, to Europe and the Middle East. She was able to close the store ten years previously and has been living in a wealthy suburb while sending her children to school. She and her sister Nabiha visit their brother Najib in Egypt and are reunited with their mother after forty years - Raeefa

does not even recognize her at first, thinking her aunt is her mother. She visits the Convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya and gives a donation in gratitude.

Back in the present, Shadid and Shibil visit a thriving multiethnic market in Suqal-Khan, though Shadid worries it will soon be extinct. Shibil remains firm in his disapproval of the house renovation, even though it has turned out well. Shibil recently visited his favorite brother, who is close to death, and Shadid pities him the loss of the few people who care about him. As rumors of war intensify, Shadid visits Cecil, who refuses to listen to the news, having already lived through everything. Though Shadid likes Lebanon, he finds the situation hopeless. Normally optimistic, Cecil agrees.

Analysis

As he gains a sense of identity, Shadid ties different worlds together: the rhythms in the church in Lebanon echo the eastern flavor of the chanting in St. Elijah's in Oklahoma City, which resonate with the sounds of the Shiite Muslims celebrating the holy day of Ashura in Baghdad during the war. The Arabic influence in his life is undeniable, and must contribute to his sense of identity. The christening of Hikmat's daughter also ties Hikmat to his own father, a great leader of the Marjayoun community. The cyclical nature of fatherhood resonates with Shadid has well. From generation to generation a torch is passed, and Shadid wants to pass the house to his own daughter. Hikmat's fundamental piety should also be noted by readers. Throughout the memoir, Hikmat has expressed a reliance on God's hand to guide him through life, and at the christening his deep faith seems to crystallize as he relies on God so his family might rely on him. Despite the myriad religions represented in the memoir and the implicit tensions that exist among them, Hikmat is the only character Shadid presents as a person of true faith. In a world turned on its head because of religious strife, it is ironic that so few people Shadid encounters have any sense of lived-in faith.

Shadid's inner journalist comes out as he senses the end of his time in Marjayoun, and thus his narrative. He begins asking everyone he meets what they think will be the future of Marjayoun. Though originally optimistic in his answer, Hikmat's perspective shifts after they visit the water company. The impersonal nature of interactions between people and the lack of interest in anyone's problems but one's own have irrevocably shifted the moral fabric of the town of Hikmat's father. Hikmat cannot single-handedly set things right again.

BOOKRAGS

Chapter 23- Epilogue: Oh Laila, My Jedeida

Chapter 23- Epilogue: Oh Laila, My Jedeida Summary and Analysis

The mounting tensions turn people thoughts to past violence: Najib, Abu Salim, and his brother appear to admire the house, and relate stories of the Israeli collaborator, Albert Haddad, who lived in the house before the occupation. He had a network of 300 informers and a gun with a silencer for assassinations. He himself escaped assassination in 1995 and is still alive somewhere.

Shadid turns back to the past, looking at a portrait of Bahija in her 90's, back curved with osteoporosis. She started getting senile at the very end of her life, but kept the house almost until her death in 1965. Around the same time, Raeefa is diagnosed with stomach cancer at the age of 57. She has experienced too much tragedy already and has too much family now, so she fights it. He has one picture from November 1968 of her holding her two-month-old grandchild: himself. Bahija's children keep an eye on the house but with the onset of the fifteen year civil war in 1975, the house is looted, beautiful furniture is left to decay in the garden, and mortar shells put holes in the walls. The house is padlocked and abandoned.

It is Shibil's 59th birthday, and he is dressed like he's ready for a not on the town in the 1970's. Shadid takes him to lunch at a restaurant Shibil likes in Shebaa, near eight square miles of disputed territory. He asks Shibil if he's happy, but he says no. He was happiest in college, but because of superstitions, he decided he had to return to Lebanon (he had a picture of his American girlfriend and his parents on his nightstand. In the middle of one night the picture of the girlfriend fell, and he knew he had to go home.) He returned in March of 1975 and the civil war started a month later. He's been stuck ever since. Now, all the people he cares about - Dr. Khairalla, his brother, Shadid - are all dying or leaving. The restaurant Shibil has always liked has changed; it is tackier and louder, and Shibil is disappointed. Shadid tells Shibil he will miss him, which excites Shibil, unused to kindness.

As Shadid's deadline at the end of June approaches, he finds himself doing the gardening while Abu Jean sits smoking and talking to him. Violence breaks out in Beirut and the journalist inside him pulls him to it. Hezbollah's "strike" was merely a show of force to intimidate the government, and fighting in the streets escalates rapidly, incited by their leader Nasrallah. Hezbollah quickly incapacitates the city, even as their militiamen sip Starbucks, with rocket-propelled grenades keeping them company in the next chair. Though he begins to write an article, he does not want to put his career first. He has promised to take Leila to his mother's wedding, where she will be flower girl, and he has already disappointed her by leaving for crises such as the capture of Saddam Hussein in 2003. He is determined to get home. Though he gets through the

unauthorized roadblocks along the road, the airport is deserted, all flights cancelled. He waits three hours and protestors light tires at the airport entrances. He gives up but before he reaches the first roadblock back to Beirut he gets a phone call that a few flights are leaving and he makes sure he is on one.

By the time Shadid returns to Lebanon, Hezbollah has won a decisive victory and the country has seen the worst violence since the civil war. Arab mediators hold negotiations in Qatar, all on Hezbollah's terms, and they resolve to hold a new election, but Shadid knows nothing will actually be resolved.

With one week left of his leave, the house final touches are down to the wire. Setbacks still arise, but luckily get dealt with quickly: the granite counter top has been cut the wrong size, but Malik marches them back to the granite cutter in Khiam and makes him redo the work immediately. Even in the clutter, Shadid can see the final product emerging as the darabzin (iron railings) are bound together traditionally rather than by nails or welding.

As a final homage to Marjayoun busybodies, the town priest, whom Shadid has never met, appears to take a tour of the house and criticize it roundly before leaving without giving any blessing. Everyone has an opinion but Shadid does not care, he simply rushes around finishing details before the movers arrive with his furniture from Beirut. He stores all the broken pieces, wanting to preserve as much as he can, and as an homage to his grandmother Raeefa who saved everything in case something needed repairing. Shadid's joy is tempered by the rapid deterioration of Dr. Khairalla, who listens with interest to the state of Shadid's garden, but no longer offers to help prune it the following year. Shadid visits him in the hospital, and promises he will see Dr. Khairalla in September, but they both know it is not true.

In the epilogue, Shadid describes the scene from his coverage of the "Arab Spring" in February 2011 - the joy of successful revolution in Egypt, the fear of another near death experience in Libya as he and a few other journalists are almost shot at point blank range, then imprisoned in a disgusting jail in Sirte, and beaten before he boards a plane to freedom. On the plane, a soldier apologizes to him. Upon his release he was angry at what these wars continue to cost. He goes immediately to Marjayoun, with his wife and infant son, because he wants to go "home." His daughter is scheduled to arrive soon, and he looks forward to teaching her Arabic, the language of her great-great-grandfather to connect her to her past, as he hopes for a better future for all.

Analysis

Chapter 23's title, "Oh Laila," refers not to Shadid's daughter but to a nursery rhyme his grandmother Raeefa used to sing as a little girl, with which she comforted herself during her cancer treatment.

In a paradox, Shibil's superstitious nature kept him from his own happiness in the United States where he wanted to be, yet because of that superstitious nature, Shibil couldn't live and be understood anywhere else but in Lebanon. He doesn't belong intellectually

and yet he does temperamentally. Just like for Assaad and others, the grass is always greener somewhere else.

Shadid's time in Marjayoun seems to have finally tempered his expectations. He recognizes that with more money the house could have been better, but he is still satisfied. He finally seems to be taking off his idealistic vision of a house from an idealized past. He no longer grieves for the lost Ottoman Empire, but instead looks to a bright future with his family. He finally accepts the reality that he currently lives in, imperfections and all, saying, "Rather than just a channel to the past, or a facsimile of it, it had become new, part of what was and what would and could be...Sometimes it is better to imagine the past than to remember it" (Page 298).

In an act of symbolic symmetry, Shadid eats the olives of his first harvest, and now beyond just seeing the continuity with his past, he looks to the future when Laila will harvest the olives of her own tree, the one he planted that is growing sturdier and taller every day.

As Shadid walks through the finished house, he describes how he "had a sense of belonging, and I felt an affinity...I was alone, and it was quiet. The silence felt to me like acceptance" (Page 296). Shadid's journey is ostensibly complete: he feels at home in Marjayoun, but many questions still arise as to a resolution: how to solve the paradox of feeling he belongs but he will not live there; after setting up the possibility of familial conflict for taking on the house by himself, readers don't discover if it becomes an actual issue as relatives make demands to share the house; he claims to have reconstructed the house for the sake of his daughter Laila, yet we never see her experience it. In fact, for as important as Shadid claims his daughter is to him, we never see him interact with her at all. Whether this is an issue of privacy for him or merely a device to make himself sympathetic can never be known. But despite the positive note the book ends on, it does not end with any clear-cut resolutions.

Shadid further tamps down any feeling of a "happily ever after" by having the final exchange of the memoir occur with Dr. Khairalla, whom he will not see alive again. He juxtaposes the euphoria of finishing his project with the melancholy of impending death. Cycles continue, creation leads to death and death back to creation, and balance is always required to navigate between the two. He puts his small accomplishment in perspective against the life of a man who humbly helped anyone who needed it, and quietly set out to better himself in every way he desired.

In the epilogue, Shadid returns to a rose-tinted fantasy of the future for his children, despite the violence he has just seen as people struggle for freedom in Egypt and Libya. He offers platitudes on "what was lost, and what might, somehow, return" (Page 307). The tone of the epilogue is of a tacked-on afterthought, the desire to tie the book into a major current event to help promote sales. Though the Arab world's fight for freedom is tangentially related to the subject of the book, he waters down his initial ending by resorting to the same nostalgia from which he had recovered by the time Dr. Khairalla is dying.

Characters

Anthony Shadid

Anthony Shadid is a reporter for the Washington Post (later the New York Times) who covered conflict in the Middle East for 15 years. At the age of 39, he is exhausted by wars that have kept him from his family, leading to his divorce and displacement from his daughter Laila. Shadid seeks a sense of home, of belonging; he is American, but Lebanese; a Greek Orthodox Christian but Arabic. His sense of identity is deeply confused. He finds himself drawn to his Lebanese heritage, tracing his family's immigration to America. He takes a leave of absence from work to move to the small Lebanese town of Marjayoun to rebuild his great-grandfather's house, despite the fact that he does not personally own the house. Shadid dreams of a world he was never a part of, nostalgic for his idealized vision of the Ottoman Empire, when cultures freely intermingled. He wonders if such a world can ever exist again. He becomes obsessed with returning the house to its original glory, in an effort to connect himself to his own family and as a symbolic gesture of what Marjayoun is capable of. Though often discouraged by the extremely slow pace of work and the continued escalating tension in Lebanon, Shadid never wavers in his determination. No obstacle makes him consider leaving Lebanon and never returning. Impatient and sometimes timid, he nevertheless forges ahead and rallies his team to complete the project by the deadline. Shadid died in 2012 trying to get out of Syria on horseback.

Shibil

Shibil is a close friend of Shadid's in Marjayoun. A man in his late 50's, he was once a respected English teacher but has fallen into an obsolete life of pot and whiskey, mirroring the decline of Marjayoun itself. In a culture of grudge bearing, his family barely acknowledge him, while Shibil himself feels ill will toward Shadid's friend Hikmat. Shibil is superstitious to a fault; while attending college in Oklahoma, a picture of his American girlfriend fell over on his nightstand one evening, and he took it as sign he must return to Lebanon. He supports Hezbollah, the violent Shiite opposition movement, despite being a Greek Orthodox Christian, and has a love/hate relationship with his hometown.

Isber Samara

Isber Samara is Shadid's great-grandfather, dead long before Shadid's story starts, but a constant presence throughout the narrative. Shadid recreates the circumstances that led Isber to build his house, his desire to better his family's economic status and improve the opportunities available to his children, only to have the world he knew crumble with the end of the Ottoman Empire, forcing him to send his children to America for safety and opportunity.

Bahija Samara

Bahija Samara is Shadid's great-grandmother, also dead long before Shadid's story starts. Shadid vividly recreates the care she took of Isber's house, even after he died in 1928 until her own in 1965. Bahija silently bore the loss of her children to America, believing one should hide both one's successes and one's sorrows from the greater world.

Raeefa Samara

Raeefa Samara is Shadid's grandmother, who was forced to leave Isber's house, the only home she ever knew, at age 12. She settles in Oklahoma with an aunt and uncle for a rougher, more hard-working life than the one she had led in Marjayoun. Raeefa is one of Shadid's main inspirations in rebuilding the house, as he contemplates her childhood there and how she felt upon leaving. She died when Shadid was a baby, so he has little direct connection to her, and he moves to Marjayoun as a way to feel closer to her.

Abdulla Shadid

Abdulla Shadid is Shadid's grandfather, who leaves Lebanon earlier than most immigrants, leading an itinerant peddler's life in America for years before finally settling down with Raeefa. He died abruptly in 1942, leaving Raeefa with five children and a grocery store to care for, a challenge she rises to.

Laila

Laila is Shadid's daughter, who does not appear directly in the narrative, but is constantly on Shadid's mind. He rebuilds the ancestral house partly to provide a home for her after the trauma he caused her by constantly being away working and getting a divorce from her mother. His decision to move to Marjayoun is ironic considering he worries about how little time he spends with Laila already.

Abu Jean

Abu Jean is the foreman on Shadid's building project. At age 76, he is energetic and strong, but lazy and inattentive to details. He refuses to act like a manager and call people who don't show up when they are supposed to, and the work he does is often subpar compared to the rest of the maalim, or experts, who work on the house. His definition of "tomorrow" means some unfixed time in the future, and he is the source of massive amounts of frustration as the reconstruction frequently stalls. However, he comes to care about Shadid as a son, and this motivates him to work harder on the

project he knows is so important to Shadid - though not so hard that he completely allays Shadid's impatience.

Hikmat Fahra

Hikmat Fahra is a local town councilman who recommends Abu Jean to Shadid for his project. Hikmat believes optimistically in the future of Marjayoun, where his father was an influential community member, respected and loved by most. Yet at the age of 55 as he becomes a father for the first time, he begins to worry about living in a country so constantly on the brink of war.

Karim Shadid

Karim Shadid is one of Shadid's local cousins, who welcomes Shadid back to Marjayoun as a full-fledged member of the family, complete with the obligations and guilt and unannounced drop-ins. He criticizes Shadid's decision to rebuild the house but is more than impressed with the results. Karim offers an interesting perspective on Shadid's theme of home and identity. Karim looks down on everyone and everything about Marjayoun, yet there is nowhere else he belongs. Marjayoun is home no matter how he feels about it.

Dr. Khairalla Mady

Dr. Khairalla Mady is the 65-year-old former head of the local hospital, who still treats patients without being paid. Though dying of cancer and unwilling to discuss it, Dr. Khairalla approaches life with patience and admiration, taking up hobbies such as instrument building and bonsai pruning, in order to more fully appreciate the expertise that goes into such crafts. He teaches Shadid many lessons in patience as he assists him with his garden.

Assad Maatouk

Assaad Maatouk is a Lebanese-American chef who returns to Marjayoun from Wisconsin hypothetically to find a wife, but finds himself taken advantage of by his own family in the reconstruction of his house, leaving a bad taste in his mouth for the entire country. He hates everything about Lebanon, and longs for America and his friends there, right up until he's finally returning to the States and feeling nervous about it.

Cecil Hourani

Cecil Hourani is a Lebanese Brit in his 80's, who spent much of his childhood split between Manchester, England and Marjayoun, and wrote a memoir of his experience. Though friends with Shadid, he advises his against his construction project, and also

publicly calls Shadid out for a newspaper article in which Shadid claims Marjayoun is dying. Cecil is passionate about the future of Marjayoun and believes it can once again prosper.

Abu Salim

Abu Salim is a stonemason who works on the reconstruction of Shadid's house. At the age of 76, he is one of the last expert craftsman in his field left in Lebanon. He approaches his work with passion and vigor, rhapsodizing on the nature of building with materials from the earth, and comparing the work to artistry itself.

George Jarardi

George Jarardi is a quirky member of Shadid's work crew, who pushes the rest of the team, fights with Abu Jean, and is willing to do what it takes to get the job done. George speaks about himself in the third person and has a drinking problem. He was badly injured when he fell from a roof because of violence during the civil war. But he always arrives for work cheerful and ready to help the project progress.

Objects/Places

The Young Olive Tree

The Young Olive Tree is something Shadid plants during his very first visit to Isber Samara's house, before he has even decided to rebuild it. It is a symbol of his determination to see the house reborn, and of continuity between the generations of his family.

Isber Samara's House

Isber Samara's House is the main object of focus in the memoir, the reason Shadid returns to Marjayoun to resurrect it from its long abandoned shell of a self. Reconstruction of the house takes up the bulk of the narrative. It becomes known as the "warshe," or "workshop."

Mount Hermon

Mount Hermon is a major landmark outside of Marjayoun, a snow-covered peak that provides the town with beautiful vistas and forms part of the border with nearby Israel.

Cemento Tiles

Cemento Tiles are beautiful hand-painted tiles that form a major architectural element of traditional Middle Eastern homes, covering the floor and sometimes ceiling. They connect the house to its roots in the time of the Ottoman Empire.

Arak

Arak is the local alcoholic drink of choice in Marjayoun, flavored with anise.

Coffee

Coffee in an important ritualistic beverage in Marjayoun. It is made with great care and offered as part of standard hospitality, often savored over a long conversation.

Marijuana

Marijuana is Shibil's constant source of sedation. He self-medicates in order to avoid dealing with the unhappiness inherent in his life.

Oud

An Oud is a pear-shaped, stringed instrument, often used in Middle Eastern music. Dr. Khairalla builds them from a variety of wood as he comes across it.

The Houran

The Houran is the steppe, now in Syria, mostly inhabited by the wandering Bedouin, which were the ancestral home of Isber Samara's people. Isber works on the Houran, selling wheat and renting land, in order to earn the money he needs to build his family a house and a better social standing for them. Once the Ottoman Empire collapses and the arbitrary borders and established throughout the Middle East, Isber and the Marjayouni lose access to this land they have always had spiritual connection to.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is the extremist Shiite opposition group opposing the reigning government in Lebanon. They desire to wipe Israel off the face of the earth, and frequently incite their followers to violent antagonism.

The Druze

The Druze are a local ethnic group in southern Lebanon. They are monotheistic but don't subscribe to any of the "Gods" of the big religions such as Christianity or Islam.

The Convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya

The Convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya is a Christian pilgrimage site outside Damascus, where the Byzantine Emperor Justinian saw a gazelle that morphed into the Virgin Mary and demanded he build a church on the spot. It is supposedly the spot where Cain killed Abel.

Themes

Home as Identity

Shadid can be boxed into many categories: American, Lebanese, Arabic, Greek Orthodox, divorced, father, journalist. Each speaks to one facet of his identity. He feels the tension between his career and his role as father; he was born in America yet since 9/11 knows the disconnect most non-Arabic Americans feel towards anyone who looks Middle Eastern. Since his divorce, he has no true home, and his life is lived constantly on the road in war zones, watching other people be displaced from their homes. He goes to Marjayoun to try to reconnect with his own cultural heritage, and to seek out "bayt," the Arabic word for "house," Shadid associates more deeply as a sense of "home."

Mirroring his personal struggle, Marjayoun and Lebanon have undergone an identity crisis. Shadid laments the loss of the Ottoman Empire a century ago, because the Ottomans represent a time when various sects of Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived in relative harmony. Ethnic groups moved across the landscape of the Middle East without hindrance or fear. As a loosely united empire, political factions with ideological agendas did not exist to arouse hostility and violence amongst neighbors. But since the demarcation of borders and European interference in "nation-building," people of the region have been forced to choose sides, to lose connections with cultures and people they were always attuned to (for example, Arabic Christians would find they had more in common with Muslims than their French Christian brethren). By enacting boundaries and forcing people to identify with a particular spot as "home," many people in the region lost other facets of their identity, leaving them in a constant state of flux, perpetuated by the almost unceasing violence and conflict the Middle East has experienced over the last century.

Shadid understands that a sense of belonging to a community is inextricably linked to a sense of self. He constantly asks the residents of Marjayoun why they stay, particularly if they believe the community has no prosperous future to look forward to - and especially in the constant state of fear that violence will erupt around them. They stay because it is their home, and they identify themselves by this place where they belong. Despite the pitfalls, Shadid is seeking that type of stability, and by the end of the memoir, he seems to have found it in Marjayoun, though he will never live there full-time.

Culture Clash

Shadid is American, originating from a fast-paced, service-driven society, punctuated by his work as a journalist, where he constantly works against the clock to make deadlines. Although his roots are entirely planted in Lebanon, he is ill prepared for the pace of life in Marjayoun, and must re-acclimate himself to a new system of social norms and rules.

Construction on his house comes in fits and starts, and the knowledge of a firm deadline does nothing to rouse his crew to work. It takes him a long time to understand that when his foreman, Abu Jean, says something will be done "tomorrow," he actually means at some nebulous point in the future. He has to accept that sharing a cup of coffee can be a ritual that lasts an hour. As a man well past America's retirement age, Shadid must always show Abu Jean respect, even when Abu Jean does his work incompetently, or procrastinates. Even as his employer, Shadid has no recourse to lose his temper with the older man. Despite having met few of his neighbors, life in a small town means everyone has an opinion on his activities, and everyone is willing to share it whether he wants to hear it or not. He learns that in a small town where "Shadid" is a prominent family name, people make assumptions about his character, denying him privacy and any anonymity to do as he pleases. Through his cousin Karim, Shadid is exposed to a whole new set of familial obligations. Karim guilt trips him for not calling or visiting often enough, and for not taking his advice.

Dr. Khairalla becomes essential to teaching Shadid the value of patience as he navigates a world so different from what he is used to. Through his own example, Dr. Khairalla shows Shadid that anything worth knowing or doing will take time, possibly years, to perfect, but that it is worth the journey to experience the satisfaction of a job well done, with all the wisdom gained along the way.

Reconciling the Past

Shadid takes a great deal of comfort in finding connections with the past: he imagines his grandmother picking olives while he harvests them, he wonders how Isber felt during the construction of his house and if he experienced the same delays and indecisiveness as Shadid himself feels. He appreciates the way his own narrative resonates with that of his ancestors, and it contributes to his sense of belonging. In facing a divided world constantly on the brink of self-destruction, he finds stability in knowing that each year the olives will need harvesting at the same time. Children will come into the world and fathers will be faced with new priorities, as he and Hikmat do when their daughters are born. No matter how blighted or dreary the winter, spring will renew hope with its lust green and cleansing, healing rain.

On the other hand, Shadid spends a lot of time lamenting the loss of the Ottoman Empire and its tolerant, multicultural ethos. He longs to return to a world less conflicted, borderless, and ethnically rich. In rebuilding the house, he seems to half-think he can resurrect the time of its origin as well. If the house can return to its former glory, why can't the Middle East? Yet nothing in the greater national or regional attitude seems interested in changing the new and less appealing cycle of conflict and truce that has emerged over Lebanon's history. Individually people hate the cycle but no one seems to believe there is any collective action that can put an end to it. Shadid vacillates between an idealistic sense that Marjayoun can return to its roots as a crossroads of culture and despair for its imminent demise. No matter how many ways he finds to fulfill cycles begun by his ancestors, he cannot single-handedly resurrect the empire. Its historical cycle is over.

Style

Perspective

Anthony Shadid is a journalist who worked for the Washington Post and the New York Times. His family is of Lebanese origin, settling in Oklahoma in the United States a generation before Shadid was born. He spent fifteen years as an international correspondent, mainly in the Middle East, and covered myriad conflicts, particularly the war in Iraq. He did not merely observed the violence, but was shot in the shoulder in 2001 in Baghdad. Though he is a Christian, he was the Islamic affairs correspondent for the Post. Shadid brings the balance of his work as a journalist to his memoir, capturing details of day-to-day life in Marjayoun as well as opening his personal narrative up to historical context. He tries to present a well-balanced view of Marjayoun and Lebanon, asking each of his neighbors and friends how they feel about their home and its future. Despite his roots, he is a foreigner in Marjayoun, observing the idiosyncrasies of a culture not familiar to him even though it lives in his blood. Recently divorced and feeling adrift, he is seeking a sense of home, so though objective about Marjayoun and its shortcomings, he tends to have a sympathetic eye toward the town and its inhabitants. The house is a metaphor for his mission: he seeks to resurrect rather than destroy the house, and he feels the same way about the town as a whole, though he is a dispassionate journalist who can acknowledge how difficult that might be.

Tone

The tone of Shadid's memoir is tinged with melancholic nostalgia for a time that is a century gone, a time that he personally never knew; namely, the reign of the Ottoman Empire. He sees it as a time of non-nationalistic, religiously tolerant, and ethnically diverse community in the Middle East, and by rebuilding his great-grandfather's house he seems to be trying to find a bridge back to that more peaceful world. Given the intense political strife of the region and the abundant horrors Shadid has seen as a correspondent in war zones, the tone of his book is generally neutral and gentle. He does not explicitly proselytize for "peace in the Middle East," nor does he harshly point fingers at any one nation in particular in blame for the region's hardships (he does not agitate against Israel or Hezbollah for Lebanon's constant state of conflict; nor does he rant angrily against the trauma British and French colonialism left on the region). He does not paint all Muslims with the broad brush of fundamentalism. He uses a small town in southern Lebanon as an example for what could be: though imperfect, often grudge-bearing and slow-to-motivation, the people of Marjayoun live together peacefully, despite their obvious political and religious differences. Shadid does not hammer this point home but just observes his friends and neighbors and juxtaposes their daily life with that of the Ottoman reign, and implicitly asks the question why it cannot be like this all over the region.

Structure

"House of Stone" is divided into twenty-four chapters and an epilogue, ranging from seven to 20 pages. The memoir consists of two parts, Part 1: Returning, and Part 2: At Home, reflecting Shadid's journey through the reconstruction of the house to a sense of belonging. Shadid juggles three narratives within House of Stone. He frames the story on his own personal history of moving to Marjayoun, in Lebanon, to rebuild the ancestral home of him great-grandfather. This narrative covers about ten months from August 2007 through June 2008. As he moves through the day to day dealings with the community, he moves back in time to tell the story of how Isber Samara, his great-grandfather, build the house a century ago, fighting a rigid class structure that did not welcome his self-earned wealth. The sections relating the details of Isber's life are offset in italics, as a guidepost to readers that they are moving back in time. That historical narrative continues through his grandparents' immigration to America and what they faced as foreigners, moving from the 1910's to the 1960's. Woven throughout the text, Shadid contextualizes the narrative by summarizing the history of the region in geopolitical terms, from the colonialist French and British unsolicited creation of Lebanon's borders in the 1920s despite calls for Arab nationalism, through the fifteen year Lebanese civil war beginning in 1975, and the eighteen year Israeli occupation from 1982. The constant stream of characters and shifts in time may make the narrative slightly difficult to follow, but Shadid constantly repeats his themes, keeping his readers engaged with the broad ideas of the story even if the details are difficult to remember.

Quotes

"Central was a slowness allowing for the consideration of every choice. The state of the spirit, it is believed, reveals itself in small tasks, rituals - all the things that war interrupts. Old traditions that represent values, daily habits that calm the mind, are not perpetuated when war stops time. Life goes unattended. What might have been lasting is lost" (Page 6).

"No one has suffered the curse of drifting off alone. Together is the way these people, my people have lived since coming to the United States. Together is the way they will die. Community is everything; home is everything. If you have lost your own" (Page 12).

"When I was younger, I had pictured myself as the sort who plants trees that endure. I wanted to be a family man, a generous man, but there was always work, and like my great-grandfather Isber, I had to make my name. Others, I mistakenly believed, would understand the sanctity of my mission and have no trouble postponing their cocktail parties" (Page 14).

"To be born in these parts is not only to know loss and rumination, but also to savor the endless pleasures of discord. It is to feel, and often feign, useful rage. Anger diverts attention; as a ruse it can blur the facts of a losing argument or disguise one's true motives" (Page 26).

"There was meaning in destruction, an elegance of movement as the house hurtled toward its end and a new beginning" (Page 52).

"To Shibil, it wasn't simply a loss of accent, not just a flattening of the diversity and integrity of the history bequeathed to the town. It was all part of the loss of identity and the loss of the influences that had made Marjayoun what it was" (Page 56).

"There was a part of Islam in every Arab Christian ... Whatever their beliefs, they acknowledged a shared culture that bridged faiths, joined by a common notion of custom and tradition and all that it entailed - honor, hospitality, shame, pride, dignity, and a respect for God's power" (Page 61).

"[Isber's] house was first a display of pride, then a place where he made a home for his wife and children. It would in time become a refuge, and finally a memory we carried, whether we ever stepped through its doors" (Page 90).

"Artificial and forced, instruments themselves of repression, the borders were their obstacle, having wiped away what was best about the Arab world. They hewed to no certain logic ... The lines are too straight, too precise to embrace the ambiguities of geography and history. They are frontiers without frontiers, ignorant of trajectories shaped by centuries, even millennia. Marjayoun suffered with the advent of borders, losing its true hinterland" (Page 98).

"For so long, Lebanon had wrestled with the rudimentary questions of identity: whether its inhabitants were Arabs first or Lebanese above all, whether they belonged to East or West, whether they were bound to a destiny that stretched far beyond its borders ... or were part of a legacy as particular as the history of ancient Phoenicia" (Page 143).

"As the work progressed, I found myself wanting more and more to live there. This house, Isber's dream of security and luxury, was really the only idea I had for a home ... Like my grandmother, I understood questions of identity, how being torn in two often leaves something less than one" (Page 161).

"It reminded me of the nostalgia that is so often pronounced here, always unprompted: the longing for a peaceful but vibrant past. I wondered whether he was trying to return to a place that no longer existed. Isn't that always the case when we try to go home again?" (Page 178).

"He went about the work trying, I felt, to impart knowledge. He wanted to do it right. He wanted me to do it right. Doing it right was important, a kind of morality, a proper exercise of spirit. I asked him how he learned, and as usual he would take no credit. "It's practice," he said" (Page 192).

"I worried that ... I would never really find home ... I suppose it is the curse of a generation always looking for something more, something better - the cost of too much freedom. Yet we search, sometimes without realizing it" (Page 202).

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the significance and symbolism of olives and olive trees throughout "House of Stone". Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.

Shadid is nostalgic for his great-grandfather's time before the end of the Ottoman Empire, yet by rebuilding Isber's house he will not resurrect the Ottomans, and Lebanon will continue to be mired in political tension. Do you think his goal of "home" is truly achieved by the end of the memoir? Why or why not? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.

What are the biggest obstacles Shadid faces in getting his house rebuilt? How do these obstacles reflect the theme of culture class in the memoir? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.

Shadid titled his memoir "House of Stone". "Stone" is a word with many connotations. Does Shadid have positive or negative associations for "stone"? What does it mean to him? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.

Shadid writes about a country that is slightly more Muslim than Christian, bordering on the Jewish Israel and all the political tension that exists in the region. Which political or religious agenda does he seem to prefer? How can you tell? If you believed he stayed neutral, explain how he managed this. Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.

Which native Marjayouni's personal trajectory (past, present, and future) most closely reflects that of the city itself? Describe how Shadid threads this symbolism throughout the memoir, connecting people with place. Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.

Describe the importance of artistry and craftsmanship throughout the memoir. How does Shadid use this theme to teach the virtue of patience? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.

Hikmat claims that, "Whatever you do, God chooses for you. It's not up to you ... You don't make choices. You can't choose your direction" (Page 63). Do you think Shadid returned to Lebanon because of the intervention of God / fate, or did he demonstrate complete control of his future with the move? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.