



My Road from Damascus

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

An extraordinary account of Jamal Saeed's survival in Syria's most notorious military prisons, his life during the country's dramatic changes, and his escape to Canada. *My Road from Damascus* offers a tapestry of Saeed's whole life. It looks squarely at brutality but also at beauty and poetry, hope and love.

1

My Road from Damascus suggests that a writer may move freely within the space of their life rather than along a chronologically arranged line of experiences, creating scenes in which childhood and old age are juxtaposed. We can say the same about sorrows, joys, despair, and hope. How do you view this type of narration and the effect it has?

2

Many imaginary things permeate *My Road from Damascus*: the writer watches clouds and reads them in different ways at different ages; he imagines the crowd in cell #7 as a forgotten, vivid Goya painting; he runs a bank of little stones in a solitary cell; and there is a public exhibition of chess, where he occupies many roles, including two competitors, an audience, and a commentator. The writer believes that this kind of "madness" helped keep him sane. The imaginary appears to be part of the real world and has a function in the life of the writer as a rural child, as a prisoner, and as a refugee. What does the intersection of the imaginary world and real world in the book mean to you? Do you think that the imaginary plays an important role in "real" life?

3

My Road from Damascus presents the sharp paradoxes that occur in countries ruled by repressive regimes. At one point, Jamal enters a government office and is welcomed by Antun Maqdisi, the well-known director of the Department of Composition and Translation in the ministry of culture. "You will be for Syria what Maupassant was for France," Maqdisi tells Jamal. Just 18 hours later, Jamal is arrested and Brigadier Mustafa al-Tajer, the head of a military investigation branch, tells Jamal his fate is to become dog food. What do paradoxes of this nature mean to you as a reader?

4

The book explores turning points in Syrian history, such as its union with Egypt, the Six-Day War, the coup that led to the regime of Assad the father, the succession of Assad the son, and the demonstrations of 2011; it also contains everyday details like meetings between poor people in their homes or on the street. Readers, here, find history outside of situation rooms, outside of the propaganda and demagoguery of radio stations, newspapers, and television. Jamal Saeed presents unofficial history, or “history from below.” How does this book contribute to clarifying ambiguous images about Syria?

5

The writer wanted to share his inner world, so *My Road from Damascus* is not a journalistic account. Instead, he uses the techniques of a novel to narrate and present poetic scenes in several places: the child wants to hear the voice of God; in living love, the lover sees the meaning of the word holy; and the refugee who dances around an apple bush when it is raining remembers his father’s description of rain as music to make the earth happy. What do you think about the use of poetic scenes in memoir?

6

The writer expresses love for his childhood and youth, and the country in which he lived for more than half a century, but he distinguishes between his love for the river near his village, his father’s orchard, his home on a hill in the city of Damascus, and his concept of homeland. On the Lebanese-Syrian border, he mocks official papers and seals, and notes that birds, lizards, flies, and butterflies cross in both directions without the need for passports or stamps. How do you see the concept of homeland in *My Road from Damascus*?

7

The writer brings his past to Canada and once there tries to rid himself of the effects of torture. He survived some of the worst prisons in the world. He attempts to heal himself by howling on the shores of Lake Ontario, like a wounded wolf, and by writing about the traumas he’s experienced. Discuss Saeed’s healing mechanisms.

8

In a memoir full of pain, Jamal Saeed deftly explores the idea of love on many levels. Talk about the love stories — how does reading them make you feel when they’re juxtaposed with such darkness?