

The Book of Ashes

Excerpt

Characters

Fadiyah, a librarian
Amir, a 10-year old
Jinan, Amir's mother
Gabir, Fadiyah's husband
Abu, a neighbour
The General
US/UK soldier
A looter
A woodsman

Puppets

A pigeon
A bird
A tree

The stage is dark.

A flashlight fractures the blackness and reveals Amir, who sits on a stool made of books, engrossed by a book.

Fadiyah emerges out of the darkness and steps into the pool of light surrounding Amir. He is too absorbed by the book to notice her. She places a hand on his shoulder. He looks up. They share a smile.

We hear the sound of a muezzin's call to prayer.

FADIYAH: In the Koran, the first thing God said to Muhammad, peace be upon him, was, 'Read.'

Amir closes his book.

AMIR: A book saved my mother's life.

FADIYAH: She came to the library that morning.

Lights up on a set defined and shaped by books of all colours and sizes.

AMIR: Then my mother went to the market. To buy bread.

FADIYAH: 1988. The end of an eight-year war with Iran.

AMIR: Before I was born.

FADIYAH: She had the bread in one hand. The book in the other.

Jinan appears, holding the bread and the book.

The bullet ricocheted.

AMIR: First it hit a pillar. Then it hit my mother.

The sound of a single rifle shot. Jinan reacts as if she's been hit. She drops the bread but hangs on to the book.

The bullet stopped at page 257. What if the book was only 200 pages? My mother might have died. (Beat) I wouldn't be here.

Amir picks up the loaf of bread and holds it as if it was a rifle. He aims at an unseen soldier, 'shoots' his rifle and makes the appropriate sound effects.

He's caught in action by Fadiyah and hands her the bread.

FADIYAH: Bread and books. Both keep us alive.

Sound: distant bombs exploding.

AMIR: The Iran-Iraq war had many names.

FADIYAH: And many victims.

AMIR: To me, it was The War with the Book that Saved my Mother.

Jinan hands Amir the life-saving book and exits.

Amir opens the book and a bullet drops to the floor. He picks it up, handles it as if it were a foreign object, and then places it back into the book.

AMIR: In 2003 Iraq was invaded. Again. I am ten years old.

FADIYAH: The Americans and the British said Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

A weary US/UK soldier enters, heavily armed, carrying a book. He slumps onto a stool made of books.

AMIR: I will destroy the weapons of mass destruction!

Amir holds his book as if holding the handles of a Gatling gun. He makes the sound of a rapid-fire assault and is immediately lost in battle.

FADIYAH: Many books were written about the Iraq War of 2003.

The soldier opens his book and begins to read. Fadiyah stands by the soldier's side and pulls out a hand-sized U.S. flag from inside the book.

American books.

The soldier turns a page. A wide-eyed Amir puts his hand in and removes a Union Jack.

British books.

The soldier closes the book and exits.

Every book is a story. But not every story is a book.

AMIR: This is my story.

FADIYAH: Our story.

She holds out her arms as if embracing the books that line the walls.

Fadiyah peers out a library window. Amir joins her.

First the bombs fell in Baghdad.

AMIR: I will bomb the bombs!

FADIYAH: No one was surprised that Basra was next.

AMIR: The second largest city in Iraq.

Fadiyah turns to survey her beloved library.

FADIYAH: How will I protect my books?

AMIR: No one would hurt a book.

Fadiyah shrugs, uncertainty creasing her face.

FADIYAH: It has happened before.

The General enters the library. Fadiyah takes note of him and tenses up. He shows no interest in the books as he peers out another library window and looks skyward. Amir watches nervously as Fadiyah approaches the General.

Can I help you?

GENERAL: It is I who can help you.

FADIYAH: Thank you, but I have more than enough helping hands. An army of volunteers.

GENERAL: My dear woman, hands are not enough.

He raises his rifle. Amir reacts.

You need arms.

FADIYAH: Not here.

GENERAL: Not yet. Books are your business.

He steps toward the window and peers out one last time.

Invaders are mine.

The General exits. Fadiyah considers the General's words. She notices she is being watched by Amir and moves to comfort him. She tousles his head with maternal affection.

FADIYAH: Have you finished *The Diary of an Iraqi Dog*?

AMIR: Almost.

FADIYAH: It is due tomorrow.

AMIR: I still have today.

The distant sounds of airstrikes intensify.

FADIYAH: Before you know it, Amir, tomorrow is today.

Fadiyah exits.



Amir sits cross-legged and opens a book. Amir is immediately transported.

JINAN: (Off-stage) Amir!

Amir is lost in the book.

Amir!

Amir is pulled out of his reverie.

AMIR: I'm on the roof.

JINAN: With Abu?

AMIR: I'm waiting for Abu.

JINAN: I don't want you up there alone.

Amir closes his book and raises it upward.

AMIR: I'm not alone.

JINAN: Amir....

We hear the sound of cooing pigeons.

AMIR: He's here!

Abu enters and walks toward a bookshelf. He lifts a hinged row of books and reveals crates full of young pigeons. He hands a grown, majestic pigeon, Zara, to Amir as he feeds the younger ones.

AMIR: How do you know they like lentils?

ABU: They eat it.

AMIR: I eat food I don't like.

ABU: My pigeons don't complain. Neither should you.

AMIR: If I was a pigeon, I would want to be one of your pigeons.

ABU: Can you do somersaults in the air?

AMIR: No.

ABU: Then you can't be a roller pigeon.

Abu takes hold of Zara.

AMIR: I will be a war pigeon. I can do war.

Amir pretends he's a fighter pilot shredding the enemy plane caught in his cross-hairs.

ABU: There are no more war pigeons.

AMIR: But there is still war.

Abu nods and scans the skies as if on the lookout for warplanes.

ABU: Not today.

AMIR: When?

ABU: Whenever it is, it is too soon. The skies were made for birds, not bombs.

Abu raises Zara as if she were an offering, then releases her. The pigeon swoops and does magnificent somersaults.

Abu and Amir watch in wonder.

AMIR: Would she tell us?

Abu looks at Amir.

Zara. Would she tell us if she saw warplanes?

ABU: She is too busy thinking about the competition. So am I.

AMIR: This year, she will win.

ABU: I don't trust judges.

AMIR: You trust Zara.

Abu nods, enchanted by the sight of his beloved bird as it lands back in his hands. He gently puts it back in its crate and exits.



Fadiyah enters. Amir hands his book to her. We are in the library.

FADIYAH: One day late.

AMIR: I'm sorry.

FADIYAH: You have a good excuse?

AMIR: I read it twice.

Fadiyah nods approvingly.

FADIYAH: I have a new book for you.

Fadiyah pulls out an oversized book bound in leather, housed on a special shelf. Amir's eyes go wide.

It is new old.

AMIR: If it's old then it's not new.

FADIYAH: Have you read this before?

Amir shakes his head.

Then it's new to you.

Fadiyah is about to hand Amir the book, then stops.

This one cannot leave the library.

AMIR: Why?

FADIYAH: Because it is so old.

Amir nods.

AMIR: Older than my grandmother?

FADIYAH: Older than your grandmother's grandmother's grandmother.

Amir does the math.

AMIR: That's old.

Fadiyah places a hand on the book.

FADIYAH: My grandmother read me this book when I was a child. In this library. In that corner. Each illustration is drawn by hand. You don't just see the trees. You lean against them.

Fadiyah inhales the book as if holding a bouquet, then hands it to Amir.

FADIYAH: We must protect what we love. You could no sooner replace this book than we could replace you.

The General walks by a library window and peers inside.

AMIR: (Low) He scares me.

The General walks away.

FADIYAH: Who?

AMIR: The General. What is he going to do to the library?

FADIYAH: The library is not his to do with as he pleases. It belongs to us.

Fadiyah caresses a row of books.

I don't want the Tigris to turn blue again.

AMIR: When did it turn blue?

FADIYAH: Before you were born.

AMIR: Everything happened before I was born.

FADIYAH: Long before I was born, too.

AMIR: How long?

FADIYAH: Very long. Mongol forces attacked. Libraries were destroyed. They threw the books into the Tigris River. So many books the water turned blue from the ink.

AMIR: Like they had drowned.

FADIYAH: With no one to save them.

AMIR: Some books are bullet-proof.

FADIYAH: Your mother was lucky, Amir. I will need more than luck to protect my books.

AMIR: You have an army. An army of volunteers.

FADIYAH: One small army can't protect 40,000 books.

AMIR: You need a bigger army.

Fadiyah scans the shelves. Her mouth slowly blossoms into a smile.

FADIYAH: I need an empty library. The books aren't safe here.

AMIR: Where will they go?

FADIYAH: I don't know where. I just know when.

AMIR: When?

FADIYAH: Soon.

Amir holds up the treasured book.

AMIR: I don't want this one to drown.

FADIYAH: We will keep it here until you have finished it.

AMIR: And then?

FADIYAH: Then we will find a safe place.

As Amir opens the book it radiates warm light. Amir and Fadiyah bask in its glow. Music surfaces.

Amir begins to read.

White clouds filled with Arabic script float above.

A moment later, a bird appears from the pages of the book. Amir is utterly enchanted.