

The Book of Ashes

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By Anna Borowiecki

In the world premiere of *The Book of Ashes*, the character Abu states, “The skies were made for birds, not bombs.” He is right, of course.

However, Basra, the second largest city in Iraq, has no choice. The British are advancing troops and soon Basra will be scorched from tanks and bombs.

In the middle of impending war and uncertainty, Alia (Nimet Kanji), the city’s chief librarian is desperate to save ancient books and manuscripts that define and teach Iraq’s culture and history.

Her personal code is, “We must protect what we love.”

Believing that war brings total destruction, Alia tries to save books by smuggling them to a safe place. However, a general who believes his men offer the necessary protection stymies her efforts.

“This is our past,” Alia cries. “Without these books, who are we?”

However, Alia and a young boy Amir (Aidan Burke) have developed a special bond over their shared passion for literature. As Amir comes to realize the importance of books in a culture and the extent of war’s destruction, he adopts Alia’s crusade and tries to rally support. His awakening is simple, yet beautifully constructed.

This is a story worth sharing, in part because it was inspired by true events. It’s a very compelling story of how war pits neighbour against neighbour. But it’s also a tale of great courage of people who put personal issues aside to perform the seemingly impossible.

Playwright Emil Sher (*Hana’s Suitcase*) has shaped the story with poetic language and mystical references. But it is the special relationship between Alia and Amir that transcends and illuminates.

Director Tracy Carroll brings this stunning story to life as we see the best of humanity fight for their beliefs. In fact, the last scene left me with goose bumps.

At a time when leaders across the world talk about building walls, *The Book of Ashes* tears them down by giving us much-needed inspiration and hope.