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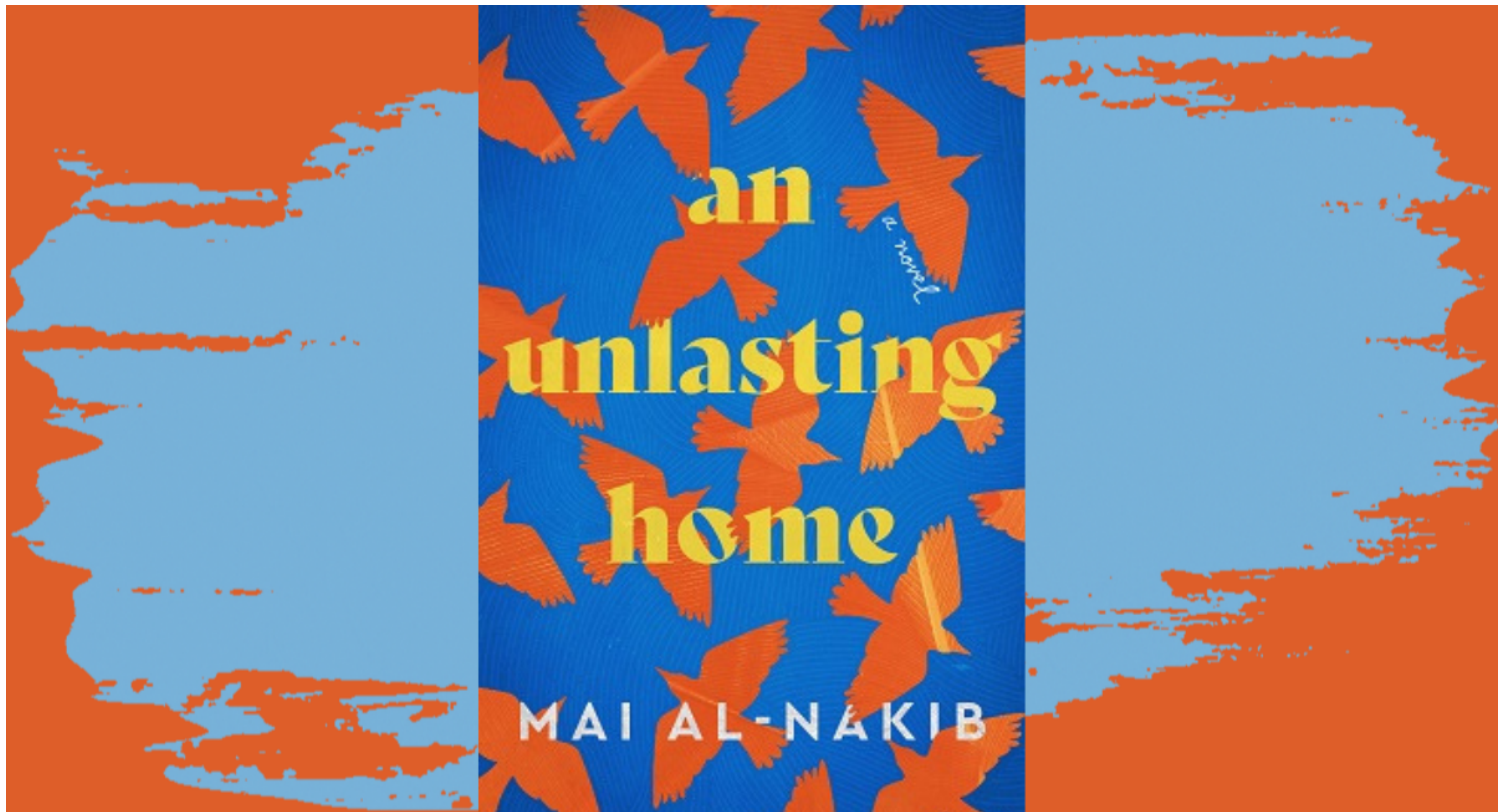
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Fiction

Blasphemy, Truth and Conviction in Epic Family Drama

Contributor:  [K.L. Romo](#) · September 16, 2022 · 6 min read



An Unlasting Home by Mai Al-Nakib



THE PLOT



This is a book about freedom and what it means to have it ripped away. It's a story about women and their independence — or lack thereof. It's about liberties given and liberties relinquished. And it's about strong women fighting their way through hardship.

In *An Unlasting Home* ([Mariner Books](#)), author [Mai Al-Nakib](#) takes readers into the lives of four generations of women in a Kuwaiti family.

Born in 1971, protagonist Sara Tarek Al-Ameed is 42 years old and has been a Professor of Philosophy at Kuwait University for 11 years. She's spent her life living in both America and Kuwait, returning to Kuwait when her mother died. In

2013, present-day Kuwait is not the same one she experienced as a teen.

Sara discovers there is no longer freedom of speech in Kuwait. A student recorded one of her recent lectures in which she stated, “God is dead.” Although she’d been quoting Nietzsche, the Kuwaiti government is charging her with blasphemy, for which death is a potential punishment. She no longer recognizes her country.

She may be able to retract her statements. But if she’s found guilty during trial, her “execution is not guaranteed; more likely five years in prison and a \$10K fine.” The probability of lesser punishments gives her little comfort.

Sara realizes girls are now raised differently than she was in the ’70s and ’80s. “They are forbidden to drive, are forced to wear black, not by law but by family dictate, more powerful than any law.” She “tried to figure out how Kuwait could have gone from bikinis at the Gazelle Club to niqabs in mosques in the span of a single decade.”

Sara and her gay brother, Karim, share backgrounds from Iraq, India, and Kuwait, but they were also American — they lived in St. Louis where her father completed his medical residency and in California where they also had a home. After returning to Kuwait a decade earlier, Sara’s existence was almost as American as it was in America.

The narrative in the present revolves around Sara’s blasphemy charge and subsequent trial, but chapters alternate with stories of the women in her family, who came from Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and India. Readers learn the history of her grandmothers — Lulwa and Yasmine. Lulwa fell in love when she was young, and her desire to be married and raise a family never wavered. Yasmine had been a teacher in Iraq, the embodiment of “the future of Arab women — independent, fearless, shaping their lives as they desired, not into shapes determined by mullahs or kings.”

Sara’s mother, Noura, was just as independent, wanting to “engage in real

politics,” but at a time when women weren’t allowed to vote or run for parliament. She asserted her voice by opening the Curiosity Bookshop in Kuwait in 1978, even smuggling 20 copies of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* in a suitcase.

Maria Torres was Sara and Karim’s nanny from India, who’d raised them — both in Kuwait and America — while being away from her own children. Maria’s devotion to the Al-Ameed family never wavers.

THE VIBE AND THE ART OF STORYTELLING

Al-Nakib takes readers into the heart of the Middle East during periods of extreme turmoil, delving into the histories of each woman who shaped Sara and Karim’s family. Devastation and dedication in their lives are juxtaposed, giving us an intimate look at the challenges each conquered to maintain their families and raise their children.

We also feel the danger posed to women in the new Kuwait and the angst Sara feels at having to choose between teaching her students the truth of the world and recanting her message in trade for her freedom.

The prose is lyrical, like a song sung from many places, pouring from many hearts. It’s beautiful, while also painfully honest.

THE AUTHOR

Al-Nakib was born in Kuwait. She received her Ph.D. in English from Brown University. She’s an Associate Professor of English and comparative literature at Kuwait University, focusing on Middle Eastern cultural politics and its effects on gender equity and “cosmopolitanism,” and I believe that plays a key role in her writing of Sara’s character.

WHAT I LIKE BEST

The beautifully written narrative allows us to experience the dedication, devotion and hardships of these women while existing in a patriarchal society. Their strength shines through the ever-present darkness and adversity.

The book's comparison between the freedom of women in Western culture with the misogyny of Middle Eastern culture paints a stark picture and prompts the question: What does it mean to truly be free?

OPINION

Fans of epic family dramas surrounding issues of social justice, especially on a global scale, will lose themselves in this tale of love, longing and the struggle for independence.

This story appears through BookTrib's partnership with [Romo's Reading Room](#).

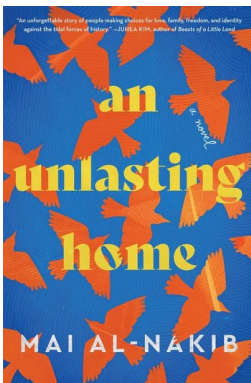
About [Mai Al-Nakib](#):

Mai Al-Nakib [pronounced May (like the month)alna-KEEB] was born in Kuwait and spent the first six years of her life in London, Edinburgh, and St. Louis, Missouri. She holds a Ph.D. in English literature from Brown University and is an Associate Professor of English and comparative literature at Kuwait University.

Her academic research focuses on cultural politics in the Middle East, with a special emphasis on gender, cosmopolitanism and postcolonial issues.

Her short story collection, *The Hidden Light of Objects*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2014. It won the Edinburgh International Book Festival's 2014 First Book Award and was the first collection of short stories to do so. Her debut novel, *An Unlasting Home*, was published by Mariner Books-HarperCollins in April 2022.

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K.L. Romo

K. L. Romo writes about life on the fringe: teetering dangerously on the edge is more interesting than standing safely in the middle. She is passionate about women's issues, loves noisy clocks and fuzzy blankets, but HATES the word normal. She blogs about books at Romo's Reading Room. For more, visit klromo.com, [@klromo](https://twitter.com/klromo) on Twitter and [@k.l.romo](https://www.instagram.com/klromo) on Instagram.

