



## Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family

*Najla Said*

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**Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family** Najla Said  
A frank and entertaining memoir, from the daughter of Edward Said, about growing up second-generation Arab American and struggling with that identity.

The daughter of a prominent Palestinian father and a sophisticated Lebanese mother, Najla Said grew up in New York City, confused and conflicted about her cultural background and identity. Said knew that her parents identified deeply with their homelands, but growing up in a Manhattan world that was defined largely by class and conformity, she felt unsure about who she was supposed to be, and was often in denial of the differences she sensed between her family and those around her. The fact that her father was the famous intellectual and outspoken Palestinian advocate Edward Said only made things more complicated. She may have been born a Palestinian Lebanese American, but in Said's mind she grew up first as a WASP, having been baptized Episcopalian in Boston and attending the wealthy Upper East Side girls' school Chapin, then as a teenage Jew, essentially denying her true roots, even to herself—until, ultimately, the psychological toll of all this self-hatred began to threaten her health.

As she grew older, making increased visits to Palestine and Beirut, Said's worldview shifted. The attacks on the World Trade Center, and some of the ways in which Americans responded, finally made it impossible for Said to continue to pick and choose her identity, forcing her to see herself and her passions more clearly. Today, she has become an important voice for second-generation Arab Americans nationwide.

## Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family Details

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## From Reader Review Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family for online ebook

??? says

Ok, I know it's my fault that I'm not rating this book with 5 stars.

I just couldn't relate to what she's going through, and I tried to understand but I couldn't.

And another huge problem was that I expected too much of it. The title said "Looking for Palestine", and as I was reading I was also looking for her Palestine with her but neither I or she could find it. And I believe that "Palestine" wasn't what she was looking for, she ended up finding her identity as an Arab-American -not even Palestinian American- who loves the United States and Lebanon, not Palestine.

So I expected more, I know I shouldn't have but I did. Also I was disappointed with Edward Said a little. The problem is with having idols, is that they're perfect to us, and anything that ruins this image of perfection we have about them makes me hate the cause and the model, and this is exactly what happened while reading this.

I know he, and his wife, wanted their kids to create their own identities and personalities, but maybe when it came to their history and legacy, they should've had more impact and effect. I know I shouldn't interfere with anybody's parenting, but that made me think that he's like all these successful dads out there, who spend decades educating other people and helping other people and spend little time doing the same for their own.

I was trying to read this as a fellow Palestinian, in order to understand her better, but I don't think she's much related to the cause. It's as if Najla sees the Palestinian struggle for freedom as any other struggle that she can't be part of. She was more invested in what's happening in Lebanon because she lived it, and maybe that's why she's not too connected with what's happening in Palestine. It felt to me that Lebanon was part of her, while Palestine was only part of her father and had nothing to do with her other than just that, that it was only precious a little to her because it was precious to her dad.

And I know this book was about Najla, but I was really disappointed in Edward Said as well, because he too fell for the trap most of us fell for. UN Resolutions that serve a certain agenda, International Law that only serves the powerful, and having faith in a so-called leader (Arrafat) because he's all we have right now. I really wanted him to be different, because he had insight, he always saw what was to come of the Palestinian struggle, and for him to only "settle" and not demand justice harder, was a bit disappointing to me.

I wanted him to storm through the door when he went back to his house in Jerusalem, I wanted him to not wait for permissions or think about it twice, because it was his right, his legitimate right to do so, and even he backed down.

I don't know, I thought this book will bring me closer to my heroes, but it only pushed me further away. And I know it's not because there's something wrong with them, but because I wanted more of people I couldn't ask anything of.

But Najla having this identity struggle and ending up where she did makes total sense. Her parents did raise her to not judge people based on their nationalities or ethnicity or religion, and that's exactly what she did. Maybe that's why she's an Arab-American and not a Palestinian-Lebanese-American, because all these are just invented labels that only push us more apart, and she didn't want to be pushed away from her culture, she wanted to be brought closer.

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### **Danna says**

Najla Said is a Palestinian-Lebanese growing up in New York City. Her father is a famous Palestinian scholar and, unbeknownst to me, the reason we no longer use the word "Oriental" to describe Asian people.

Najla grew up confused and troubled with her identity. *Looking for Palestine* is her memoir, which describes her childhood to present day and how she has dealt with her experience of never quite fitting in.

I had high hopes for this memoir, but was unimpressed. It felt a tad whiny at times, and not quite original. It almost felt like reading a diary, and I wanted Najla to be stronger than she was. The feeling was: we all feel like we don't fit in at times, can you move on and mature now? Which is undoubtedly harsh, but how I felt.

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### **Athena says**

I read an uncorrected proof of this book that I got through LibraryThing's Early Reviewers program. It's based on a solo show that Najla Said -- Edward Said's daughter -- says she performs mostly for high school and college students. That's apparent in the simplistic tone of the book, which makes it seem like it must be targeted at a young (teen) audience. Looking past that, the narrative is about 3/4 humble-bragging with a few paragraphs expressing guilt over the author's privilege. It's just not a compelling memoir.

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### **Karen says**

The daughter of a late hero of mine...fascinating to read her story, and laugh with the similarities of our lives, and cry with the tragedies of her specific life. Dealing with the feeling of "other", something I have always struggled with, albeit not as pathologically as she has...I commend her for her work with other Arab American actors after 9/11. This is the story of all immigrants...which in truth is the story of all Americans, at some point in their history, is it not?

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### **Claire says**

I received *Looking for Palestine* as part of a Goodreads giveaway.

In her memoir, Najla Said recounts her early life growing up in New York City. A Lebanese-Palestinian-American, baptized Christian but raised by non-religious, intellectual parents (her father was the literary theorist and academic Edward Said), Najla struggles with issues of identity common to any young girl (body image and social standing) but exacerbated by insecurities over her cultural background and identity. From her childhood visits to Lebanon to her days as a student at Chapin, Trinity, and Princeton, to her current profession as a stage actress whose performances are centered around social justice, Najla comes to embrace her identity and follow in her father's spirit of activism (though in a slightly different way)

The narrative flows beautifully. For being a young woman, Najla has a wonderful sense of perspective about

her life and her own mistakes and weaknesses. You find yourself cheering for her younger self as she navigates not only the "normal" insecurities of adolescence, but also the larger struggles of growing up as a second-generation immigrant of Middle Eastern descent. Her travails make her reminiscences on her current life all the more satisfying.

Beautifully written and recommended!

## Sohair says

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**Pam says**

This is a very quick, easy read....and I have mixed feelings about it, because I expected one thing and got another. Since Najla is Edward Said's daughter, and since the book is titled "Looking for Palestine," I was expecting to read more about...well, Palestine. And her development as an activist/daughter of an (intellectual) activist. What I got instead is a memoir about a very mixed-up kid who spent most of her life denying her heritage and starving herself to be accepted as "normal" in a white, largely Jewish neighborhood/school. It's also more about her growing affinity with Lebanon, than Palestine (which she only

visited once and couldn't relate to). In the end, though, I did like it, because it gave me insights into Edward Said as a person, and how hard it is to be an immigrant or child of an immigrant in this country -- even when you're as wealthy/privileged as the Saids were (the latter being a fact that often tempered my sympathy for Najla as I read the book..which was perhaps unfair of me). Actually, in retrospect, Najla's angst growing up (including anorexia nervosa) was likely due just as much to living in the shadow of a famous father who didn't pay as much attention to his daughter as his son. That's my opinion, at least.

One other note: I think one reason why I found myself being impatient in the first part of the book, when Najla spent quite a bit of time dwelling on her young desire to wall off or even ignore her cultural heritage, is that I always LONGED to "belong" to something..a culture, an ethnicity, etc. I am as "white bread" as they come -- American very far back, with no particular affinity for a religion. That's probably why I have adopted the Palestinian cause so passionately. So....I was the opposite of Najla!

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### **Karen.s says**

I would give 3 to the first 3/4 of the book and 4 to the last quarter. I chose this book because it deals with identity issues of the Arab-American daughter of Edward Said. She grew up hating the Arab part of her identity. It even lead to very dangerous anorexia. I figured that she would write something earth shatteringly useful that could help me advise my own Arab American kids deal with identity. For the first three-quarters, I did identify and sympathize with her. Her attitudes and experiences were very familiar, though not exactly anything I felt I could use as teachable. Her writing is humorous and entertaining. Easy to read.

However, the turning point in Najla's life on 9/11, when she, angry and disappointed, was made to confront being Arab. Hereafter, the book is much more insightful. Her experience of 9/11 I think is very different to any others I have read. It finally awoke pride in her Arabness. Not because she supported the acts or terrorism or anything of the sort, but because she was labeled as Arab, she began to feel that she had to live the positiveness of that identity. She stumbles upon an Arab American theater group and finds herself there. She finds a safe environment in which to meet Arabs with whom she feels something in common. They develop a stage production about being Arab, gathering the voices and opinions of Arabs and Arabs discussing what an Arab is. I wish I could get my kids to see these production.

Don't pick up this book because you expect an extension of Edward Said. I would think that would lead to disappointment. Najla is intelligent in her own right, but this is not a scholarly account. Pick it up because you want to read a story of self discovery.

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### **Marietje says**

I bought this book after I heard Najla Said speak at the Boston Book Festival. I admired her courage as a very anxious person to stand up for an, in the USA, unpopular cause. Despite the fact that her father was a leader in the Palestinian movement, Najla Said manages to write a very personal account to how a youth of Christian Lebanese and Palestinian descent feels in American society. Said's confusion and suffering was compounded by her mental health issues: anorexia and anxiety. This makes her story more realistic. It makes very clear what being a misunderstood minority can do to a human being. We should never loose sight of this, when we voice strong political opinions.

I saw some reviews, where Said's well to do background was attacked, and where she was called a "whiner". I do not agree. Anybody living in the shadow of a famous relative is forced to assert their own identity more than those who do not have famous relative. The outside world tends to think that they have the exact same opinions and talents as your famous relatives, which is a narrow minded way of viewing a person. Najla Said wisely stays away from the scientific/ political approach her father took. Even though she talks about her father a lot in her book, she never attempts to promote his work. She is her own person.

I would love to see Najla Said's play "Palestine"

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### **Patricia Douglas says**

Fabulous! Said's book is so honest and to me, fascinating. First of all, it has sparked in me an interest in the Arab world. I want to educate myself about Israel and Palestine and the struggle. I also loved Said's personal story and the way she describes her identity conflict, her insecurities and her troubled mind. She writes really well and her self deprecating style and candid soul searching captivated me. I related to her story as well because I struggled in middle and high school with being Cuban. Growing up in Miami you would think I could embrace being Cuban but I hated it. Among many WASP friends, Cubans were "island people" and I was made to feel inferior. I told people my surname was Italian or French. Other times I would insist that my family was from Spain, never Cuba.

I loved this book and recommend it highly. I want to go get some of Said's dad's books as well. Happy reading!

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### **Kat says**

*Let me first specify that I received uncorrected copy of this book before publication for review. That being said, my thoughts and opinions are mine alone. I was not reimbursed by the publisher or asked to post a certain kind of review.*

This memoir is particularly notable for having been written by the daughter of acclaimed thinker and professor Edward Said. She describes the difficulties she encountered in being raised as a self-proclaimed "Upper West Side princess," while also growing up in a family strongly rooted in their Arab heritage.

Speaking as a child of split nationalities myself (my father was born in the U.S. to thoroughly American parents; my mother was Mexican), I could relate to her struggles to figure out a place to belong. It's rare to see that struggle put to paper, how there is always a part of you that seems to tug in an opposite geographical direction. That's what the heart of the story is about; figuring out how to gracefully reconcile one's current identity with their familial past, and how the past and present entwine. I thought that was one of the strongest points of the book.

A good portion of the story takes place during her visits to the Middle East, which is the other part that interested me. If you don't have a great idea of what the struggle in that area of the world is about, she gives a good, basic overview (from what some may consider a slanted viewpoint, of course). It's also horrifying to get even the glimpses--only glimpses--that she provides of the warfare in the region.

In the end, though, I felt kind of like I didn't quite understand why this book needed to be written. It's written well, no question. It's a very easy, quick story to read. But unless you're either a memoir junkie or a Edward Said fan, I'm not sure what the audience for this book is. It doesn't go into a whole lot of detail about Palestinian-Israeli relations for the political science geeks, and it's not about a person particularly famous in her own right. She had identity crises, and got over them. It happens to be special because she had access to a very privileged life.

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### **Louise says**

As smart as he was, Edward Said did not understand his daughter. I believe the key to all that went on before was on p. 158 "... girls like me didn't need to know serious things". The Said's sent their son off to school with the tools to understand the "rules", and like many before, of almost any ethnic background, sent their daughter off vulnerable.

Fully vulnerable she was: she was the only Arab in a school with Christians and Jews; a school that had a holocaust survivor's memoirs and visit as part of its curriculum. In this school her, dark hair, her name, her height and her unacceptable address were issues with the other girls. A psychiatrist was the Said's answer to their daughter's confusion and low self-esteem.

While the book is not about gender issues, I believe gender informs the wrenching part of this memoir. The outsider nature of her life had disastrous consequences for her health and her parents seen very slow to recognize the obvious.

In her famous father's memoir *Out of Place* he writes of his abusive father and manipulative mother. His four sisters were hardly noted in his book. Edward Said's "outsider" experiences should have helped him understand his daughter. Perhaps because the schools he attended meted out physical discipline and Najla's didn't he didn't look into the appropriateness of Chapin. Perhaps he never emotionally overcame his isolation from his sisters. Perhaps he was just too busy. Najla's brother seems to have known and reconciled his family history and identity early on; I would guess he had a very different experience of family life than his sister.

Once at Princeton University, where her brother and both cousins also attend, she comes in to her own. As she matures and travels the work her parents did becomes meaningful to her. As she puts together the pieces of her heritage she becomes whole.

She writes more about Lebanon (her mother's heritages, and 1/4 of her father's) than about Palestine as the title suggests. In one sense, Palestine is for her a metaphor for the outsider: those set apart, discriminated against and forgotten; descriptions which relate to her at different places in her life.

Najla, through her art is finding a way to interpret the outsider (hence the Palestinian) experience in a way people can understand. I have not seen her performances, but she has an authentic voice that comes through clearly in this book.

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### **Steven Berbec says**

What a complex and honest delivery from Said. To be allowed to read of one's otherness, what it makes them

feel, think and do, or vice versa. Najla Said reminds us all, that it is our otherness, what a society cannot assimilate (if we do not let them) that will open us up to spaces where we can belong together. A moving memoir.

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## **Pearl says**

If I had been younger - much younger, say in my teens or early twenties -I probably would have liked this book more. It's the memoir of a child's and then later a young woman's struggle to find herself. I don't mean to belittle her struggle or the insights she came to; but, although the particulars of her situation are rather unique, the search for herself and the insights she came to seemed more mundane than insightful. Perhaps I expected too much, considering whose daughter she is. And that is part of her problem - living in the shadow of a famous father. So I unintentionally reinforce her difficulty.

Najla Said is the daughter of the renown intellectual Edward Said, founder of post-colonial thought, Professor of English Literature at Columbia University, author of several scholarly books, outspoken advocate for the Palestinian people and on and on. (He passes away near the end of her book.) I knew of Edward Said mostly by seeing him on guest appearances on TV talk shows. When a host needed someone to talk authoritatively on Palestinian issues, Edward Said was often called upon. When she was a child, Najla writes that she was unaware of her father's famous reputation. She didn't think it unusual for such notables as Noam Chomsky, Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida, Daniel Barenboim to show up at their home. As a freshman at Princeton, Cornell West spotted her in his large classroom/auditorium and beckoned her to the stage in order to greet her. Her classmates were in awe.

Such were her difficulties.

Najla describes her heritage as Palestinian-Lebanese-American-Christian and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Jewish. Her father was 3/4 Palestinian and 1/4 Lebanese; her mother, fully Lebanese; Najla was born and raised in the United States and baptized as an Episcopalian. She grew up in Upper West Side, NYC, a Jewish neighborhood; but, for her early schooling, was bused to the Upper East Side's Chapin, an exclusive, very WASPish private school, which claims Jacqueline Kennedy as one of its famous alumni. She didn't feel that she fit in anywhere. Although she loved her family and her warm and loving extended family and the many times they vacationed in Lebanon, she didn't want to be recognized or identified as an Arab. She was six, when the American hostages, who had been held captive in Iran, were released. She was thrilled as was her first grade class as they watched the release on television. When she got home she ran to tell her mother how happy she was. Her mother listened, smiled, and then told her that Algeria, an Arab country, stepped in to help the Americans talk to Iran. Najla argued she was happy because they all were Americans. Her mother told her that she should be happy but she should also be aware that Arabs also helped and she should be happy about that too because she was an Arab. Najla's response was to run to her room yelling "Mommy, you spoil everything."

Her struggle to find herself continued into her high school and university years when she became severely anorexic and struggled with insecurity, even though she was doing well in school. As she grew older, she never knew if her friends liked her for herself or for her famous father. I admit getting a little tired of all of this during the first half of her memoir. The second half was more interesting. The events of 9/11 woke her up when blanket condemnations of all Arabs became the norm. She began to accept and then embrace her identity - all of it. Palestine is really a metaphor for Najla herself. That's what she was looking for. She seems to have found herself. I wish her well.

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**Jane says**

I loved reading this book. It was as if Najla Said was sitting at my kitchen table sharing coffee and her story with me. Her struggle to find her true ethnicity, can be compared to everyones struggle to just fit into the human race. For me it was a real page turner, I read it in one day.

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