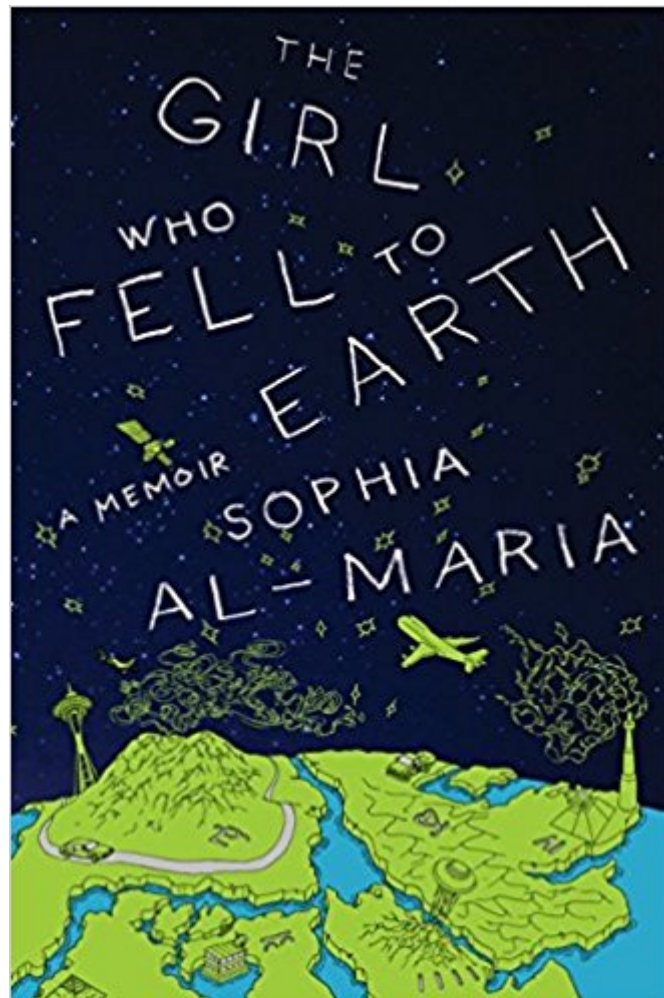




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The Girl Who Fell To Earth: A Memoir



Synopsis

Award-winning filmmaker and writer Sophia Al-Maria's *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* is a funny and wry coming-of-age memoir about growing up in between American and Gulf Arab cultures. With poignancy and humor, Al-Maria shares the struggles of being raised by an American mother and Bedouin father while shuttling between homes in the Pacific Northwest and the Middle East. Part family saga and part personal quest, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* traces Al-Maria's journey to make a place for herself in two different worlds.

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Customer Reviews

The writer was born in Seattle to an American farm girl and a Bedouin father, and he soon returned to Qatar, where he started a second family. As a young teen, Sophia is on the classic quest to find her father (and herself), and her wry, eloquent narrative does a great job of blending the viewpoints of the 12-year-old then and the adult writer now, while the intersection of contemporary cultures explodes the comfortable stereotypes, old and new. The girl is shocked by backward Bedouin traditions and deep sexual segregation, but she also remembers her American school segregation of jocks, geeks, and freaks, and very clearly by race, and she discovers that love in a culture of arranged marriage and sexual oppression can be as far more complex than anything on MTV. As the action moves from the Nile delta to Cairo, her commentary gets it exactly right, and without a heavy message. The day was so full of these exotic people doing, well, normal stuff. Families like hers had the nouveau part without the riche. Great for reading aloud.

--Hazel Rochman

When Sophia Al-Maria's mother sends her away from rainy Washington State to stay with her husband's desert-dwelling Bedouin family in Qatar, she intends it to be a sort of teenage cultural boot camp. What her mother doesn't know is that there are some things about growing up that are universal. In Qatar, Sophia is faced with a new world she'd only imagined as a child. She sets out to find her freedom, even in the most unlikely of places. Both family saga and coming-of-age story, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* takes readers from the green valleys of the Pacific Northwest to the dunes of the Arabian Gulf and on to the sprawling chaos of Cairo. Struggling to adapt to her nomadic lifestyle, Sophia is haunted by the feeling that she is perpetually in exile: hovering somewhere between two families, two cultures, and two worlds. She must make a place for herself—a complex journey that includes finding young love in the Arabian Gulf, rebellion in Cairo, and, finally, self-discovery in the mountains of Sinai. *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* heralds the arrival of an electric new talent and takes us on the most personal of quests: the voyage home.

When Sophia Al-Maria's father was a boy his family still lived a traditional Bedouin lifestyle, traveling around the deserts of Qatar and Saudi Arabia and sleeping in tents under skies dark enough to be filled with stars. After being forced by boundary-loving authorities to settle in a gender-segregated family compound her father's wanderlust remained, which is how he ended up in Seattle unable to speak English but still managing to meet and marry an American girl, giving Al-Maria the dual or maybe triple or even quadruple cultural heritage that makes this memoir so mind expandingly and eye openingly interesting. Al-Maria spent part of her childhood in her grandmother's small, isolated house in rural Washington state, where the protective paranoia of her mother made Al-Maria feel more trapped than when she stayed in her father's crowded multi-generational and now stationary home in Qatar. Even though while in Qatar there were substantial cultural and religious restrictions on her ability to move around freely and meet with whomever she wanted, being part of a larger family crowd felt liberating. While she lived in Qatar Al-Maria spent her time getting to know her substantial Bedouin family, attending an international school mainly for foreigners, brawling with her male cousins in the wrong side of their gender divided home because she couldn't stand that being older meant she was no longer able to play *Mortal Kombat* with them (well, this happened just once), assisting her uncle's carefully choreographed subterfuge as he sneak-courted a non-Bedouin girl unacceptable to their family (which helped her figure out how to spend forbidden time with her boyfriend when she fell in love), and attending rowdy, sexually charged all female parties that

seemed to be part of the insular culture of women. Al-Maria also got to experience a little of her traditional Bedouin heritage when the whole family would take off to camp in the desert. Several of Al-Maria's perspectives and insights on hot topics like burka wearing are not what I've encountered anywhere else, and she experienced class divides I knew nothing about. The book presents a fascinating almost disorienting set of interrelated worlds and Al-Maria's vivid energetic writing sweeps the story along, allowing me the deep pleasure of being able to visualize that wide, star-rich desert sky but leaving me hanging a little at the end wondering what she did next. I'm hoping for a follow up book.

Being a Qatari, the book was a bit shocking! The story is fresh and touches the heart, but I'm not convinced of many details that the author highlighted. Her Bedouin Grandma speaks English?! No way! The family was happy to see their son suddenly married to a stranger with two kids? Impossible! Although I can relate to many cultural things she mentioned, I never felt I was immersed in the narrative. Most importantly, I never felt that painful attachment when you finish reading a book, mainly because the end was abrupt and uncreative. You may read it, but don't think of it as your "guide" to the Khaleeji culture, habits or lifestyle. Think of it as the "case study" of Sophia Al-Mariaa and her family because her life is quite unusual.

I felt this was a very interesting and telling tale of a girl struggling to fit into two very different cultures. Living in Qatar, I was able to relate to a bit of what she was experiencing. I found it a very interesting comparison of two very different, yet similar groups of people. One being the Bedu people of Qatar, and the other the "Bedu" (redneck/country) of America. Both have very similar qualities but are worlds apart. We all hear about how rich and extravagant Qatar is, but this book takes you behind the scenes of those Qataris who are barely scrapping by. I do wish the ending had a bit more substance. It felt a bit rushed. I would have liked to know more about her current situation and what happened after Cairo. Also, more of her current relationships between her parents and her Qatari family. The writing style was very good, and it had a nice flow without feeling rushed or unorganized. Overall, I would recommend this book to all memoir readers!

Or perhaps I should say, "an important and beautiful" book. It is important because it tells the tale of growing up between two very different, yet tightly connected, parts of the world. Gulf Arab culture is often stereotyped as either "Rich Oil Baron", "Scheming Terrorist", "Repressed Woman" or "Noble Savage". These cliches are miles away from the truth, which is far more nuanced, detailed and

humane. Sadly, such texture gets lost in most contemporary accounts, which can lead to ignorance at best and disastrous misunderstanding at worst. Yet growing up a young person in America is often stereotyped and clichéd, as well. Abercromie and Fitch paint a pretty picture, but the reality of growing up in the States can be far more awkward, anxiety-ridden, and bizarre. "The Girl Who Fell to Earth" brings these two worlds together in a way that is touching, intimate, and true. Both American and Gulf readers would do well by reading this journey of self-discovery and acceptance, which touches on all the most important parts of growing up and experiencing life's many contradictory transitions. It will be particularly resonant for young women growing up in contemporary Gulf society, stretched as they can often be between competing demands and desires. But the book is also beautiful because it does so with humor, tenderness, and bravery. The author does not flinch from sharing some of her most embarrassing moments, yet does so in a way that is relatable and familiar. This is powerful and touching. While the circumstances may be different for each of us, I have no doubt that almost everyone can relate to her tales of growing up and not quite fitting in. It is this very similarity, in worlds that appear so different, that gives this book its power. "The Girl Who Fell to Earth" is wonderfully written; I literally couldn't put it down after starting it. I can't recommend it highly enough, but those growing up in or around Gulf / American cultures will find it particularly moving.

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