



EMAN'S APPLE *Roni O'Brien* **NON FICTION BONUS**

Roni O'Brien is a reformed Fairfax journalist who now lives beside the Murray River because somebody has to keep a watch on the state border. She shifts between studying law, writing her satirical crime novel and trying to convince her local community to refer to her as, "Your Highness". She is much more fascinating online than in real life.

EMAN'S APPLE

'A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.'
Holy Bible, Proverbs 25:11

For a woman forever categorised as a *boat person*, Eman Al Abbasi is not much of a sailor. She gets sick at the thought of a boat, still finds herself feeling ill every time she looks at the ocean and lives 320 kilometres inland from the nearest sandy shore.

But for a few treacherous months in 2001, the sea, the nebulous, never ending sea, was Eman's captor and her only friend.

"When I saw the ocean it was at night. It was the first time I had seen the sea in my life. It was black. The sky was black, the water was black, you could see nothing. Like ink. Everything was still. Even the waves," Eman says. "But a man with us, another refugee, he advised me. He said, 'Sister, hop in the boat. Have faith. If we die, we die.' "

Much later when she thinks about that stillness, she says the man's blind encouragement and the invisible shroud was a blessing. If she had known what lay ahead of her, she and her three small children would never have clambered aboard the boat with the battered sides. In fact, if Eman had thought about the consequences of all the risks she has taken in her life, she would never have taken a single step. She would still be in that police station with Saddam Hussein's henchmen, their guns by their side as they argued about whether to kill her.

"But I have a sun that lives inside me. They could never touch that."

When Eman grew up in Al Hurria on the banks of the Euphrates River in central Iraq, life on her parent's date palm farm was uncomplicated. School, farm work and sharing books with her 11 brothers and sisters was the simple routine she shared with her close Muslim family.

As well as straddling the fertile plains of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Eman's homeland of Al Hurria also sits on the edge of the former empire of Mesopotamia, one of the birthplaces of modern civilisation where scholarship and theology were highly valued.

Eman's family were true to their roots. "My mother Nadma could not read or write but she wanted all of us to receive a good education. I have always believed that learning and understanding has helped me to move forward."

"I wanted to be a science teacher," she continues softly, "But that was before the wars came."

The wars she speaks of were given neat, inconsequential names by the west; the Iraq-Iran conflict and the Gulf War. But to Eman and her country, they were anything but neat – or inconsequential.

Her school buildings were bombed, roads and railways became impassable making small communities islands in the sands, and blood flowed in village market places and universities alike. The wars had no favourites.

As Eman explains, contrary to popular and not so popular belief, Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath party originally created a highly livable country under his dictatorship. Like many dictators of the world, Saddam capitalised on the after effects of a revolution by socialising infrastructure and manipulating national pride.

But absolute power corrupts absolutely and the increasingly fragile ego of one deeply psychotic man soon began to send Iraq spinning down into its own parallel madness, taking the small, unseen life of Eman Al Abbassi along with it.

In 1980, while attending Baghdad University in pursuit of her coveted teaching degree, Eman found herself hiding between university buildings for shelter as the Iranians bombed the capital. And for more than once in her life, gilded words of advice helped save Eman, "My parents had told me to get an education at all costs. So I put my head down and continued on. Perhaps knowing I could die there, that was the cost."

Eman's sense of duty could not protect her though. The protracted war against Iran had begun to eat into normal life, making Saddam Hussein more paranoid and fearful of his enemies. Suddenly money for schools and universities was being channeled into the dictator's secret police forces and palaces.

With her country's leader growing ever more hostile to the outside world, down on the ground, Eman continued trying to live her life as an Iraqi woman as quietly as she could. She taught biology in school, met her husband Ghazi and married in a modest ceremony in the ancient city of Kufa, while half a world away, the United Nations Security Council met in midtown New York, unaware of the insignificant life of Eman Al Abbassi.

The United Nations Security Council's decision to formalise economic sanctions against Iraq may have been for their stated aim of, "maintenance of international peace and security", but it also helped plunge Eman's life, and the lives of her fellow Iraqis, into even greater darkness.

And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.
Holy Bible, Matthew, 10:36

Despite her university education, Eman suddenly found herself without a job and penniless. "We could not find food. There was no flour for bread and we were hungry. Everybody was hungry." For Eman the hunger was made worse by the arrival in quick succession of three young children. "You do not know how damaging to the soul it is to watch your children cry from hunger or from pain."

Despairing and frustrated with their lives, Eman's husband Ghazi made anti-Ba'ath party statements in public. In a society built on paranoia and punishment for those who went against the grain, Ghazi's free speech put him in dangerous territory. Within a week, Ghazi was suddenly arrested and taken away. Eman did not expect to see her husband alive again. "For two years I waited to hear from him. But nothing."

Eman found herself alone. Life in an increasingly suffocating secular country was dangerous for a woman on her own with three young children. Eman moved back to her parent's farm and waited. And waited. She may have been waiting still if not for the actions of some unknown neighbours. "Everyone was paranoid and everyone spied on each other. Somebody told the secret police I was in contact with my husband."

Unbeknown to Eman, her missing husband had escaped from prison, bribed his way onto a ship and found himself in a strange place Eman had never heard of, Port Hedland. The time was early 2001, many months before planes would fly into the World Trade Centre and five months before Australia's prime minister would leave 438 refugees on the deck of a Norwegian tanker called *Tampa*.

And although the western world was becoming increasingly hostile to Muslim refugees, there were no people more hostile to Eman than her fellow Iraqis. The secret police, suspicious of her escaped husband's contact, came knocking on Eman's parent's farmhouse door. Eman was arrested, detained without charge and threatened with torture.

Saddam's secret police took her to the town's police station where they held a loaded pistol to her head. Her brother, a respected local doctor, intervened before Eman could be shot by insisting to the police his sister urgently needed to go to hospital.

Once at the hospital, Eman hid before returning home under cover of darkness, and with her three hungry children and one precious carpet bag, Eman disappeared into the night.

Jodi Piccoult once wrote, "*the human capacity for burden is like bamboo - far more flexible than you'd ever believe at first glance.*" Unaware of her own ingenuity, and never having travelled anywhere before, Eman escaped over the border into Jordan, lost and disorientated, with a few pieces of cheese and bread and \$400 US dollars. She suddenly found herself paying a people smuggler to get her and her children away to Malaysia. "Yes I was frightened but I had to

keep moving,” is all she will say with deep humility.

With her three children stuck to her side like errant ducklings, Eman made her way from the shores of Malaysia to Jakarta, via a lengthy bus ride and another boat journey. By now Eman and her brood were becoming amateur seafarers, but nothing could prepare her for her final journey.

“Do not lose hope, nor be sad. You will surely be victorious if you are true in faith.”
The Quran, 03:139

“We came to this boat in Jakarta with about 250 other people. The boat was not new. It was more scary than any of the others. The sea was bigger – so much bigger.”

“Halfway on the journey pirates attacked us. They stole everything; my wedding ring, they threw my bag into the ocean and took the boat’s compass. They threatened to kill us but I had faced death many times, so I was not scared.”

“We spent 14 days floating in the Indian Ocean. My children cried from hunger pains and so I gave them my potatoes and my bottle of water. It was all we had for all that time. I watched the moon and I knew how many days we had been afloat. But I never gave up hope. The sun in me never went down.”

When the sun came up on the 14th day, Eman spotted an ominous shape on the horizon. It grew larger as they approached. She dreamed the pirates had returned or that her salty, sweat stained eyes were deceiving her. As they drifted ever closer in their leaking boat of human cargo, Eman saw the shape of a ship.

On paper, the Royal Australian Navy intercepted their 15th IMA (Irregular Maritime Arrival) for 2001, in May off the coast of Ashmore Reef. In that boat drifting alone in the Timor Sea, Eman Al Abbassi, single mother, torture survivor, former teacher, watched as her three children, starving and dehydrated, were pulled aboard.

“I felt relief. I felt so glad to see the Australians.” Eman is at pains to stress the Australian Navy personnel treated her and her fellow passengers very well. “When we got to Darwin, I got off the boat and they gave me a present. It was like a shiny red ball. I had never seen anything like it.” The ball was a fresh apple, unknown to Eman in her previous life under the sanctions of Iraq.

“I went to share it with my children and they said, ‘Oh no, you all get one each’. And so I had an apple, and my sons had an apple and my daughter had an apple. We all had our very own apple.”

The happiness in her face as she recounts this part of the story turns the corners of her eyes into pleats of joy. An insignificant, humble apple symbolised to Eman the safety and the protection her new country offered. “I knew I would be safe here.”

After September 11, 2001, as mainstream Australians started to re-examine their opinions of boat arrivals and the validity of detention centres, Eman was reunited with her husband, Ghazi. The family spent time in Woomera Detention Centre which Eman remembers with respect and relief, “We had nothing but our own clothes we were wearing, but everyone was very nice to us. They did not treat us as if we were poor refugees. The people in the town were good to us.”

And it was a helper at the rural TAFE in Woomera who told a still shell-shocked Eman that she needed to get her life back together, that she needed to write down some goals to aim for. Once more, a piece of timely advice guided Eman to her destiny. “I sat and thought about it and I told myself I would pay this country back for the help it gave me. And I said I would one day be a teacher again.”

“Have they not observed the sky above them, how we have constructed it and beautified it,
and how there are no rifts therein?”
The Quran, 50:06

On the banks of the Murray River in northern Victoria sits a farming town not unlike Al Hurria in central Iraq, if Al Hurria had V8 commodores and a hotel crowded with poker machines. While Cobram, with its fringe of orchards and irrigated dairy farms seems an unlikely place to find a thriving Muslim community, it has offered a safe and quiet environment to several middle eastern families over the last fifteen years, including Eman’s.

“We came here because my relative told us my husband could work in the orchards. But we also came here because it was peaceful. It was quiet. It feels like home.”

For Eman it is where she has added her own special touch of Mesopotamia to an Australian country town. She began her new life by exploring culture and education within the area, volunteering at Cobram Primary School, translating school newsletters for the newly arrived immigrant parents and in turn teaching Arabic to community members eager to cross the cultural divide. Eman went on to organise fashion parades, educating others on Muslim customs and helping teach new arrivals how to integrate into their new, and sometimes confusing town.

Before long, the local council, Moira Shire began to hear of Eman and asked her to help with translation services and act as a community go-between. From there, Eman worked at Uniting Care as an informal social worker. "I never turned anyone away you see. I have helped anyone who knocked on my door."

When asked if she has encountered any backlash in rural Australia, Eman is positive. "I have had people tell me to go back to where I came from, but not many. Besides, they do not know what it is like back where I came from."

Softly, softly, piece by piece, Eman has built herself a new life, one that is underwritten with a need to continue educating herself and with a sense of debt to her new country. "You see, I have never forgotten the apple," Eman says.

She also never forgot her dream to teach again which is why over the last 12 years while volunteering and raising a family, Eman pursued formalising her teaching studies, helped by local teachers at Cobram's schools.

Last year Eman Al Abbassi's name was added to the list of registered teachers at the Victorian Institute of Teaching and this year in 2016, she starts her first year as a paid teacher in Australia.

"You see, Muslims are not so different. We want the same things. We want a job, peace, to educate our children and to look after our neighbours. I am the same as you. No matter where we live we are all the same really, you and me."