

A passionate family chronicle that takes readers from Morocco to the Low Countries

Half a Life

AYA SABI

In 'Half a Life' by Aya Sabi, three women of different generations speak to us. In this family chronicle that takes the reader from sunny Casablanca to the chilly Netherlands, each character expresses herself in her own way. At the centre is the life of mother Fatna, written in traditional narrative form. The reader meets her in the turbulent year 1955, with Morocco attempting to throw off the yoke of the French colonial regime. Fatna is struggling to avoid two forced marriages. She is given protection as a cook in the household of Lala Touria, who occupies a central role in the Moroccan resistance. In Lala's kitchen Fatna's oppressive world gradually opens out. She is illiterate and carries a trauma within her. Fatna's story alternates with contributions by her daughter Hamouda, who in the late seventies and early eighties writes ardent letters to her sweetheart in Morocco. Granddaughter Shams is studying history at a Dutch university in the present day, and she writes essays about her family ties and her position as a third-generation Moroccan woman in the Netherlands. From these three perspectives, each with its own narrative register, 'Half a Life' investigates the problem of how to live as a (Moroccan) woman, mother, daughter, grandmother, wife, widow and loved one.

Tenderly and mercilessly, Sabi gives voice to three generations in a breath-taking novelistic debut.

DE MORGEN

'Half a Life' is published at a time when issues of identity are stimulating political debate. Sabi discusses these themes explicitly and invites the reader to reflect on them. The socio-economic and cultural positions in which the characters find themselves form a framework to which they need to relate. The pain women experience in a patriarchal culture cuts across the generations. Sabi describes incomprehension, suffering and oppression, but places the search for connection at the centre. With love and empathy, she portrays the lives of the women who have gone before her.



AUTHOR



Aya Sabi (b. 1995) writes fiction as well as columns for Flemish newspaper 'De Morgen'. At the age of 22, she made her debut with the short-story collection 'Verkruid land' (Crumbled Land, 2017), which Dutch paper 'NRC Handelsblad' compared to the work of British author Zadie Smith. Her first novel 'Half Leven' (Half Life, 2022) centres on the key themes of migration, feminism and colonialism. Sabi writes with great passion, really gets under the skin of her characters and is ruthless in her descriptions of the pain, powerlessness and lack of understanding they experience. *Photo © Debby Termonia*

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