

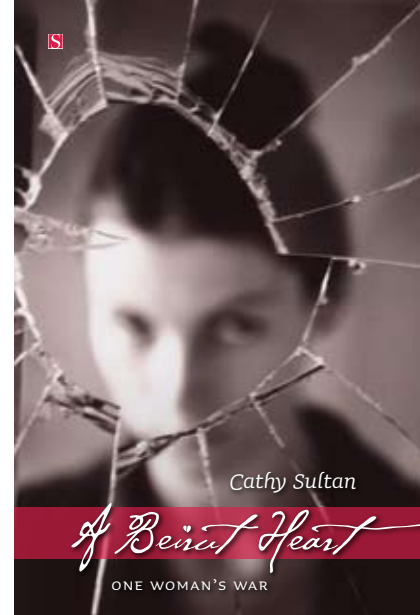
A BEIRUT HEART: ONE WOMAN'S WAR
BY CATHY SULTAN
REVIEWS

LIVING FOR EIGHT YEARS amidst Beirut's civil strife establishes Cathy Sultan's credentials for her memoir of family life in a war zone. But her subsequent years of research also probe roots connecting Lebanon to Syria, Israel, Palestinians, the United States and to Middle East conflicts that persist today. *A Beirut Heart: One Woman's War* is an unpredictable memoir of a family whose choices tied them to disruptions and dangers of life on that city's infamous Green Line.

It opens with events that swept Sultan from her American monoculture into the seductive embrace of pre-war Beirut, the "Paris of the Middle East." Romance and marriage to Michel enveloped her in his cosmopolitan Lebanese family, whose sons were pursuing professional credentials in the U.S. Their move to Beirut with two lively children in 1969 established Michel as a successful physician. Cathy struggled for acceptance in a multi-lingual Christian community suspicious of American wives. Complicated by a Prima Dona mother-in-law but supported by a generous father-in-law, Cathy's adaptation grew with her languages and family arts. She established her own credentials as a dutiful daughter-in-law, caring wife and mother, gourmet cook, hostess and family manager in a spacious eighth floor apartment. And she vowed never to leave her adopted home.

Absorbed in the vitality of their good life, the family downplayed the unrest that rumbled at the edges of this cradle of civilization. Amidst the lush bounty of Beirut's flowers and friends, seaside, sunshine and nightlife, it was preferable to believe the façade of interethnic cordiality. But early on Sultan shares growing signs of the precarious post-colonial political balance in Lebanon.

In 1975 the civil war struck with a fury that shattered the idyll and upended family stability. The apartment overlooked the Green Line separating



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Christian and Muslim neighborhoods. Life turned into a repetitious race for cover when bombs fell or bullets shattered the windows. Their routine began with rounding up children and dog, checking to find Michel, then grabbing the pre-packed bundle of documents and valuables, trekking down eight flights of stairs to the VW Bug, weaving through streets to the sanctuary of Michel's office or to the strangely peaceful countryside. During 20 cease-fires in the first months of the war, life in Beirut ricocheted between street fire and rockets and defiant dinners hosted on their balcony – between reassuring the children and finding a neighbor woman shot dead on the street below.

Bound by a physician's sense of responsibility and a mother devoted to making things work, there was the illusion that the family had adapted to life under fire, as they did for an amazing eight years. Cathy fixed on her role as impresario of normality in a long nightmare of opposites. Michel risked his life on the barricades of the neighborhood militia, while she raced the children to school through sniper fire or to refuge in a country safe house. Four times she reassembled the pieces of their apartment after bombings. But she still refused to abandon her chosen home, even as Beirut's beauty was blown to bits around them. The seductive counterpoint to terror was an intermittent taste or glimpse of Beirut life as it once was.

Since return to the United States was always an option for the Sultans, their choice to stay as events escalate looms increasingly bizarre. In recounting their ultimate departure and resettlement, Cathy Sultan is candid about the stress and costs to a family pulled under the spell of wartime. She shares the devices used to maintain a façade of strength and sanity. *A Beirut Heart* honestly presents the false security and paradox that can tie us to both home and danger in a war zone.

As the media once again echo reports of Beirut violence, this memoir offers well-researched insights into ongoing Middle East conflicts and the United States policy errors that compound them. Its timely publication by Scarletta Press will be complemented by their re-issue this fall of Sultan's 2003 *Israeli and Palestinian Voices: A Dialogue with Both Sides*. Together these two volumes argue persuasively that without active citizen demands for peace, the hypnotic vortex of conflict can swirl on without end.

SARAH HARDER, President, National Peace Foundation

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A TAPESTRY OF VIVID COLORS and shifting landscapes. *A Beirut Heart* puts a common face on the trauma of war – that of a family. This memoir offers a view drawn from a camera obscura that moves behind the screen of invading armies, detentes and broken treaties. Sultan writes a compelling story of survival that settles for no less than the promise that her family will remain together and safe at all costs. This is a must-read for everyone with any interest in what happens to a family under siege.

COLLEEN McELROY, Professor of English, University of Seattle, author of *A Long Way from St. Louie*, a travel memoir; she is the recipient of many fellowships including a Fulbright Creative Writing Research Fellowship in Madagascar where she wrote *Over the Lip of the World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar*. Her books of poetry include *Traveling Music*, *When Madness Brought Me Here* and *Queen of the Ebony Isles* which received the American Book Award.

THERE IS NOTHING like an intelligent woman, spouse and mother of small children, to carry one into the midst of war, with its horrors as well as its capacity for soul-building. Few who read Thomas Friedman's *From Beirut to Jerusalem* ever encountered Jean Said Makdisi's *Beirut Fragments*: the story of a young mother and teacher in the midst of the civil war. Journalists must speak from a "middle distance," women have to attempt the impossible: create a haven in the midst of surrounding chaos.

Now we have Cathy Sultan narrating the disintegration of the mosaic which was Lebanon with a lover's distress, a spouse's care and a mother's abiding concern. Never partisan, ever present, always insightful; her narrative enfleshes our disjointed "news" of the Middle East.

DAVID BURRELL, C.S.C., Hesburgh Professor in Philosophy and Theology, University of Notre Dame, Director, Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem

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CATHY HAS EFFECTIVELY COMBINED a dramatic personal and family story of life in the Lebanese capital with the complex context of Lebanese and Middle Eastern politics. She has captured the historic moment and the seductive spirit of this multi-ethnic, multi-confessional society which seems to thrive in direct proportion to the willingness of its many sects to compromise and not press for dominance. The pre-civil war Beirut gentility and magnetism Cathy displays is lost on most people today who associate Beirut with the trauma of 15 years of battling that created haunting news and film images. Out of the debris of these troubles, the essence of Beirut's cosmopolitan culture periodically shines forth to tempt us to return and to be part of its renaissance.

Cathy's personal story challenges us to wonder why she was determined not to leave even while her family and home were at risk. Most of her American readers will ask themselves if they would have remained as calm, focused and unyielding in their devotion to life along the eastern Mediterranean under those circumstances. The defining realities of the role of Syria, Israel, the PLO and the United States frame the chronicle of daily life for her and her family. She entices her reader to ask questions and seek answers as to how such a situation can persist and who are the responsible parties. The story of Cathy's Beirut is a sub text for the clash of power, politics and perspective that makes the Middle East a region of enduring interest and peril. She is also calling us to our responsibility in a free society to seek answers as well as peace rooted in justice.

Cathy's style is fluid and interactive; the pages seem to turn themselves. The reader will close this book resolved to learn more about Beirut, Lebanon and the Middle East, and to connect with this woman who offers this intensely personal window on to some of the protracted challenges that the international community faces in the region known as the Middle East.

DON BETZ, PH.D., Chancellor, University of Wisconsin, River Falls



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AS I WATCH THE IRAQ WAR BEING WAGED from the vantage point of my TV and newspapers, I've wondered what it must be like to be living there. Cathy Sultan's beautifully told experience of living and coping in war-torn Beirut with her family has heightened my ability to imagine the human impact of war in residential streets on the people who live there. *A Beirut Heart* reads like a well-written novel while providing a lens through which to view and be deeply touched by the many day-to-day tragedies that must be occurring in Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and Baquba among the resident citizens. Ms. Sultan's story certainly demonstrates the biological imperative that drives the human spirit when we must function and persevere in unthinkable circumstances.

DONALD MASH, former Chancellor, University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire