



All Strangers Are Kin: Adventures in Arabic and the Arab World

Zora O'Neill

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“The *shadda* is the key difference between a pigeon (*hamam*) and a bathroom (*hammam*). Be careful, our professor advised, in the first moment of outright humor in class, that you don’t ask a waiter, ‘Excuse me, where is the pigeon?’ — or, conversely, order a roasted toilet.”

If you’ve ever studied a foreign language, you know what happens when you first truly and clearly communicate with another person. As Zora O’Neill recalls, you feel like *a magician*. If that foreign language is Arabic, you just might feel like a wizard.

They say that Arabic takes seven years to learn and a lifetime to master. O’Neill had put in her time. Steeped in grammar tomes and outdated textbooks, she faced an increasing certainty that she was not only failing to master Arabic, but also driving herself crazy. She took a decade-long hiatus, but couldn’t shake her fascination with the language or the cultures it had opened up to her. So she decided to jump back in—this time with a new approach.

Join O’Neill for a grand tour through the Middle East. You will laugh with her in Egypt, delight in the stories she passes on from the United Arab Emirates, and find yourself transformed by her experiences in Lebanon and Morocco. She’s packed her dictionaries, her unsinkable sense of humor, and her talent for making fast friends of strangers. From quiet, bougainvillea-lined streets to the lively buzz of crowded medinas, from families’ homes to local hotspots, she brings a part of the world that is thousands of miles away right to your door.

A natural storyteller with an eye for the deeply absurd and the deeply human, O’Neill explores the indelible links between culture and communication. A powerful testament to the dynamism of language, *All Strangers Are Kin* reminds us that learning another tongue leaves you rich with so much more than words.

All Strangers Are Kin: Adventures in Arabic and the Arab World Details

Date : Published June 14th 2016 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

ISBN : 9780547853185

Author : Zora O'Neill

Format : Hardcover 336 pages

Genre : Travel, Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Humanities, Language, Northern Africa, Morocco, Egypt

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From Reader Review All Strangers Are Kin: Adventures in Arabic and the Arab World for online ebook

Dave says

A fun and highly informative tour through several stops in the Arab-speaking world. O'Neill introduces us to many compelling characters in Egypt, the UAE, Lebanon, and Morocco. Along the way she provides plenty of insight into (transliterated) Arabic that was fascinating even for those of us who know no Arabic.

O'Neill's journey is personal as well, and we learn a lot about her through some moving passages about her family, her struggles with Arabic, and her navigation through the Arabic-speaking world as a (frequently) solo female traveler. This is a wonderful book!

Kateri says

I came to this book through the NPR podcast The World in Words, and I'm so glad I read it. To a language nerd, the heartfelt hand-wringing over accuracy vs. connection is both familiar and delightful. The descriptions of popular culture, traditional language, and human connection in Arab cities are vivid and warm. I only wish it was available in audio so I'd know how to properly say many of the phrases I read.

Emily Morrison says

One of my new favorites. Funny and engaging. I already love Arabic, but this made the language all the more delightful. What a grand way to get a taste of the flavor of so many different Arabic-speaking countries. If you're not an Arabic speaker, this is a great- and needed- intro to a part of the world that sadly evokes fear in many Westerners. If you have ever been a student of Arabic, you'll get a kick out of her descriptions!

Grass monster says

I have been wanting to read this book for a while. For one, i love Travel Memoirs and two, i have an interest in the Arabic language.

This covers Zora O'Neill's travels to Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon and Morocco.

Zora starts in Egypt, where the dialect is very different from words that are used in other Arabic dialects.

Next she travels to the United Arab Emirates, where they are very wealthy and like to make it known.

Maids attend to the homes and there is an awful lot of the sex trade going on. This is where the locals

manage in life and foreigners have to do the work. Next up is Lebanon, here she meets people who have

been victimized by landmines left over by the civil war. Lastly she goes to Morocco, this was my favourite

part in the book. Here is where her parents lived as hippies before she was born. And her parents join her for their first return visit to the country since the 1960's.

There were areas of the book that goes into a lot of detail about the history of the various countries which i found at times very mind boggling and not exactly interesting because i wanted to read more about Zora's

actual trip, what she did, what she saw, who she met, what she ate and i wanted to read more about the sights and sounds to get a real feel of the places she was in. We get a lot of information about the Arabic language, including words thrown in throughout. I think this would only appeal to you if you have used or learnt Arabic. There are parts we learn from Zora about living in an unfamiliar culture and opening herself up to some situations good and bad. Arabic is an amazing language to learn, but at times Zora seemed self conscious to use it and she found it difficult initiating conversations. But she did well and i think that is part and parcel of expressing a new language that you have learnt. The Arabs love that you have taken the time and effort to learn or pick up the language, so never be afraid to give it a go.

Steven Svymbersky says

It is true that the only way to become fluent in a foreign language is to spend time amongst native speakers in their own land and that to truly understand and appreciate the people and culture of another country you need to be able to speak their language. In this book, the author seeks to expand her Arabic studies through sojourns in Egypt, Lebanon, the Arabian Peninsula and Morocco and in the process also finds insight into the places she visits through the differences in way the language has developed and is used in these places.

As an American who admits to very little understanding of the Arab world beyond the stereotypes and even less knowledge of the Arabic language, I found this book to be an eye-opening look at both. All great travel books depend on our being able to indentify with our guide. The best ones always leave me wishing I could tag along with the author on her next trip. This book accomplishes that in spades. O'Neill is a curious and daring traveller. She is so open to new experiences that at times I worried for her safety. Her desire to speak Arabic with the natives occasionally puts her in a position of having to deflect men's advances, which she does with great aplomb. She allows herself to be lead into strangers homes despite her own reservations. And she is mostly rewarded with the kind of experiences that give us, the reader, a view into these places that visiting monuments and taking tours never could.

Having zero knowledge of Arabic, some of the longer sections dealing with the nuances of the language went way over my head but did not lessen my appreciation for the book as a whole and many of the author's insights provide some of the funniest parts of the narrative.

My favorite section was the last one, her travels in Morocco, where 40 years before her parents had spent time as young hippies and where they met an independent young Moroccan woman for whom the author is named. When her parents join her for their first return visit to the country since the 60's the story becomes wonderfully personal and moving.

This is an exceptionally well-written travelogue, witty and wise, and I can highly recommend it to anyone, not just fans of travel books.

Ashley says

All Strangers Are Kin is a fascinating book about travel, as well as the logistics of the Arabic language. Throughout the memoir, the reader comes to understand Zora and why she is motivated to travel the world. Zora discusses the nuances of Arabic and its many dialects and colloquialisms. By the end of the book, the reader understands that, through her travels, Zora not only better understands the Arabic language, but now

better understands the breadth of the human experience.

As someone who has not studied Arabic, I think that an audiobook version would have benefitted me in understanding the struggles and successes of Zora in regards to the dialects and vocabulary . I found myself skimming over the paragraphs that were filled with phrases and explanations of sentence structure because of my unfamiliarity with the language.

Linda says

I love this book. Her journey to discover the nuances of a foreign language and become fluent in a language with as rich a history as Arabic is wonderful. The humor, the danger and the overall insights provided into the Muslim culture through its language is fascinating. If you are a word nerd as I am, you will be enthralled and amazed by zora's adventures.

Mary says

This is a most unusual, beautifully written, memoir. At the age of 40, the author's desire to learn more about the Arabic language led to her taking a year-long trip to four different Arabic-speaking countries. Highly recommended!

Jodi says

Loved this book! O'Neill expressed the same frustrations and challenges that I have gone through trying to learn Arabic, and yet interwoven are the warm people she dares herself to meet, as she travels alone throughout the Middle East. Very brave, and very insightful!

Sarah says

OK, I'm a language nerd. I love learning about different languages and their history. Zora tells a fascinating story from a perspective rarely explored when visiting the Middle East. Very refreshing and entertaining.

Monica says

The short: I loved this book.

The long: I can't believe how much I related to the author. We both started studying Arabic in US universities around the same time (very early 90s), rejected academic study of the language for 3ameyya/colloquial, and we share a strong love for Cairo, warts and all. There were several times I felt like I was reading stories I could have written or reading about folks I could have met. She has had some great experiences and I liked her writing style very much. I highly recommend this solid book for language lovers

in general, and Arabic language lovers and long time learners in particular. Both the vast and subtle differences between dialects and the level of lifetime learning Arabic takes will have you feeling less alone in the world!

Holly S. says

A travel memoir set in four areas of the Arabic World--Egypt, the Gulf, Lebanon, and Morocco--All Strangers are Kin explores the complexities of the Arabic language and the challenges of learning it, from Standard Arabic to the spoken Arabic of the street.

As someone who has traveled to all the places mentioned and has studied Arabic for years, I found the book to be a terrific read for anyone with an interest in travel, linguistics, the Arabic language, and the vast variations within the Arabic-speaking world. Highly recommended.

Beth says

What happens when a middle-aged woman from the US decides to try and master her limited Arabic by travelling around the Middle East to different countries, learning some of the ins and outs of each version of the language? A bit of chaos, a bit of confusion, and an interesting history lesson thrown in. In short, you have 'All Strangers Are Kin'.

This book was a bit of a toss-up for me in regards to the actual reading. The parts where the author emphasized so much of the language were slow and confusing - not a surprise, really, since the language is one of the more complicated ones. However, the parts where the author spends more time talking about the places, the people, and the history of the different locations were far better and are what kept me going throughout. She has an easy way of writing that really works in getting her story out. Frankly, I recommend skipping the second chapter in the Egypt section, because she seems to have gone on a word-bender...the rest is good to go.

Overall, while I'm not sure that I would really recommend this to many friends, it was worth the reading time simply to get a different perspective on the culture of the area, as well as the constant wars. For me, this would be a library book rather than a purchase.

Kate says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this tour through Arabic dialects: from Egypt to the Arabian Peninsula to Lebanon and finally ending in Morocco. The author had undertaken a trip to these parts to learn colloquial Arabic, the languages spoken on the streets rather than the formal Arabic, Fusha.

For me it was listening to a story told about places I know of, some I'd been to and now miss, and some I knew less of and had never been to but have had some little connections, stories inside my mind. So it was a storytelling for me, perhaps like one told around the fire out in some Arabian desert. I listened to her travel tale and was delighted.

This is a book for someone with an interest in the region. It is a travel book with an emphasis on language. I recommend it to those whose hearts are still there.

Ali Crain says

I really enjoyed reading about the authors adventures and misadventures in learning Arabic and different dialects. As someone living in Morocco and struggling daily with Darija, this was comforting. I hope I can take the advice of just winging it but also asking clarifying questions when necessary
