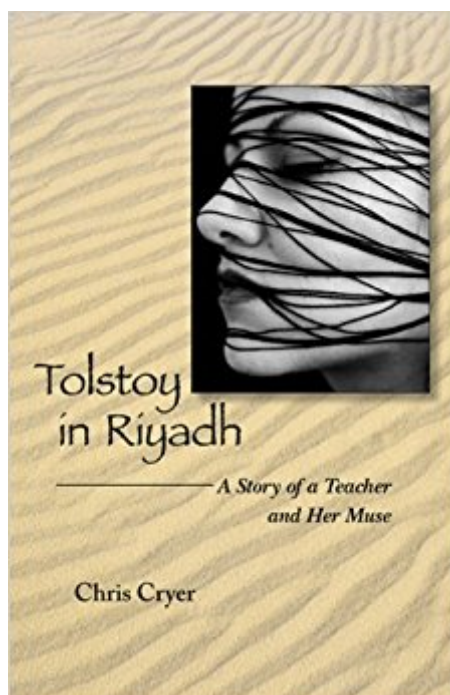


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Tolstoy In Riyadh: A Story Of A Teacher And Her Muse



Synopsis

In 1982, Chris Cryer spent a year in Saudi Arabia, teaching English to women at King Saud University. Accompanied by her fourteen-year-old son, and a few books by and about Leo Tolstoy, Chris found a sense of connection where she least expected it. The fast-moving, slightly comic, always fascinating adventure pulls us directly into the journey. We come to respect and love the mother-son duo for their unprejudiced outlook and their cool-headed survival of matawas (moral police), strict laws, and customs. This book is one of very few based on true events, written from the inside out, that show the Arab side in the Islamic world, a place long held in mystery under the dark images of Western media. The author presents the Saudi culture at that time with a sensitivity to their need to preserve values and traditions in the face of modernity.

Book Information

Paperback: 160 pages

Publisher: Daniel & Daniel Publishers (November 1, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1564745171

ISBN-13: 978-1564745170

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.5 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,046,716 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #14 in Books > Travel > Middle East > Saudi Arabia #321 in Books > Travel > Middle East > General #1212 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > LGBT

Customer Reviews

Chris Cryer is an English professor in Ventura, California. She has developed Montessori programs in the deep South written for a Los Angeles Arab newsmagazine, and done freelance reviews for the Los Angeles times.

Although a good story-memoir, it was badly written and confusing as the author jumped from one topic to another and then randomly went back to the first topic.

This book is a must read for anyone trying to understand the Muslim Culture. It is written in an unusual style that is easy to read. The book has enough humor to keep what would otherwise be a

slow story moving right along and turning pages.

During the fall 2006 semester, I took a Major Non-Western Authors literature course to complete my degree in English. We read a lot of books I would never have been exposed to on my own, like the Epic of Gilgamesh. We also read some "trendy" books as well, and one of them was Reading Lolita in Tehran. So many reaped great praise on Reading, but it did not jive with me. There were a lot of issues I had, but one of them was that the book seemed to lack a real authenticity. The author was, by all accounts, Americanized, and it seemed to me that her book was something she wanted to use to tie her to her roots without ever having truly experienced the culture about which she was writing. It was forced and pompous and I hated reading it. I don't want to put all memoirs that take place in the Middle East into a box, so when one of my colleagues, Chris Cryer, told me she wrote a book about her experience living in Saudi Arabia teaching English, I offered to read and review it. That book is Tolstoy in Riyadh. Cryer's book tells the story of her move with her teenaged son to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. Cryer had a position teaching English at King Saud University and experienced Saudi Arabian culture in a way that can only be experienced by living in Saudi Arabia. What I found in Tolstoy in Riyadh is everything I didn't find in Reading Lolita in Tehran. There is a real, visceral authenticity in Cryer's pages that sucked me in from the beginning. The people, the places, and the food -- oh my goodness, the food! There is no better way to be in a country than through its traditions, and Cryer gives us access to so many Saudi Arabian traditions, from food to dress to relationships to worship. Multiple times she describes the richness of the country and its food. In the talk of culture and place, I mustn't forget our friend Tolstoy, seeing as he got special billing in the title. Despite the fact that I studied English as an undergraduate, I never read Tolstoy. That is, I can say now, the part of reading Tolstoy in Riyadh that worried me the most. Would this beautiful story of journey and self-discovery be made dry and full by the works of an author most of us have never read, an author whose experience is of a man during the 1800s? Thankfully, it's easy to answer that question. Tolstoy is present in these pages, his words echoes of Cryer's experience and life as she makes her way through her year in Saudi Arabia. He is there as Anna Karenina, and from the pages of Cossacks, and the well loved pages of Hadji Murad. His presence isn't one that overwhelms or suffocates; instead, he is a friend to those who don't know him yet and a wise man to those who do. Cryer could have easily overdone Tolstoy's presence, but instead of taking over her story, he compliments and guides it with a simple ease. I'll even admit that one of the next books I read will be something by Tolstoy as I, too, want to experience the companionship Cryer has with him. Tolstoy in Riyadh is a slow, leisurely. It's not a face book you race through in an attempt to be

done. It's a quiet walk on a Sunday afternoon, the kind of book where you read paragraphs and pages again to get their full worth. This is a book which respects the boundaries of tradition and accepts Saudi Arabia for what it is, not for what a Westerner presupposes it ought to be. And I must say, it has altered my thoughts on novels about the Middle East. After all, this one feels real.

Unlike many personal accounts of American women living in the KSA, this book was composed by a writer of experience and talent. Additionally, she and her son were able to set aside minor inconveniences and restrictions to experience life from a global perspective. She realizes how rare and lucky it is to live in another land. As a fellow American who has lived in Riyadh, I appreciated her even-handed, even humorous approach, and I share her belief that all is not well in our often shallow, me-centered culture. The literary connections deepened my enjoyment of this lovely memoir.

It is a wonderful thing to come across a beautifully compelling story. It is even better when the story describes something that really happened. With "Tolstoy in Riyadh," first-time author Chris Cryer paints a delightful canvas of life in the land of the veil, Mecca, Islam, Shari'ah law, Aramco and oil, that is to say Saudi Arabia. Cryer moved to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to teach English. She was accompanied by her only child, her son Marc, who through the paradox of Saudi custom and law, ended up being the head of the family, though he was only 14. There they became "expats," a member of the highly-skilled group of foreigners brought in to Saudi Arabia to help that country convert its petrodollars to training and professional skills for its exploding population. Through her unique perspective as a single American woman, she splendidly details her life and its intersections with that of other Americans and Saudis. The result is part travelogue, part cultural journey and part a how-to-survive in a distant and very foreign land. "Tolstoy in Riyadh" is at times funny, poignant, surprising and always interesting. The book cuts through stereotypes of living in an Islamic Kingdom at the time of King Fahd just as often as it confirms them. Cryer's writing is beautiful, and she always seems to know just which word to use at the right time. With the on-going war in Afghanistan, the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabian women agitating for the right to drive and the cautious progressive reforms of Saudi King Abdullah, the timing of Cryer's book couldn't be better. "Tolstoy in Riyadh" is a great read for anyone who has lived in Saudi Arabia in the past, who may be moving there or living there as well as those who just want to get a better insight into the mysteries of the marvelous kingdom. It will also appeal greatly to those who have enjoyed books such as Carmen Bin Ladin's "Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia" or "In the Land of Invisible Women: A Female

Doctor's Journey in the Saudi Kingdom" by Qanta Ahmed.

I have gone through your superbly written book. I was also teaching in Riyadh at about the same time you were there. Reading your book made me very nostalgic. The cover of your book is an excellent work of art which has enhanced the value of your book enormously. I am sure, sophisticated readers from all areas of life will equally enjoy this book.

Although I haven't finished "Tolstoy in Riyadh", my wife finished it and really enjoyed it. We both think it is "Quite a tour de force". It is a very engaging and eye-opening story of a blond American woman in a Muslim environment.

A well written, easy to read journey about an American woman in a Muslim world. Beautifully crafted. Great cover photography.

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