



Minaret: A Novel

By Leila Aboulela

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Leila Aboulela's American debut is a provocative, timely, and engaging novel about a young Muslim woman -- once privileged and secular in her native land and now impoverished in London -- gradually embracing her orthodox faith. With her Muslim hijab and down-turned gaze, Najwa is invisible to most eyes, especially to the rich families whose houses she cleans in London. Twenty years ago, Najwa, then at university in Khartoum, would never have imagined that one day she would be a maid. An upper-class Westernized Sudanese, her dreams were to marry well and raise a family. But a coup forces the young woman and her family into political exile in London. Soon orphaned, she finds solace and companionship within the Muslim community. Then Najwa meets Tamer, the intense, lonely younger brother of her employer. They find a common bond in faith and slowly, silently, begin to fall in love. Written with directness and force, *Minaret* is a lyric and insightful novel about Islam and an alluring glimpse into a culture Westerners are only just beginning to understand.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Aboulela's U.S. debut is written in the voice of Najwa, an upper-class Sudanese woman, and covers, episodically, 20 years of her life. A Khartoum teen, Najwa flees to London with her mother and brother when the coup of 1985 leads to her father's arrest and execution. With her mother soon dead and her brother in jail on drug charges, Najwa attempts to negotiate work, love and the ways they get twisted around emigré politics—and religion. An affair begun in Khartoum with devout, politically engaged, working-class fellow émigré Anwar is threaded in with a later one with Tamer, the contentiously devout, college-age son of the family for which Najwa works as a nanny when in her 30s. The denouements of the two relationships, though separated by more than 10 years, come one after the other; both lead, painfully, to a deepening of Najwa's religious faith. Aboulela was raised in Khartoum and now divides her time between Dubai and Aberdeen, Scotland; a novel (*The Translator*) and short story collection (*Colored Lights*) were previously published in the U.K. Aside from some stilted dialogue, she draws Najwa's odyssey of exile, loss and found faith beautifully.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—The daughter of a wealthy government official, Najwa grows up pampered and carefree in western Sudan during the 1980s. With her 19th birthday, though, comes the overthrow of the president and arrest of her father by the new government. Najwa; her twin brother, Omar; and their mother flee to London. Within a few years, she is completely alone: her father has been executed, her mother succumbs to a fatal illness, and Omar is in prison for an assault conviction stemming from his drug abuse. Once a fashionable university student in Khartoum, the young woman makes ends meet as a nanny to a wealthy Arab family. Clothed in traditional Muslim hijab, she has suddenly become invisible within the city, much as the Ethiopian servants used to blend into the background in her parents household. Yet even as she comes to terms with this anonymity, a spark develops between her and the younger brother of her employer, and she is forced to confront the chasm between servant and master. Aboulela offers a captivating glimpse into one woman's journey through the various strata of society. The protagonist's experiences give her a deeper reliance on her faith and help her to recognize the shallowness of the life she left behind. This is the author's first work to be published in the U.S. Students will appreciate the story not only for its insights into Muslim faith and traditions, but also for the ways her compellingly real characters relate to one another.—*Kim Dare, Fairfax County Public Library System, VA*

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From [Booklist](#)

Aboulela's second novel, the first published in the U.S., weaves a timely Cinderella tale—only in reverse. Born to a wealthy and politically well-connected Sudanese family, Najwa attends the university in Khartoum. A student-led revolution leads to a coup, sending the family into exile in London, except for her father, who is detained and hanged. Najwa's journey over the next 20 years involves a downward economic spiral and her gradual acceptance of the Muslim faith. She is forced to give up her educational goals after her mother dies and her brother is incarcerated for drugs, and when she applies for a nanny position, she confronts just how far she has "come down in the world." Her despondent moments are alleviated by visits to the mosque with newfound Muslim friends, and she starts wearing a headscarf, an anathema in her student days. Aboulela's engaging story of the life and loves of this brave young woman provides an honest and thoughtful look at the power of this often maligned religion to both heal and support. *Deborah Donovan*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Anthony McDonell:

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