



# Absent

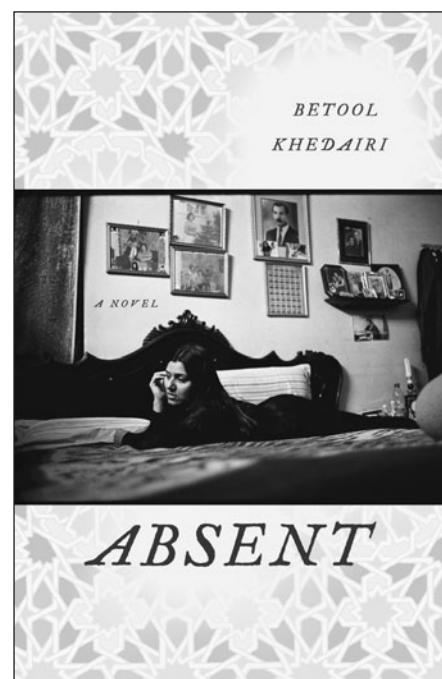
## A Novel

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READING LEVEL: 9



### • introduction •

*Absent*, by Betool Khedairi, is a coming of age story set in Baghdad during the difficult years of United Nations Sanctions against Iraq following the first Gulf War. The novel's narrator and protagonist, Dalal, is a young girl struggling to define herself as a young woman, to pursue an education and to cope with a personal tragedy. Having lost her parents in a car accident as an infant, she was raised by her aunt and uncle. On top of that, at the age of 10, she suffered a small stroke which left her mouth partially paralyzed, and she has never been able to get the reconstructive surgery that could have corrected the damage.

Dalal and the other residents of her Baghdad apartment building form a tight-knit community. During the course of the novel, Dalal's neighbors offer her various, sometimes conflicting, forms of advice, support, and guidance. She always listens and measures their advice in her own inimitable fashion. In fact, it is Dalal's narrative voice that offers the greatest sense of pleasure while reading this novel. A realist at heart, Dalal interacts with many older people, observing, analyzing, and commenting on their words and deeds, frequently with a humor and wit that is always original and deeply moving. Throughout the book, Dalal's poetic and lyrical observations are contrasted with her wry, incisive, and sometimes angry recording of the difficulties they all live through because of the Sanctions.

Over the course of the novel, Dalal matures from a secondary-school girl to a young woman in her early 20s. Having had to abandon her university studies shortly before she graduated, we see her two years into her job at a recycling plant. During this time, many of the apartment building's inhabitants leave: some are arrested, others die, and some are even exposed as spies. Despite these hardships, Dalal manages to maintain her dignity and a measure of hope for the future.

*Absent* offers many opportunities for substantive class discussion of powerful social issues and literary techniques. Set amidst recent and complex historical events, the novel offers a vision of life that is probably very different from those held by its readers. But although the setting may be foreign, the book's focus on a girl in her formative years offers students the common ground they'll need to connect with the story. Indeed, it offers ample opportunity to discuss issues that pertain to the very lives of the students reading the novel—most notably relationships with elders, self-image and first love. *Absent* is accessible, yet written in a high literary style; students will be introduced to such literary techniques as narrative perspective, symbolism and irony as they make their way through the story.

## • historical context

Since *Absent* refers explicitly to specific historical events, students should be aware of the context as a way to enhance their understanding of the novel. A brief historical overview may either be provided to students as a preface, or teachers may assign specific research tasks to students to conduct and present to their peers. The historical situation entails significant moral questions that can be explored through class discussion and debate.

Although *Absent* is vague with regard to dates, it is clear that it takes place in the 1990s, ending just before the year 2000. These were very intense years for the Iraqi people. After a deadly and damaging eight-year war with its neighbor Iran, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990. United Nations Resolution 678 presented Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader, with an ultimatum to withdraw from Kuwait; since he did not do so, the United States and its allies began bombing targets in Iraq on January 17, 1991. After weeks of air bombing and a final ground offensive known as Desert Storm, the Iraqi army was driven out of Kuwait and a cease-fire was declared by the end of February.

In April 1991, UN Resolution 687 was passed. It allowed Iraq to import foodstuffs and materials for “essential civilian needs” but restricted oil exports (the so-called “Oil for Food” Program). The goal of the Resolution was to extract four essential concessions from the Iraqi regime: (1) the recognition of Kuwaiti sovereignty and borders; (2) the identification and elimination of weapons of mass destruction; (3) the release of Kuwaiti citizens and other nationals in Iraqi custody; and (4) the establishment of a compensation commission to pay for War damages. Although these Sanctions established by Resolution 687 were never intended for long-term use, the recalcitrance of the regime in complying with the resolution proved formidable; it resisted compliance with the demands of the resolution, especially in regard to the inspection of its arsenal. Although they were in non-compliance, the Iraqi regime unsuccessfully attempted to have the Sanctions comprehensively lifted. Later resolutions, however, did mitigate the strictness of Resolution 687, which was finally lifted by the UN Security Council Resolution 1483 on May 22, 2003 in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq.

There is considerable debate regarding the morality and efficacy of this type of sanction since it most strongly and directly affects the general public rather than the leaders of the regime. With regard to the Sanctions placed on Iraq during this period, internal and external observers reported devastating effects on public health and education. While Iraq’s own leaders must be held culpable for their non-compliance with the terms that would have raised the Sanctions themselves, the long-term effects on the innocent masses are so great that the outsiders who establish the Sanctions must too feel some moral responsibility for their effects. *Absent* shows us the very real effects of the continued bombing and the Sanctions on individual people: class discussion may grapple with the moral question of these policies after students read about how they affected average citizens of the city.

## • narrative plot summary

### CHAPTERS 1-4

Opening discussion of the novel may focus on character development, setting and narrative voice. The first chapter of *Absent* sets the scene for the novel. Dalal is a resident of Baghdad, the capital city of Iraq. She describes the death of her parents, along with her adoption by her aunt and uncle who cannot have children of their own. Since parents are traditionally renamed after their first born, they take the names Abu Ghayeb and Umm Ghayeb (the parents of the absent one). From the start, the concepts of absence and loss are therefore introduced and then reinforced with the description of the stroke which left Dalal's mouth partially paralyzed. In addition to Dalal and her aunt and uncle, two other key characters are introduced in these opening chapters: Umm Mazin, the fortune teller/faith healer, and Dalal's friend, Ilham the nurse.

On a grander scheme, these early chapters take pains to provide much of the necessary historical context, including references to: the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi attack on Kuwait, and the subsequent bombing of Iraq and the stifling economic Sanctions; in addition, we learn of Iraq's cultural history through Abu Ghayeb. The difficulty of their lives under the Sanctions is contrasted with the so-called "Days of Plenty" by the telling of several stories. For example, in one key moment, Dalal eats a precious egg even after she drops it on the floor and in another scene, a bathtub from an upstairs apartment falls through the floor into their own apartment.

Dalal's aunt and uncle must struggle to make a living within the context of the economic Sanctions. Having lost his job at the Ministry of Tourism, Abu Ghayeb decides to learn beekeeping and sell honey for a living, and Umm Ghayeb takes up the business of refashioning old clothes for private clients. Back in the "Days of Plenty," when Dalal's family enjoyed middle class success, they were members of the neighboring Country Club, Abu Ghayeb drove a Volvo, and they frequently traveled abroad. The walls of their flat are crowded with the works of original art that Abu Ghayeb had collected over the course of many years. For her part, Umm Ghayeb not only resents the change in their economic and social status, but also her husband's affliction with psoriasis, a skin ailment that makes him "shed scales" throughout their flat. Umm Ghayeb continually "whines" about the "good old days" (40); indeed, Dalal reports that Abu Ghayeb is "convinced that she's a person who can't adapt to new circumstances and insists on living in the past" (40). This will prove exactly to be the case in later chapters of the novel.

Khedairi's narrative structure and voice should also be examined in class. The novel is not plot-driven. There is no central dilemma that must be resolved. Instead, its aim is to illustrate the daily struggles of living in a society paralyzed by Sanctions. It is structured as a series of brief segments, some of which are Dalal's lyrical descriptions of paintings or people, narrations of the quotidian events in the lives of Dalal and her neighbors, and presentations of historical context. Students may need to be encouraged to enjoy the book's pacing: although it is not structured by action, the lyrical beauty of the narrative is indeed accessible. The first-person narrative perspective of Dalal not only limits the nature of the information we receive, but also helps her get right to the very heart of just about any situation she encounters. Dalal's observations have the irreverent humor of a teenager, but are also full of original imagery and keen insight. For example, even the description of a drooping plant is an occasion for poetic imagery: "The plant ascends laboriously from the mustard-colored pot sitting beside the sofa. Its wilted leaves lift up their greenery lazily toward the fingers of sunlight that tickle playfully at the sides of a restless curtain" (2).

## • narrative plot summary (continued)

### CHAPTERS 5-9

The novel continues to develop Dalal's character, describing how she deals with her handicap and with the situation in Iraq. Chapter 5 begins with Dalal and her aunt going to visit Umm Mazin, the fortune teller and faith healer who has recently moved into the building. Umm Mazin's apartment is full of women (she does not accept male clients), who seek out her advice and folk remedies for a variety of ailments. While awaiting their turn with Umm Mazin, the women discuss the bombs and the blockade, and their effects on the nation and their personal lives.

Dalal reflects on the fact that the money that Umm Ghayeb and Abu Ghayeb had once saved for her mouth surgery would now be invested in the bees; there is simply no choice in the matter, since their livelihood depends upon it. Her resentment and anger are barely concealed in her narrative. The horrors occurring as a result of the Sanctions and bombs are expressed in the newspaper articles they read and the personal stories reported by Ilham: working in the hospital she sees first-hand the horrific effects of disease, malnutrition and missile attacks. Ilham continually curses and obsesses over the French mother who had abandoned her long ago. It is clear that she reviles this long-lost mother, but wishes that her mother had kept her; surely she would then have been spared the agonies of living in Baghdad under these conditions. In contrast to the ugliness of life outside, Dalal and her uncle frequently discuss art, focusing on the colors and shapes that make a good painting.

Nevertheless, the outside world of "intelligent weapons" is hard to ignore. Dalal's uncle begins his beekeeping by visiting the tennis courts in the neighboring Alwiya club where he plans to set up his apiary. Meanwhile, Dalal is finishing her secondary school education while her aunt pursues her career in refashioning clothes. Along with Abu Ghayeb, another resident of the building, "Uncle Sami," also teaches Dalal about art, and tries to encourage her to "see" things in a new way. Uncle Sami is a retired photographer who is now blind. He claims to see "within himself" now, rather than outside himself, and tells Dalal that he can teach her that "human beings come in different colors" (63).

Unfortunately, Dalal receives bad news that her friend Ilham has cancer. In addition to expressing a real sense of hopelessness about her own case, she describes the children who are dying in the hospital without treatment. Ilham continues to complain about her French mother, and she encourages Dalal to study French at the University, since a knowledge of this language will be important in the aftermath of the war and Sanctions, when rebuilding the nation will be a priority. Life in Baghdad is desperate: people are auctioning their belongings on the street, a trip to the dentist is fearful, and bombs may fall at any time. In the midst of this horrible situation, a character such as Umm Mazin is particularly difficult to judge. As a fortune teller and faith healer, she is dubbed a "charlatan" by Dalal, although Uncle Sami suggests that she does perform a useful function for her clients; in giving them faith, her remedies have a very real although placebo effect: "Every person needs to believe in something. Believing in trickery willingly is another form of faith" (112).

Dalal makes the acquaintance of Saad, a young man who has opened a hair salon on the ground floor of her apartment building. In many ways he is a positive influence on Dalal. Like Uncle Sami, he attempts to instill in Dalal an optimistic attitude: "I'm not responsible for this tragedy. We must try to live in as normal a fashion as possible. We have to dream of the things that we're entitled to hope for" (109). Saad encourages Dalal to think positively and to have faith that she is beautiful, despite her facial palsy. In one scene he applies make-up to her face, drawing her mouth on straight. He then wipes the make-up off saying: "The person sitting in front of me is still the same person, before and after" (107).

In one fundamental way, Dalal's perspective on her own problem is re-centered by the Sanctions. She says that she had always been accustomed to dividing her life into "two halves"—the time before and after the stroke—but that now she, along with everyone else, sees history as "Days of Plenty' and the times that followed" (105).

## CHAPTERS 10-13

Chapter 10 begins a new phase of life for Dalal since she is accepted at the University; on the other hand, there is little change in the general situation of the nation. Bombs continue to fall, causing devastation not only in urban areas, but also on important historical and antiquarian spots (120). Moreover, the Sanctions continue, squeezing the lives of the people, causing a variety of personal reactions. For the residents of Dalal's apartment building, life has taken on a bearable quality since they have reached an interesting symbiotic experience. In fact, Dalal describes it as a relatively self-sufficient community. Abu Ghayeb sells his honey to Umm Mazin for use in her remedies and her clients patronize Saad's hair salon and commission Umm Ghayeb's sewing services. They, in turn, send clients back to Umm Mazin. Dalal works both for her Uncle and Saad while pursuing her studies.

Although a measure of stability is achieved, the pressures are also palpable: e.g. following Ilham's cancer surgery, her friends attempt to construct a prosthetic breast for her since a professionally fashioned one is not available. Later, we are shocked to learn that Ilham is arrested. Her purported crime is that she had been stealing human organs from the hospital, and giving them to her boyfriend, a local butcher, who in turn was mixing the human organ meat in beef and selling it to unsuspecting customers. Although this repugnant fact is shocking, Dalal and the others seem to accept it as a byproduct of the impossible times in which they live. In addition, the marriage of Abu and Umm Ghayeb continues to deteriorate. At the Baghdad International Fair, Abu Ghayeb meets a Jordanian woman called Miss Randa who shares his plight with psoriasis. Umm Ghayeb sees her as a threat and a rival for her husband's attentions. When the fair ends, Abu Ghayeb makes plans to go to Jordan to learn more about Miss Randa's Dead Sea skin treatments, causing his wife a great deal of anxiety. In her worry, she goes to Umm Mazin for a spell to get rid of her rival, and in one most unusual passage, Dalal describes her aunt decorating the most beautiful coat she has ever made, with mummified bees. In chapter 12, Umm Ghayeb admits to Dalal that she is "jealous of him" (students should take note of this phrase and analyze it in context of the conversation between the Abu and Umm Ghayeb in Chapter 14). They hear nothing from Abu Ghayeb for days after he leaves for Jordan.

Dalal's relationship with Saad deepens over the years since she works in his shop to supplement the family income as she simultaneously pursues her French studies at the University. She confides intimate information to him regarding the marriage of her aunt and uncle, referring to them at one point as "Buzzy bee and Fashion Chic" (149), and allows him to address her on the topic of her facial palsy. He encourages her to think optimistically and to believe in alternate forms of beauty, to believe that she might be beautiful despite her disability. Dalal expresses a more fundamentally cynical view of her situation, claiming that her face could only be considered beautiful as a form of "cubism". Although Saad appears to be a good friend to Dalal, a subtle foreshadowing occurs that suggests that he is not what he appears to be. When reading his fortune, Umm Mazin announces, "He cowardly threatens, like a woman, with a dagger like a cow's tail" (115). This cryptic pronouncement will only make sense at the end of the novel, when Saad's true role as a police informant is revealed. In addition, Saad introduces Dalal to a new character called Adel, who will prove to be immensely important later on. Foreshadowing in scenes with Adel also indicates that he may not be what he appears; although he says he is a "physiotherapist" (one who fits false limbs), in one passage, when Adel and Saad are bantering about Kit Kat chocolates, Saad asks if Adel is "interrogating" him (159) and in fact, at the end of the novel we learn that he is one of the secret police.

## • narrative plot summary (continued)

Despite this foreshadowing, both men are Dalal's friends and Adel especially shows romantic interest in her. One evening the three of them get drunk together. Adel takes her to the back of the salon, where Saad has a small living space. It is unclear what happens between them that night, since Dalal cannot remember it in the morning. When she later questions him, he is elusive and coy.

In Chapter 13, a missile hits the building, destroying not only Umm Mazin's apartment but also impeding her ability to perform her services for her clients, since her assistant cannot correctly mix her remedies after the destruction of her supplies. She temporarily moves into Ilham's empty apartment, not knowing that her assistant is incorrectly mixing her concoctions thereafter.

### CHAPTERS 14-17

When Abu Ghayeb returns from Jordan, he and his wife argue bitterly. She admits that she may not be "jealous over him" (in terms of Miss Randa's attentions) but rather, "jealous of" his transformation. She says "You represent to me everything that I'm unable to become" (171). He has accepted the loss of his previous career, and wholly embraced his new vocation as a beekeeper, whereas she struggles to feel happy in this new phase of life. Both vocations of beekeeping and sewing have symbolic qualities that reflect their individual attitudes towards their work and their current living conditions under the Sanctions. Abu Ghayeb makes an explicitly positive analogy between the bees and human existence, he says: "if only we could learn from the bees.... They suck from [the flower] what they need and won't exceed their limit" (175). In contrast, Umm Ghayeb will make a negative analogy between marriage and lace, noting that at first lace appears to be so "pure and white", but that with time, it is nothing more than "a boring pattern that soon fades and turns yellow" (176). These analogies reflect each person's attitude toward his/her work.

As for Umm Mazin, her clients begin to complain to the authorities when they discover that her home remedies are now having adverse effects due to the fact that the assistant is incapable of mixing them according to Umm Mazin's recipes. The building residents see Umm Mazin being taken away for interrogation by the authorities. Significantly, Adel is there with Dalal, talking about what happened the night when Adel, Saad and Dalal got drunk together. At this point, there is no indication that he is connected to Umm Mazin's interrogation.

Sex and Violence meet in Chapter 15. First, Dalal and Adel find themselves alone in Adel's salon; Dalal poetically describes their lovemaking with a sensual diction of colors and flavors: "A lilac cover floats above him. We play, our hands are exploring silky corners. The olive oil voice asks me gently to hush. The legs of the bed quiver" (181). Later, while cleaning Ilham's empty apartment, Dalal is visited by Adel and they have a second romantic encounter.

Also in this chapter, however, is the description of Abu Ghayeb's bees attacking each other. Some unknown cause is influencing them to turn fierce and annihilate each other. As Abu Ghayeb struggles to figure it out, his colonies are being decimated in an all-out civil war. In chapter 16, Dalal decides to investigate the adjacent tennis court, which had recently been outfitted with a mysterious tarp cover and been set with a soldier to guard it. Since she spent so much time in the club as a child, she is able to infiltrate it at night with Saad's help, and when she sees what is inside the tennis court, she stifles a scream of terror. Upon returning to Saad's salon, she informs him and Abu Ghayeb that the tennis court is full of corpses. Although their presence there is never completely explained, they speculate that they are casualties from a recent missile attack, housed there because the morgues are full. It appears that the bees from Abu Ghayeb's hive have been feeding on the blood from the corpses.

Upon learning this, Abu Ghayeb is faced with the morally repugnant fact that the honey is now tainted: since the bees have fed on human blood, he insists that the honey must be disposed of and the bees must be replaced. Doing so, of course, will be very costly for him, both in terms of time and financial investment. Umm Ghayeb begs him to reconsider, arguing that no one will know, and that no one will be harmed despite the contamination. She voices a sense of self-preservation and realism, whereas Abu Ghayeb strives to maintain a sense of personal integrity and moral dignity with regard to his work. This moment in the novel serves as an echo of the fate of Ilham and her boyfriend, who had purportedly sold human organs as beef.

In order to raise money to restart the beekeeping business, Abu Ghayeb decides emphatically to sell his vast collection of paintings, despite his wife's strong objections. He begins a complicated procedure of organizing a way to smuggle the paintings into Jordan where they can be displayed and sold in Miss Randa's Dead Sea Resort Hotel. It is while he is in the process of measuring, removing and packing the paintings, that Saad comes to their apartment to see Dalal, who has been sick and housebound since her experience in the tennis court.

The final pages of the novel narrate a good deal of information and offer the opportunity to discuss dramatic irony in class. Dalal's lover Adel enters their apartment, and his identity as "an assistant to the secret service agency" (205) is revealed. He arrests Abu Ghayeb in the apiary without explaining himself to Dalal at all. Since he does not acknowledge her, Dalal is left confronting Saad who admits to her that he had been "planted" there by Adel, who is also known as "Jamal Drawers" (because he is known for breaking the wrists of suspects by slamming them in drawers). Saad confesses that he is a homosexual who, in exchange for protection, specializes in spying on citizens and then informing the police about any unusual activities needing investigation. He had first been set up there to spy on Umm Mazin, but, due to his information, both Ilham and Abu Ghayeb were subsequently arrested. Saad informs Dalal that Ilham is in a "dispensary in the hard labor camp" (207). Despite his horrendous actions, Saad expresses anguished regret to Dalal, not only explaining everything to her and begging for her forgiveness, but also giving her the money which he had received from Adel. Dalal is enraged at his machinations, his lies and his betrayal; Umm Mazin's earlier assessment that "he cowardly threatens" was indeed prescient. Saad tries to justify his own and Adel's actions as providing protection to Iraqi society, particularly its women: "Listen. During the past thirty years people have been leaving. The communists have fled the country, many Shiite families had to leave, the educated professionals and the scientists emigrated, and the Kurds have become independent. They're even saying that women now make up more than fifty percent of the population as a result of the wars we've been through. So what will you ladies do now, dear sister?" (208). Dalal emphatically rejects this reasoning as nonsense. Although Saad had earlier appeared to be an idealistic optimist, he ironically identifies himself at the end of the novel as a "pragmatist".

The novel then abruptly moves forward to a point sometime immediately preceding the year 2000. As time has gone by, Dalal informs us that Uncle Sami has died, that they have received no news from Abu Ghayeb and that her aunt now relies on her for everything. Dalal has had to abandon her studies shortly before her graduation, and for two years has been working at a recycling plant. From her position in the recycling plant, she views a "Lab for Analysis of Viral Specimens" which is visited by the UN Team in search of WMDs (Weapons of Mass Destruction).

The newspaper delivery boy, Hamid, arrives with a bundle of newspapers for recycling. As Dalal sits and smokes a cigarette (something we have never seen her do before), she questions him about his activities. Although the boy delivers newspapers, he is himself illiterate, having left school early. Dalal insists that he learn to read, and even promises to pay him double for his newspapers if he allows her to teach him. The novel ends with her asking him to repeat the beginning of the alphabet along with her. Whereas earlier in the novel, Dalal had been the "student" to a variety of mentors, including Uncle Sami, Abu Ghayeb, and even Saad, in the end, she becomes the teacher, taking on Hamid as her protégée of sorts.

## • study questions

1. How are Iraq's culture and artistic heritage represented in the novel?
2. What are the "Days of Plenty"?
3. What are the Sanctions? Describe the economic conditions due to the Sanctions.
4. What are the effects of the blockade and bombing on everyday life in Baghdad?
5. What happened at Basra?
6. Why does Ilham suggest that Dalal study French?
7. Describe the effects of the recent war on the women of Baghdad. Consider, for instance, the portrayal of Dalal's aunt's clients and Umm Mazin's clients.
8. Dalal defines time as the time before the stroke and after. How do other people define time? How do these two ways of perceiving time influence each other?
9. Although Dalal loves her aunt and uncle, does she resent the way they handled the treatment of her facial palsy?
10. What lessons does Dalal learn from Uncle Sami? What does he say about his blindness?
11. What is Dalal's assessment of Umm Mazin? What does Uncle Sami say? Does Umm Mazin offer something valuable to her clients? Why do they return to her? What brings about her "downfall"?
12. The apartment building appears to be a somewhat self-sufficient community. Explain how the residents come to rely on each other.
13. Describe Ilham. What are her good and bad qualities? Is she a sympathetic character? In what way is she horrific?
14. Describe Adel. In what ways is he good for Dalal?
15. How do Adel and Saad betray Dalal? Is their betrayal foreshadowed?
16. Who is Miss Randa? What is her role in the novel?
17. Saad and Dalal discuss beauty and the nature of love. What is his opinion? What is hers? Can they be said to be opposites?
18. What is the difference between being "jealous over" or "jealous of" someone? In what way did Abu Ghayeb transform and how did Dalal's aunt deal with that transformation?
19. In what ways are the Bees an analogy for the situation in Baghdad? Consider especially their "wars" in the end of the novel. What is making them attack each other?
20. Consider how many forms of disease and disability are in the novel. What thematic pattern is achieved? How might these forms be said to symbolize the status of Iraq itself?
22. What is in tennis court #2?
21. Consider the title *Absent*. List how many things in the novel are conspicuously absent. What thematic conclusion can you draw from this?



## • themes and related writing assignments

### **ABSENCE AND LOSS**

The title of the novel *Absent* clues us in immediately to the sense of loss that pervades the story. There are many things that are absent in the book, beginning with Dalal's parents and Abu and Umm Ghayeb's unborn child. In addition though, all the characters have lost or are missing something as a result of their situation: there is not enough food, medicine, hair dye, honey, or new thread. Everything is scarce or absent. The novel explores this deep and pervasive loss or absence both of things and in the relationships between the people. Dalal's job at the Recycling plant at the end of the novel is brilliantly ambiguous: while the process of sorting through the old, discarded items may seem to be negative, it also shows a kind of hope in that the past can be salvaged to prepare for a new kind of future.

#### **Writing Assignment:**

Why is this novel called *Absent*? Brainstorm a list of all the forms of absence or loss that the novel presents. Write an essay in which you present a sample of these absences and draw a thematic conclusion about this pattern.

### **BEAUTY/SELF-IMAGE**

Beauty and self-image are key issues in *Absent* and are fruitful areas for classroom discussion. Dalal does not reveal much about her physical appearance, except for the facial paralysis. We know that her aunt and uncle had saved for reconstructive surgery, and had sought out medical advice on it, but that first procrastination and then circumstance prevented them from completing the work. Dalal outwardly expresses a determinedly realistic attitude toward her situation. In discussion with Saad, she makes it clear that she accepts as patently obvious that no man could ever consider her beautiful except as a form of "cubism" (151). When Saad suggests to her that Adel finds her attractive, she expresses the opinion that "attractive personality" and "beautiful appearance" are two different things. She seems to be avoiding the possibility of being hurt by simply forestalling the possibility of love or romance at all. On the other hand, she expresses a great deal of strength in this exchange with Saad, telling him "Don't entangle me in things I can do without" (151). Class discussion can center on close reading of Dalal's attitude about her appearance. In short: does Dalal repress her anger and anxiety, or is she realistically well-adjusted to it?

Dalal's strength, determination and intelligence are counterbalanced by this cynical/realistic view that both empowers and enfetters her. This paradoxical combination can itself be said to mirror the condition of Iraqi society under the United Nations Sanctions.

#### **Writing Assignment:**

Write an essay analyzing how the theme of beauty and self-image is developed in *Absent*. Analyze especially Dalal's attitude toward her facial paralysis. How does this paralysis mirror the greater situation of the Iraqi people?

## • themes and related writing assignments (continued)

### RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships among the characters as they struggle to survive in these trying times are crucial. One of the most important relationships in the novel is that between Dalal's aunt and uncle. Although Umm Ghayeb is sick of her husband's psoriasis and uninterested in his bees, she becomes terribly jealous when Miss Randa comes on the scene. However it is a powerful moment when she admits both to herself and her husband that she is not jealous "over" him, but "of" his transformation: he has been able to reinvent himself so energetically that she does not recognize him or herself any longer. Although many of the relationships in the novel disintegrate, Dalal's final effort to reach out to the child Hamid shows that she has not lost her capacity for empathy nor her energy to effect change.

#### Writing Assignment:

Although *Absent* is a historical novel, it is also one that focuses on a group of people and their interrelationships. Review the relationships and write an essay in which you explain how they are affected by the difficult times in which they live.

### CULTURE/ART

We see the cultural heritage of Iraq through the descriptions of Abu Ghayeb's personal art collection and the references to his previous career in the Ministry of Tourism. In fact, it is the area of Modern Iraq that encompasses the so-called "Cradle of Civilization" (9). Dalal's poetic descriptions of the paintings provide some of the novel's loveliest imagery. The topic is of course, controversial, too. Abu Ghayeb's fate is most unjust: it may appear to be perfectly reasonable and legal for Abu Ghayeb to raise money for his beekeeping business by selling his private art collection, which he originally began as a financial investment (6). Also, the circumstance of his actual arrest is a shock since it is carried out by Dalal's lover, and finally, it is most upsetting to learn that they never hear from him again after his arrest. However, in context of the smuggling and looting of the art museums in Baghdad that went on in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the charge of "smuggling the heritage of Iraq" (203) creates a fruitful and ambiguous area for class discussion.

#### Writing Assignment:

The area that encompasses Iraq is known as "The Cradle of Civilization". Write a research essay in which you explain the cultural history of Iraq and how that history and art generally are presented in *Absent*.

## • other writing assignments

- The novel *Absent* takes place during very specific, complex historical events. Write a research essay in which you identify the historical context of the novel and how the events are incorporated into it.
- *Absent* might be said to be a "coming of age" story. The character of Dalal is very funny, intelligent and courageous. Write a character analysis of her. In your essay pay particular attention to her narrative voice: what makes Dalal such a moving character?
- Throughout *Absent* there are many forms of disease and disability. List as many as you can and select a few to present in your writing. How do they form a pattern that mirrors the situation of Iraq?

• other titles of interest



***Funny in Farsi***  
*A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*  
 Written by Firoozeh Dumas  
**WINNER - School Library Journal  
 Adult Books for Young Adults**  
 Random House | Trade Paperback | 978-0-8129-6837-8  
 224 pp. | \$12.95

***Iran Awakening***  
*One Woman's Journey to Reclaim  
 Her Life and Country*  
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This guide was written by FILIZ TURHAN, an Associate Professor of English at Suffolk County Community College. She is the author of *The Other Empire: British Romantic Writings about the Ottoman Empire* (Routledge) and articles on the Romantic period and contemporary Muslim and Middle Eastern literature.

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