

Institute for Middle East Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Reading Guide to *Salt Houses*

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In the historical fiction novel *Salt Houses*, Hala Alyan tells the intergenerational story of an evolving Palestinian family. Her choice to structure each chapter through the lens of a different character's life enables readers to consider and appreciate the different experiences, perceptions, and questions that exist within a single Palestinian family during certain flashpoints in modern global history.

Select book reviews and author interviews

Kirkus Review

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/hala-alyan/salt-houses/>

World Literature Today

<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2017/september/salt-houses-hala-alyan>

NPR author interview

<https://www.npr.org/2017/05/04/526785965/i-belonged-nowhere-a-story-of-displacement-from-a-novelist-who-knows>

Al Jazeera interview

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/05/salt-houses-story-palestinians-palestine-170516074659352.html>

Tracking Theme and Character Development

As you read each chapter, create a log in your notebook like the sample chart on page 3. The log will help you track the following four features for each character's chapter:

- **Images or Notions of Palestine**: How is Palestine described? What does the character appreciate, know, or wonder about Palestine?
- **Character Development**: Who is the character? How do you know? What moments or descriptions tell us more about the character's developing fears, hopes, frustrations, or delights?
- **Lyrical Writing**: 'Lyrical writing' is when the author expresses emotions or events in an imaginative and beautiful way. In this category, write down any descriptions in Hala Alyan's writing that stood out to you.
- **Questions**: What questions do you have about a character or events taking place?

	Images or Notions of Palestine	Character Development	Lyrical Writing	Questions You Have
Salma <i>(Nablus 1963)</i>				
Mustafa <i>(Nablus 1965)</i>				
Alia <i>(Kuwait 1967)</i>				
Atef <i>(Kuwait 1977)</i>				
Riham <i>(Amman 1982)</i>				
Alia <i>(Kuwait 1988)</i>				
Souad <i>(Paris 1990)</i>				
Riham <i>(Amman 1999)</i>				
Souad <i>(Beirut 2004)</i>				
Linah <i>(Beirut 2006)</i>				
Atef <i>(Amman 2011)</i>				
Manar <i>(Jaffa 2014)</i>				
Epilogue <i>(Beirut)</i>				

Chapter Questions

Keeping in mind the Yacoub family tree that appears in the beginning of the novel, consider the following questions for each chapter and character.

Salma: Nablus, March 1963 (p. 1 - 23)

- On p. 3, Hussam cries, “They took my home, they took my lungs. Kill me, kill me.” The author then writes, “Hussam fiercely believed his illness was tied to the occupation of Jaffa...” How do you think losing his home in Jaffa contributed to Hussam’s illness?
- Why does Salma insist that she needs the tiles removed from the backyard in Nablus (p. 12)? How does this reflect her connection to Palestine?
- What do we learn about the class status of the Yacoub family in this chapter? How does this play a role in their experience of Palestine?

Mustafa: Nablus, October 1965 (p. 24 - 47)

- What attracts Mustafa to Imam Bakri? (p. 31)
- Atef tells Mustafa that others will “look past the rest” if he chooses to marry Aya (p. 36). What does he mean? Why does Mustafa reply, “They won’t”?
- After hearing the story of Imam Bakri’s family, Mustafa simply replies, “I want to help.” (p. 44). What does he mean by help? Do you think Mustafa could have responded in another way?
- What about the teal curtains in Aya’s room leave Mustafa feeling saddened? (p. 46)

Alia: Kuwait City, December 1967 (p. 48 - 76)

- On p. 67, the author describes Alia’s pain and writes, “The despair is a lake she must move across.” What examples have we seen in the book so far about how survivors of loss and/or trauma cope with despair?
- Why do you think Widad laughs after Alia’s description of mourning and wearing black at the top of p. 58? Does she really think the war is funny?
- Consider the scene on p. 72 - 73 where Alia discovers Atef in the bathroom. In your own words, what is happening in this scene? Why do you think Alia feels “a powerful urge to turn away” (p. 73)? The author says “shame composed her” to stay with her husband. What does this mean?

Atef: Kuwait City, May 1977 (p. 77 - 103)

- How does Atef’s parenting style differ from Alia’s? What experiences and emotions may inform each of their parenting styles?
- Why does addressing the letters to Mustafa help Atef begin to write what he needs to? (p. 82)

- Why doesn't Atef tell his wife or family about the letters?
- Do you think the conflicts about parenting and lifestyles that arise between Atef and Alia indicate a lessening of the love between them?

Riham: Amman, June 1982 (p. 104 - 130)

- What does the first sentence on p. 104 immediately indicate about Riham's personality?
- When Riham first visits the mosque near her grandmother's apartment (p. 118 - 119), she calls it "beautiful." How do you predict this positive experience might affect Riham's developing identity?
- Riham has several significant spiritual experiences as she struggles in the ocean. These experiences remain private but influential, just like her father's experiences in Palestine. What similarities and differences do you see between Riham and her father? Her mother?

Alia: Kuwait City, April 1988 (p. 131 - 156)

- Alia's mother Salma tells her, "You must remember," and later, "When it happens, you must find a way to remember" (p. 141). What does Salma mean? Why does Alia struggle to understand what her mother is trying to convey?
- The word *ajnabiyeh* (or plural *ajanib*) is used throughout the novel to refer to foreigners, white Europeans and Americans, or non-Arabs. On p. 138 Atef jokes that Alia is one of them. What do you think joking about "foreigners" helps the characters to indirectly address about their lives?
- On p. 144, Alia shouts "*I'm happy*," to her daughter, and "the childishness shames her." When in Alia's life was she most happy? What is Souad suggesting about her mother, since "happiness" is subjective, ill-defined, and unmeasurable?

Souad: Paris, August 1990 (p. 157 - 175)

- In which ways is Souad like her mother?
- What factors contribute to Souad's decision to marry Elie?
- What advice might you give Souad in dealing with all the significant change and uncertainty she and her family are dealing with around the issue of security? What advice might you give her mother?

Riham: Amman, October 1999 (p. 176 - 201)

- Make a list of ways that Riham regulates her life. What do you think this says about her worldview? About her relationship with her husband?
- Riham overheard her sister, Souad, refer to Abdullah as a *jihadi* (p.188). What is Riham's relationship to Abdullah? What does Souad mean when she uses this term to describe him? What experiences influence his worldview?

- Describe Riham’s relationships with her friends (p.193). What is satisfying about these relationships? What isn’t? How does the quality of these relationships parallel her resentment of the patients in Latif’s backyard infirmary over the years?

Souad: Beirut, June 2004 (p. 202 - 224)

- Read the exchange on p. 205 between Souad, Budur, and Aliya. How does this conversation challenge stereotypes of Arab and Muslim women? How else have the characters challenged such stereotypes?
- There are multiple reasons Souad wanted to leave Boston for Beirut. Explain (p.207).
- Manar resents her mother deeply. Why?

Linah: Beirut, July 2006 (p. 225 - 249)

- Who is bombing Lebanon in 2006?
- What did Tika mean when she told Linah, “...this is my job, not my home” (p.232). What deep, unspoken issue was she pointing out?
- Describe the scene in Abu Rafi’s store. What does Linah learn through this episode?

Atef: Amman, June 2011 (p. 252 - 274)

- How has Abdullah changed? What happened to alter his worldview?
- What is the significance of Riham smoking a cigarette on the balcony (p. 265)? What does this act indicate about all family relationships?
- Atef has been hiding his experiences for his entire adult life, except to secretly describe them in letters. How does discovering that his grandchildren know affect him? In the scene on p. 269, what does he come to realize about sharing the most sensitive parts of yourself with your family?
- How does Atef’s secrecy and subsequent relief that his grandchildren know represent the experiences of many men of war?
- On p. 273, Atef asks himself, “What is a life?” What perspective does his answer convey? How would his grandchildren answer the same question?

Manar: Jaffa, September 2014 (p. 275 - 296)

- Why does Manar say she feels she must visit Palestine? Why does she feel the need to go alone, without Gabe?
- Have you ever felt underwhelmed or let down by a travel experience you looked forward to? Why do you think this happens?
- Does Manar love Palestine? Explain.

Epilogue: Beirut

- The author chose not to provide a date along with the epilogue. What makes this so significant?
- In which ways do the end of Alia's life and her web of tangled memories serve as a final metaphors for the novel, the Yacoub family, Palestine, and Palestinians?