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BOOK CLUB

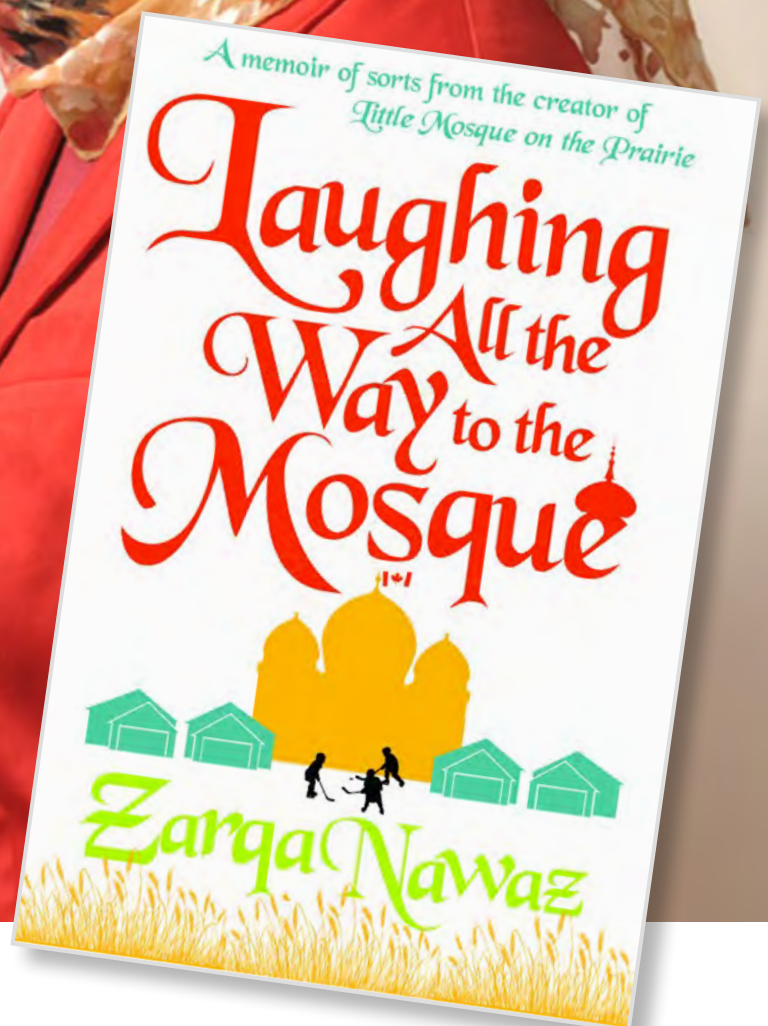
DISCUSSION
GUIDE

MARCH/APRIL 2017

LAUGHING ALL THE WAY TO THE MOSQUE

BY ZARQA NAWAZ

RECOMMENDED BY
GUEST READER
JANIE CHANG





LAUGHTER AND ACTION

The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce our March 2017 title, *Laughing All the Way to the Mosque*, by Zarqa Nawaz (a memoir that is sure to get you laughing too). This title has been recommended by guest reader Janie Chang, author of *Dragon Springs Road* and *Three Souls*.

In this guide, you'll find Chang's considered reflection on Nawaz's colourful memoir, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty background section, and an action you can take for Raif Badawi.

Laughing All the Way to the Mosque is a fun book to read. Nawaz is a natural storyteller, and the episodes she selects from her life illustrate both personal and unexpected details alongside big picture questions around religion, culture, career and family. Ideas worthy of serious reflection are shared with the reader through laugh-out-loud tales of halal chicken, awkwardness with the plumber, teenage rebellion, writing *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, match-making and more.

The Amnesty International Book Club hopes that through the reading experience you not only pause to laugh, but consider the spirit of proactivity and taking charge of one's life even amongst the chaos, that author Zarqa Nawaz exhibits so well through her storytelling. Then, consider those who could not be so free in their expression, and visit our action page within the guide.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.



About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

CBC Television's hit sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is the internationally-acclaimed comedy about Muslims and Christians attempting to live in harmony with each other in the fictional small prairie town of Mercy, Saskatchewan.



About this month's
featured author,

Zarqa Nawaz



About this month's
guest reader,

Janie Chang

Zarqa Nawaz created *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. It premiered on the CBC in 2007, ran for six seasons, was watched in over sixty countries and landed Nawaz in the public eye. When not writing, producing or directing for the show, she has spent much of the past six years writing comedy pilots for ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX, and touring the world as a sought-after public speaker. She has been interviewed or profiled by CNN, the BBC, *The New York Times* and Al Jazeera. A contributor to CBC's *DNTO*, Zarqa Nawaz lives in Regina with her loving but long-suffering family.

www.zarqanawaz.com @ZarqaNawaz

Janie Chang draws upon family history for her novels. She grew up listening to stories about ancestors who encountered dragons, ghosts, and immortals, and about life in a small Chinese town in the years before the Second World War.



She is a graduate of The Writer's Studio at Simon Fraser University. She is also the founder and main organizer of Canadian Authors for Indies, a national day of support by authors for independent bookstores.

Born in Taiwan, Janie has lived in the Philippines, Iran, Thailand, and New Zealand. She now lives in Vancouver.

Her first novel, *Three Souls*, was a finalist for the 2014 BC Book Prizes Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize and one of nine Canadian books long-listed for the 2015 IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Her second novel, *Dragon Springs Road*, was published in early 2017.

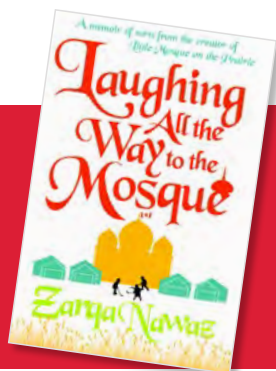
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Janie Chang on *Laughing All the Way to the Mosque*



It was only after reading Laughing All the Way to the Mosque by Zaqqa Nawaz that I realized the hijab was a weapon of teenage rebellion. Or at least it was for the young Zaqqa, who abandons her fight to become a Modern Muslim (tight jeans and short, uncovered hair) and decides instead to out-Muslim her parents by wearing a hijab—since her mother only wears a dupatta, a diaphanous loosely-draped headcover. “Some people think hijab is used to oppress people,” she says. “It’s true. I used it to oppress my parents.”

Nawaz’s humour is of the gentle, affectionate and kooky sort familiar to fans of her popular TV series, Little Mosque on the Prairie. But don’t make the mistake of filing away this memoir as a light-hearted take on being Muslim in Canada. While there are plenty of hilarious anecdotes about misadventures and awkward moments, the sub-text coursing beneath the humour speaks to the conflicts and fears she sees in and around Canadian Muslim communities. This is a book that uses comedy to entertain, grab attention, and promote understanding.

A few days after 9/11, a neighbour calls the RCMP about a suspicious container on the driveway of Zaqqa’s in-laws and the Mounties pay them a visit. It was a packing crate waiting for pick up by the moving company. Zaqqa’s response is to throw a big open house for all the neighbours, with a secret agenda of smoking out the caller’s identity. It’s funny and heartbreaking. Her in-laws’ 40-year history of belonging to that neighbourhood suddenly counted for nothing. 9/11 made them far more vulnerable to hate crimes than their white neighbours to terrorist attacks.

When it comes to misunderstandings, Zaqqa doesn’t confine herself to interactions between Muslims and white, non-Muslim Canadians. The Muslim community provides plenty of examples. Zaqqa has stated during

“Some people think hijab is used to oppress people,” she says. “It’s true. I used it to oppress my parents.”

interviews that she wanted to dispel notions of a monolithic Muslim culture and show that not only are there liberal and conservative Muslims, but also that not all Muslims observe the same religious traditions. In a chapter titled ‘Behind the Shower Curtain’, her mosque puts up a curtain in the prayer hall to physically separate the men’s and women’s areas. This escalates into segregating the women in a prayer room of their own.

Yet the practice of segregation is cultural, not religious, says the Islamic scholar she interviews for a TV documentary. It came from countries and cultures where segregation was the norm, not from the Qur’an. When it airs, the documentary sets her at odds with her Muslim friends, who think it makes their community appear sexist. They feel such conflicts should be resolved in private.

Zaqqa has stated during interviews that she wanted to dispel notions of a monolithic Muslim culture...

When we get a look at the hostility she faces after Little Mosque on the Prairie, it’s frightening. Her husband phones her, warning her to stay in the women’s prayer room of the mosque. He is in the other prayer room, surrounded by angry men who are shouting

‘Shame, shame’, demanding that he divorce her. They couldn’t distinguish, Zaqqa realizes, between poking fun at Muslims and making fun of Islam.

Despite such disheartening experiences, I never get the feeling that Zaqqa doubts her faith or community. She comes across as a fearless advocate for both Islam and women’s rights, most notably when she is challenging literalist interpretations of Islam that justify sexist behaviour. If you want to be literal, she points out, the hadith (accounts of actions and sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad) gives women the same access to prayer halls as men. She just wants more Muslims to be educated about their own faith so they can differentiate religious mandates from tradition. Hers is a faith that isn’t threatened by discourse, but welcomes engagement and inclusion.

This book extends friendship and understanding to the fearful and the curious, the doubtful and the sympathetic—on all sides. Like Zaqqa, I believe laughter goes a long way toward dispelling misconceptions. Her memoir will attract readers looking for a humorous read, and they’ll continue on to the end, learning and laughing all the way.

—Janie Chang

Discussion questions on *Laughing All the Way to the Mosque*



Discussion questions from guest reader Janie Chang

1. What beliefs did you have about Islam before reading this book, and did Zarqa's stories change or challenge any of those beliefs?
2. Which chapter or incident in the book gave you the most to think over and why?
3. When 9/11 happened, Zarqa told her husband their lives, as they knew them, were over. He replied she was overreacting.
 - a) If you are Muslim, what do you say to non-Muslims about how and/or whether your outlook has changed since that tragedy? What have you found to be effective approaches when talking to people who express concerns about Islamic extremism in Canada?
 - b) If you're not Muslim, but have friends who are, what discussions have you had with them about their lives since 9/11? Over the years, how have their concerns changed (or not) when it comes to their safety and the safety of their families and community?
4. In this book and during interviews, the author contends that Islam, as originally practiced in the 7th century, was far more female-friendly, but that patriarchy has eroded women's freedoms since then. Can you think of how other religions have evolved over the centuries, to either the detriment or benefit of women? What do you know of the influences that informed such changes?

Discussion questions from Amnesty International Book Club

1. What did you think of *Laughing All the Way to the Mosque*? Which aspects did you appreciate, and which aspects were most challenging?
2. Zarqa repeatedly uses humour to diffuse what could be an otherwise tense situation. How did you respond to her type of storytelling?
3. While this book could be considered 'light reading' there is much that could also be considered heavier issues considering our world today. What struck you most?
4. In discussing gender segregation, Zarqa Nawaz quotes one scholar around the issue. His response? "It's a cultural problem...not a religious one." This idea of culture vs religion guiding decisions is interesting. What are your thoughts, having read the book and from your own life?
5. Why do you think the sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* had such great success? Have you seen the show? If so, how does this book impact your perception of the series?
6. The author challenges others repeatedly throughout the book. Whether it is through her writing, campaigning, parties or speaking, she is proactive towards what she feels needs addressing. How are you proactive with your own life issues, and what do you wish you'd take more in hand?
7. In Canada, storytelling like *Laughing All the Way to the Mosque* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* are thankfully able to be created—but still, Nawaz faced considerable push-back within her community. Should there be a line when commenting upon one's society, and if so, where does it exist? What kind of push-back is good, and when does it become dangerous?

We must challenge religion-based hatred and fear

Laughing All the Way to the Mosque had been chosen as our March/April book before the troubling events of the past few months, and these have made it an even more timely and appropriate selection for the Amnesty International Book Club. We want to comment on what seems to be a rise in intolerance and Islamophobia in Canada and North America.

The shocking January 29 shooting at the Islamic Cultural Centre in the Ste-Foy area of Quebec City left six men dead and injured eight more. Amnesty International strongly condemned this act targeting Muslims, and issued a statement which included:

We send our condolences to the families of the victims and the wider community of the mosque. It is crucial that the police investigation be conducted promptly and justice delivered. The Muslim community in the province of Quebec needs to be assured that it has access to security, like all citizens.

Hate speech and Islamophobia are unacceptable and nurture violence. Let us show together, especially at the highest political level, that solidarity prevails and that respect for the rights of all people to live in security without discrimination is of the utmost importance to us.

In February, Amnesty International issued a press release condemning the large number of hateful, racist, bigoted and misogynistic messages and threats received by Iqra Khalid, Member of Parliament for Mississauga-Erin Mills in response to her introduction of House of Commons Motion 103: *Systemic racism and religious discrimination*. Motion 103 speaks to concerns about systemic racism and religious discrimination in Canada, with a particular focus on Islamophobia. It has become the subject of a heated and divisive debate within Parliament and at the time we put this guide together, faced a competing Motion to remove the specific reference to Islamophobia.

The threats and messages of hate received by Ms. Khalid, as well as the debate about Motion 103 and what it has unleashed, comes at a time when there is growing concern about discrimination and violence against Muslims globally, and US President Trump's effort to impose a temporary travel ban on citizens of several Muslim majority nations.

It is clear that we have a long way to go in Canada, North America and around the world in understanding that all people share the same humanity and are deserving of the same rights. We must challenge Islamophobia and any kind of categorization—whether it be religion, country of origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity—as a way to divide people into “us” and “them”. Especially when the “us” group believes they are entitled to more rights than those in the “them” group.

At the centre of the international human rights framework – the basis for Amnesty International's work – is the idea that everyone is free and equal in dignity and rights. Discrimination is never acceptable. For more information about our work, please visit www.amnesty.ca.

BACKGROUND

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Amnesty members hold a vigil for Raif Badawi outside the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Berlin

Freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is mentioned many times within this memoir, for a range of reasons both good and challenging. But it is essential to keep in mind that if Zargha Nawaz had even attempted to write her sitcom, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, or the memoir *Laughing All the Way to the Mosque* in Saudi Arabia, there is an excellent chance she would have been imprisoned or had to flee for her life.

Since March 2011 the authorities have continued a relentless campaign of repression in the name of security. The authorities have cracked down on peaceful activists calling for reforms and on

demonstrators protesting against human rights violations. Those who express dissent face arrest and imprisonment whether they are critics, bloggers, activists or academics.

Imprisoned activists

Blogger Raif Badawi has been imprisoned in a Saudi Arabian prison for over four years, charged with “insulting Islam through electronic channel”, and is serving a 10 year sentence that includes 1000 lashes. His wife, Ensaf Haidar, and his children have had to take refuge in Canada after her life was threatened in Saudi Arabia.



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Ensaf Haidar and her family

Ensaf Haidar, Raif Badawi's wife, speaks to a United Nations press conference

The following speech by Ensaf Haidar was delivered at a United Nations press conference organized by UN Watch, Human Rights Foundation, and the Raoul Wallenberg Human Rights Centre, to oppose the election of dictatorships to the UN Human Rights Council on October 6th, 2016.

Good morning,

I feel privileged to be here and I am grateful that I get the chance to speak in front of you today.

As you know, last year, my husband Raif Badawi received the 2015 Sakharov Prize awarded by the European Parliament. Therefore, I had the opportunity to speak in front of members of the European Parliament, journalists and representatives from different international organizations. I will go on speaking about my husband, always hoping for justice.

I would like to remind you about Raif's story. My husband has been languishing in a Saudi prison since June 17th, 2012. Our children live with me in the city of Sherbrooke, Québec in Canada. They have not seen their father for five years now.

I wrote a book about my story with Raif and about the first time I found myself having to publicly talk about our family's suffering. It was when we escaped to Egypt, lived in Lebanon and then settled in Québec. As a woman living in Saudi Arabia, I had never imagined myself standing in front of international media defending my husband's freedom of expression.

I also wrote about the Saudi Arabia Raif dreamed of and worked for, a Saudi Arabia where youth and women's rights were respected. From the beginning of the book, I wrote about Raif's gradual opening to human rights, how his eyes quickly turned to freedom in particular. He was always fueled by his desire to see reforms in his country, particularly regarding women and youth.

Raif speaks the language of freedom fluently, through his writings and blog posts. He founded the Network of Saudi Liberals which later became the Liberal Saudi Network. It was quickly followed by millions of people who were using aliases. It became a place of debate and struggle. Extracts from his posts have been published in a book in June 2015.

Ever since his early adulthood years, Raif realized the extent of the oppression and the missing freedoms in his society. He started expressing his concerns through his blogposts which eventually were the reason for his arrest. He was convicted and sentenced to ten years in jail and to a thousand lashes, as well as a ten-year travel ban.

On January 9, 2015, Raif received the first 50 lashes (the lashes were suspended due to health reasons, however, he remains in prison).

In order to honor Raif's values, I launched in Canada, in 2015, the Raif Badawi Foundation for Freedom, a very young foundation with many projects underway. We are still fighting for my husband's cause: weekly sit-ins are organized in front of King Abdullah's Center for Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue in Vienna, at City Hall in Sherbrooke, Quebec, as well as other cities around the world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- *When Saudi Arabia was appointed last year to the United Nations Human Rights Council, I felt hopeful and I thought that things would look up for my husband and that he would be released.*
- *Recently, I had an inkling of hope with the news that the government will be limiting the powers of the notorious religious police known as the "mutawa". The law states that officers of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice are no longer allowed to chase suspects or arrest them. Raif was arrested by those same officers.*
- *Another inkling of hope happened last week when more than 14,500 women in Saudi Arabia have signed a petition calling for an end to the country's male guardianship system.*

We thought according to the events mentioned previously that the Saudi government will reconsider Raif's imprisonment.

We all know that the Quebec authorities have granted Raif a selection certificate, the first step to speed up his immigration process. The city of Sherbrooke in Quebec made him honorary citizen. What happened since then? What can be the next step?

We hope that the Canadian government will secure a safe passage to Canada for Raif. We all know about similar precedents such as the human rights activists from Rwanda.

Will members of the United Nations Human Rights Council join the European Parliament and ask for Raif's release?

From the Dhahban central prison in Saudi Arabia to my family home in Sherbrooke, Quebec, our wish is one: to be reunited again.

We trust that your help can make a difference.

Thank you

—Ensaf Haidar

Activists in Saudi Arabia

One by one human rights activists in Saudi Arabia are vanishing. They are prosecuted, jailed, intimidated into silence or forced into exile—highlighting the authorities' zero tolerance approach to freedom of expression.

Two years after the international outcry over his public flogging, Raif Badawi remains in prison. Dozens of other activists have also been detained as a result of their peaceful human rights work. They are at risk of cruel punishments as they are being sentenced under a harsh counter-terrorism law, while Saudi Arabia's allies shamelessly back the Kingdom's repression in the name of the so-called 'war on terror'.

Raif Badawi's own lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair is among those currently detained. Since 2011 Waleed Abu al-Khair has been actively harassed, monitored, banned from travelling abroad, arrested and interrogated on numerous occasions by the Saudi Arabian authorities, which have brought at least two cases against him in courts. He was arrested on 15 April 2014 and sentenced to 15 years in prison, a subsequent 15-year travel ban and a fine of 200,000 Saudi Arabian riyals (about US\$53,000).

Scores of other human rights defenders and civil society activists have borne the brunt of the authorities' clampdown. They include members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), an organization set up in October 2009 that has reported on human rights violations and helped many families of detainees held without charge. At least 12 founding and active members of the organization have since been imprisoned or detained without charge, sentenced to lengthy prison terms, or released after serving many years in prison.

Visit our *Further Reading* section on page 12 for more information and actions.



One by one human rights activists in Saudi Arabia are vanishing.



Scores of human rights defenders and civil society activists have borne the brunt of the authorities' clampdown.

TAKE ACTION NOW

Take action to Free Raif Badawi and other human rights defenders. Call, fax or write the Saudi Arabia embassy to demand change. For example, you could call and say: “I am calling to inquire about human rights defenders like Waleed Abu al-Khair, who have been detained for their peaceful activism.” Or, you could write on behalf of Raif Badawi a letter like the following:

Your Excellency:

Everyone has the right to peacefully express their beliefs and opinions. No one should be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment

or punishment for any reason. Amnesty International believes Raif Badawi is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

We call on your government to:

Drop all charges against Raif Badawi, and release him without delay or conditions on his freedom. Until he is free, please ensure that Raif Badawi is protected from torture and other ill-treatment, including his sentence of flogging.

*Sincerely,
[Your name]*

Send the letter to:

His Excellency Naif Bandir A. Alsudairy
Ambassador for Saudi Arabia
201 Sussex Drive, Ottawa, ON K1N 1K6

Postage: \$0.85

Fax: (613) 237-0567

Email: caemb@mofa.gov.sa

The Embassy's hours are 9am-4pm. The number is: 613-237-4100 (if that line is busy you can try 4101, 4102 or 4103).



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Amnesty International Canada Board Member, Tim Carpentier, and Elba Bendo write letters at a Toronto *Write for Rights* event.

FURTHER READING

Help free Waleed: <http://bit.ly/2j1Jb6I>

Watch *Me and the Mosque* at www.nfb.ca/film/me_and_mosque

Visit cbc.ca/littlemosque for *Little Mosque on the Prairie*

Amnesty report, *Killing in the name of justice* <http://bit.ly/2jyPcdG>

Amnesty International's written statement to the 32nd session of the UN Human Rights Council (13 June - 1 July 2016). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/4139/2016/en/>

Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia steps up ruthless crackdown against human rights activists*. January 2017 <http://bit.ly/2j1s8SA>

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COMING UP IN MAY 2017

419 by Will Ferguson
Recommended by guest reader
Nino Ricci



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Lives intersect, worlds collide, a family falls apart. And it all begins with a single email: “Dear Sir, I am the son of an exiled Nigerian diplomat, and I need your help ...”

419 takes readers behind the scene of the world’s most insidious internet scam. When Laura’s father gets caught up in one such swindle and pays with his life, she is forced to leave the comfort of North America to make a journey deep into the dangerous back streets and alleyways of the Lagos underworld to confront her father’s killer. What she finds there will change her life forever...

The discussion guide will be sent out May 2017.

In the meanwhile, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca.