Book Review: *The Cat I Never Named: A True Story of Love, War, and Survival* (2020) *written by* Amra Sabic-El-Rayess and Laura L. Sullivan. New York: Bloomsbury.

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The Cat I Never Named: A True Story of Love, War, and Survival, written by Dr. Amra Sabic-El-Rayess and Laura L. Sullivan, is a memoir of Dr. Sabic-El-Rayess' teenage years in besieged Bosnia. This story depicts the resilience of a Bosnian-Muslim girl who, even as a witness to the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in her hometown, refuses to give up her education. Published at a time when radicalization and hate-crimes are on the rise in the U.S., Sabic-El-Rayess' life testifies to the power of education to counter violence with dialogue, not force.

In 1992 a teenage girl was on a train from Belgrade, Serbia returning home to Bihać, Bosnia, a cosmopolitan city populated by Muslims, Croats, and Serbs who have lived in harmony for generations. After a day of tests, her mind circles back to the puzzles and questions she answered a few hours ago. Looking upon a setting sun behind the hillside with children playing and mothers scolding them, she is almost asleep. The train halts. Men, dressed in black, march down the aisles. They are Četniks, "the most vehement Serbian nationalists" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 3). Her eyes lowered these soldiers begin discussing 'Balije' women, a derogatory term for Muslim women. One of the brutish men compares them to rabbits, "eager and soft" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 4), only to be struck by his compatriot. "You don't fall in love with them, you idiot" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 4), he broadcasts, ensuring that everyone, including our protagonist on the train, hears loud and clear. "You put Serb seed in their bellies...You wipe them out, generation by generation. You dilute their unclean blood. You honour them with half-Serb babies, and one day they will

be gone from this earth, and only Serbs will remain" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 4). Bringing her knees close to her body, she fixes her eyes on the window willing the train to reach home. They address her, "Hello, young Srpkinjo [Serbian Girl]" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 6). For a moment, she relaxes. They think she is a Serb, as Muslims in the region do not wear the hijab, speak Arabic, or recite the Quran. "We are Muslims of birth, of ethnicity, not religion, really" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 6). She feigns politeness, an act of courage, as a well-mannered Serb girl would. They fall for it, advising her not to travel alone in this messy country, her homeland of Bosnia. But they assure her not to worry, "you have the Četniks to protect you!" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 6) In this opening, we see that the enemy is near, and survival is a matter of both luck and composure.

This memoir, which takes place between 1992 and 1998, is a testimony to Amra's experiences in besieged Bihać as the world turned its back upon the victims, Bosnian Muslims, of this unforgivable violence. It is, in part, a story of war experienced behind the frontlines. When walking outside of her house, the threat of snipers positioned on buildings becomes a condition of daily life. "You never hear a whisper from the bomb that kills you," (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 139) explains Tata, Amra's term of endearment for her father. Crossing a bridge on her way to see Nura, a close friend, an explosion erupts on the riverbank near her house. Standing still, she thinks, unbelievably, about physics and the speed of light and sound. Broken bodies are all that is left once the flash of light dissipates. And yet, amidst scenes of such carnage, it is vital to remember that she is still an adolescent. Why did she wish to see Nura? To make sure that the message about school reopening got to her and, if she were brave enough, to talk about boys. Clinging onto these fragments of thought remembering the boy with the summer-bronze skin and the grey-green eyes, imagining her first kiss, wondering, as she did just before leaving to cross the bridge, "what if I die without ever having a

boyfriend?" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 134). This illustrates Amra's courage to continue to live, to salvage the freedoms of the mind, and to never relinquish the desires of her heart. This is why Amra's story is, in part, a story of love too.

As a story of survival, the form of the memoir suggests that it is the sole power of the person who is writing that seized survival. However, in Amra's story, it is the characters in her life, whom we meet along the way, that make survival *possible*. Her mother, a pragmatic and stoic schoolteacher, kills a chicken that Amra, and her brother Dino considered a "friend". With supplies either too expensive or absent from the market, they had not had a nutritious meal in months. Without remorse, mother chopped its head. Amra protested, unwilling to eat later that evening. "The chicken is already dead," replied Mama. "It died to give you strength, to keep you alive. Do you want it to have died for nothing?" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 129). Recognizing the wisdom of her Mama's insistence, she eats.

Upon seeing a group of Muslim boys rob their Serbian neighbour's belongings, once Bihać emptied with the soldiers approaching, Amra declared: "They deserve to be robbed…They deserve to have nothing, after what they have done!" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 111). Noticing the resentment in his daughter's judgment, her father speaks, gently: "You must never let yourself think like that…The Serbs, they are just people. Most of them are like us, just trying to be happy and get along. A few of them have been corrupted by hate, or greed, or…I don't know what. But inside we are all the same. Just because some of the Serbs have forgotten that, you shouldn't" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 111). Learning from her father's moral resilience, Amra walks in his pedagogic shadow. When her Tata is summoned to dig trenches in the frontline, despite his old age, it is Amra who grows indignant again. After returning from an evening of digging, Tata calms his agitated daughter, speaking evenly: "My soft hands have pushed pencils and held books, and now they hold a

shovel and haul cinder blocks and sandbags. Hands are adaptable things. They can do calligraphy, and mend a bone, and break a bone" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 195). "But your poor hands," she laments. Replying, her father says, "Blisters turn to calluses, Amra. It is one of life's great lessons" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 196).

Fortified by the equanimity of her Mama and the moral tutelage from her Tata, Amra's gradual journey from Bihać to the promised land, the United States of America, is achieved by her commitment to education. Although she was an excellent student, the mere act of being a diligent, conscientious learner, as a Muslim, was itself a rebellion. During a heated exchange with her Russian teacher, Sava, while translating Bosnian sentences to Russian, Amra refused to translate the sentence, *Waitress, bring me a cup of coffee,* into a form that disrespects the server. "You call a waitress 'girl' when you are summoning her," barks Sava (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 55). This back and forth continues, until Sava snaps. "You Muslims make me sick. Do you want to be a backward people forever?" (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 55). Amra's life, as it unfolds, becomes a defiant rebuke to this imperious teacher's charge. Graduating with one of the highest marks in her tests across Bosnia there are scarce opportunities to put this powerful intelligence to use. Undeterred, Amra teaches English while she is still learning its contours, gets hired as a translator for the International Rescue Committee, and obtains a position with the International Medical Corps (IMC), helping to coordinate medical relief for children in the war zone. Through a confluence of circumstances involving many glimpses towards a scholarship to America that appear, only to disappear, she gets a call during the end of a shift in the IMC office. She almost decided against picking it up, but she did, opening a portal to a world beyond the horizon of possibility, of probability, and of promise.

In this memoir of war, love, and survival, an abiding question remains: Where is the Cat? Following a grotesque display of misogyny and intimidation towards Amra by the Serbian soldiers in Bihać, she closes her eyes. The world, at this moment, has become too much for the young, Bosnian-Muslim teenager. But even with her eyes shut she sees the tanks from which these soldiers hurled their epithets, the refugees bloodied and beaten, and the hopelessness in the eyes of people in Bihać. "Where has all the beauty of the world gone*?"* (Sabic-El-Rayess and Sullivan, 2020, p. 25). Cloaked in this darkness, she decides to open her eyes again. Looking for an answer, she sees only brick walls and concrete. But then there is a flicker of movement. A stray calico cat appears. She sits watching Amra. "Go away." She does not. With the brush of the softest fur against her, she introduces herself. Eventually called Maci, the Bosnian word for cat, she survives with the family through the war. Maci was a kind teacher who always listened and never let Amra feel as if she was alone. As a student of the storyteller, now a professor, behind this poignant memoir, I can comfortably say that the spirit of Maci lives on in the classrooms of the young teenager she made a silent vow to protect.

Recently named a Young Adult Library Services Association Excellence in Non-Fiction Finalist (2021), *The Cat I Never Named*, published by Bloomsbury YA ($17.99), is a book that I recommend not only for young readers but also for a general audience. By consciously setting aside the historical narratives of nationalism and geopolitics, which Dr. Sabic-El-Rayess has explored in her scholarship, this memoir brings forth a story of resilience that I hope will find its way into K-12, Higher Education, and Continuing Education syllabi across the country. If there is anything to be learned from the courage of this teenager's voice, it is that there is a distinct courage in sitting down and listening too.

References

Sabic-El-Rayess, A., and Sullivan, L. L. (2020). *The Cat I Never Named: A Story of Love, War, and Survival*. Bloomsbury.