

Ghassan Zeineddine's *Dearborn*: Short stories about Arab-American life

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A man whose nest egg takes the form of cash stuffed in frozen chickens, a butcher whose occasional transgenderism expresses itself in an abaya [a robe-like dress] and niqab [a long garment covering a woman's body and face, excluding the eyes], a community thrown into disarray by the sudden appearance of a man in a Speedo. These are a few of the premises of Ghassan Zeineddine's deceptively comical book of stories, *Dearborn* (Tin House, 2023).

Dearborn, a city neighboring Detroit, is home to the largest Arab-American population in the US, and as of 2023 it is the first majority-Arab city in the country (55 percent of its 110,000 residents). Although in recent decades the city has seen a large influx of Iraqi and Yemeni immigrants, Lebanese Christians moved there in large numbers in the early 20th century to work in the auto industry. Dearborn is still home to the world headquarters of the Ford Motor Company, as well as the immense Ford Rouge plant—and company founder Henry Ford's estate, now a museum, Fair Lane.

Zeineddine's stories concern immigrants who escaped the civil war in Lebanon (1975-90) and their children, who are negotiating their own escapes. Some dream of being actors, Yasser dreams of being Yusra. Others dream of business success, of moving out to affluent West Bloomfield and seeing their faces on billboards in Dearborn. Two specters haunt all the stories and characters in *Dearborn*, however: the older generation's dream of returning to their villages in Lebanon and the pervasive dread of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the FBI.

Setting some of his stories in the first years after the events of September 11, 2001, Zeineddine pointedly draws attention to the atrocious way the men of Dearborn and other Arab-Americans were treated by the US government at the time. Over 1,200 were detained on suspicion of terrorism while thousands of others were subjected to interrogation. The entire city was terrorized by the menacing presence of government agents, as well as by racist non-Middle Eastern Americans incited into aggression by the anti-Arab hysteria stoked by the government and media.

But even here Zeineddine's touch is light and deft. There are no intrusions by a narrator opining on the situation, only events themselves unfolding in characters' lives. The implications are all the more powerful for this: there is the heart-stopping knock on the door, and while air travel is all but out of the question for men of Middle Eastern descent, even travel by train is unsafe, and, as a father tells his son who wants to go to California to meet the

woman he's fallen in love with on the internet, "They're boarding buses."

Meanwhile, the dream of returning to Lebanon throws into relief intergenerational struggles over identity. In "Money Chickens," an autoworker (known in the story as Baba, "father") saves what he can from his meager pay in order to buy property in Lebanon and build a house there. When his cousin, a carwash owner, is detained in "a nondescript prison" on suspicion of terrorism, the cousin sells Baba his carwash at a reduced price and returns to Lebanon. "America has betrayed me," he says bitterly. With this turn of events, Baba begins to save real money—hidden from the IRS in chickens kept in a chest freezer in his basement—and his dream home in Lebanon materializes on a blueprint he shows to his family. His daughter protests:

"We're American," Danya said in English. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You're Lebanese before anything!" Baba said.

Danya rolled her eyes.

The stories in Zeineddine's book are not "hilarious," despite the blurbs on the jacket. Their humor is almost entirely situational and, notwithstanding money chickens and Speedos with images of Lebanon printed on them, their humor is largely subtle. That is because the characters, like Yusra in her niqab, are figures of compassion first and fun second. Most of the stories, while almost always maintaining a surface lightness, are deeply felt and affecting.

They are stories in a classical mode in this regard, allowing readers to grasp the humor and the pathos with neither the nervous emotional docent of an obtrusive third-person narrator nor the self-absorption and self-promotion that characterize so much written in first person in the last 20 years. Though Zeineddine himself teaches in an MFA (master of fine arts) program, at Oberlin College, only one of the stories in this collection, "In Memoriam," feels unlikely and strained in the familiar academic manner. A story about a young woman who compulsively writes stories about death, "In Memoriam" has promise, but in the end concept overwhelms character, and the story lacks Zeineddine's usual observational vigor.

Otherwise, the stories in *Dearborn* present well-imagined

characters whose motivations and life experience harmonize with their words and deeds. Even Badria of “I Have Reason to Believe My Neighbor Is a Terrorist,” the collection’s most complex character in its most emotionally intense story, remains believable and compelling right up to the story’s powerful last line.

The beautiful story “Marseille” stands out from the others in that its action primarily takes place, not in Dearborn, but shipboard and in the southern French port city. “Marseille” is the story of a young bride from Lebanon (before it was Lebanon) who falls in love with her shy husband as they begin a journey to America and who survives the sinking of the *Titanic*. The frame of the story takes place when a young reporter for the *Dearborn Post* interviews 99-year-old Ayda shortly after the release of the film *Titanic* in 1997. Her memories make for some of Zeineddine’s best writing in the book. In one passage, 14-year-old Ayda asks her new husband Nabil about his home in Dearborn and whether he has friends there.

“A few. I’m not as social as my brother. He can walk into a room and capture everyone’s attention. I’d rather cower in a corner.” He looked at me. “Maybe now you regret marrying me.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” When I saw the concern on his face, I said that I was trying to be funny. He didn’t laugh.

Although there are lovely descriptions of Marseilles through Ayda’s eyes in the story, the prose is more spare than lyrical. The powerful moments, like the book’s humor, come in moments such as the passage just quoted. An unassuming sentence or passage is packed with its situation and rewards a careful reading. Overall, Zeineddine’s style is clean and direct, artfully so. No verbal pyrotechnics to be found, just crisp prose that moves the story along. The combination of such language, engaging plots and believable characters makes for compelling reading.

Ghassan Zeineddine was born in Washington D.C. and, according to the book cover, “grew up in the Middle East.” He taught for a time at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and lived in the city. *Dearborn* is his first book of fiction.

While one of the great strengths of *Dearborn* is that Zeineddine does not shy away from treating difficult subjects truthfully—domestic violence, depression, a parent’s questioning her love for her children are all looked at with dry eyes—one subject that is handled rather delicately is the Lebanese civil war. This war figures in almost every story and is a prominent factor in many characters’ lives, the reason they are in Dearborn in the first place. Zeineddine even provides glimpses of atrocities in one story.

But the politics of that complex war, which claimed perhaps 150,000 lives and saw a million people leave the country—more than a third of the population—are left untouched. Instead, the conflict is treated as a kind of natural disaster, a hell to escape that has now thankfully passed.

In fact, in 1975, civil war broke out, as the WSWs explained in 2005,

between the fascistic Christian Phalangists, backed by Israel, and the Lebanese left, representing the impoverished Muslim majority, in alliance with the Palestinians. Turning its attention again to Lebanon, Washington first provided political support for an intervention by Syria, which sent in its army at the behest of Lebanon’s Maronite Christian president, Suleiman Franjeh and the rightists, who were on the brink of defeat.

In 1982, the US gave a green light for

an Israeli invasion that was to claim tens of thousands of Lebanese lives. The Zionist regime turned its full fire power against the crowded slums of West Beirut and initiated an occupation and fighting in southern Lebanon that would continue for another 18 years.

In retaliation for the US’ siding with the Lebanese fascists and Israelis, Shiite forces blew up a barracks in Beirut in 1983 housing occupying foreign troops, killing 241 Marines.

Dearborn includes no mention of the role of American imperialism in the war, and Israel is mentioned on occasion only as a place on the map near this or that character’s village.

Even allowing for Zeineddine’s talent for implication, his characters are improbably unanimous in their apoliticality. One could speculate as to the reasons for this disinterestedness on the part of his characters, but Zeineddine’s treatment of the civil war leaves an intriguing hole in the center of *Dearborn*. In “Rabbit Stew,” the book’s most overtly political story, a mother reminds her son during a Gulf War newscast to consider the Iraqi dead as well as the US soldiers he feels sad for. Perhaps the son speaks Zeineddine’s mind on the civil war in Lebanon when he thinks,

It had been hard for my parents to watch America and its coalition of allies bombard Iraq, no matter how much they despised Saddam. We were Arabs, after all.

Nevertheless, *Dearborn* is a very well written and conceived collection of stories that in its humanity and objective truthfulness about people and American life, as well as Arab-American life, stands out among contemporary fiction.



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