



# Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus

*Layla Al-Zubaidi (Editor) , Matthew Cassel (Editor) , Robin Moger (Translation) , Georgina Collins (Translation) , Samar Yazbek (Introduction)*

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**An English PEN Award winning collection of personal testimony from participants in the Arab Spring**

As revolution swept through the Arab world in spring of 2011, much of the writing that reached the West came via analysts and academics, experts and expats. We heard about Facebook posts and Tweeted calls to action, but what was missing was testimony from on-the-ground participants—which is precisely what Layla Al-Zubaidi and Matthew Cassel have brought together in *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution*. These essays are profoundly moving, often harrowing, firsthand accounts span the region from Tunisia to Syria and include contributors ranging from student activists to seasoned journalists—half of whom are women. This unique collection explores just how deeply politics can be held within the personal and highlights the power of writing in a time of revolution.

## Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus Details

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# **From Reader Review Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus for online ebook**

## **Kate Lansing says**

"History tells us that many of the greatest works on revolution were written by authors who were never at the center of events, who stood at the margins or who watched from afar."

The above quote is not true of this series of essays on the Arab Spring, each with a strong narrative voice, written by authors who were there, who participated in the uprisings.

I watched the news in 2011 as the events of the Arab Spring unfolded, however I still understood very little about it. After reading these essays, which discuss the revolutions that happened concurrently in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, etc., I have a slightly better grasp on a very complex situation. A situation that's ongoing in many of these countries.

I especially loved reading about the role that Facebook and Twitter played in the revolutions, how they were leveraged to mobilize the masses and spread news of what was happening abroad.

It was inspiring to read about people who believe in something so strongly that they're willing to risk imprisonment, torture, even die for it. With the many references to George Orwell's 1984, I really want to read that book next.

I recommend for anyone curious to learn more about the Arab Spring.

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## **Jeff Scott says**

It's very difficult to examine conflict in different countries and cultures without attempting to make similarities to our own. The idea of revolution is a romantic notion in Europe and certainly in the United States. While the need for freedom and democracy seem like very common ideas, it still comes off as foreign when it happens far away from us. The cause and the fight take on different meanings with different inspirations. The world was fascinated with the Arab Spring. The areas under revolt were pawns during the Cold War for so long, it takes a great deal of bravery to step forward and think that repressions of the past won't continue to take place in the future. It's those that stepped forth during the Arab Spring in spite of this long history that make it that much more remarkable.

The authors of *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution* stretch from Tunisia, to Libya and Syria all with stories to tell. The uprising in each country has its own flavor. It's also interesting to note that many of the dictators in these countries were both enemies of the United States and enemies to groups like Al Qaeda. Any group connected to a Muslim following is subject to questioning not only by outsiders, but by those inside the revolution. It's a difficult path to follow. In Tunisia, the writer talks about being named after a Palestinian suicide bomber. Syria becomes a prime example of this as Al Qaeda gets involved in the civil war, all western help is pulled out. The book becomes very educational in this way whereas we see the revolution from the culture rather than from our own. Any outside report on the topic would greatly fail to identify the main issues. Any western book would also get stymied with a radical Muslim cause overthrowing a dictator.

The perspective range from the very dramatic, a Tunisian freedom fighter fighting a dictator with rocks and tortured in a prison, to a view from the outside, a Libyan refugee in London loses all his friends during the civil war in Libya. Anyone who is even remotely interested in the Arab Spring would find this a key work in describing the history and cultural perspective of what happened.

“It was the experience of prison literature, the literature of human tragedy, where the prison guard stands before you exposed as human beast, where the pain is more than language can capture, where everything takes place far from eyes and ears, inside caves or darkened dungeons that belong to a world of unfettered savagery.” P. 37

In those 18 days that have come to be known as the Egyptian revolution as I navigated my way between my grandmother’s house which had become home again some four years before and Tahrir Square, I watched something very slowly, transform. The street-side vendor suddenly had an Egyptian flag; the taxi driver had an opinion; the young man on the street was no longer scared to say that there was something he didn’t like; the tree trunks were painted red, white, and black; the youth, once skulking, were now handing out flyers, forming political parties and collectives, changing, discussing, planning, hoping, for those better lives. For every emotion, every thought, every idea, now, there was an audience, and on the same street corners that were once host to dejection, possibility was being born. I watched, in the days of the Egyptian uprising and the months that followed, human emotion finding an outlet, and in tandem discovering its source. I witnessed in the waiting time of those days until 5.56 p.m. on 11 February, dignity restored. In myself, too. P. 64  
They treat us like fish in an aquarium they are slowly draining of water. P. 93

Love for country is confused with love for the authority established by them. P. 96

They said I was a witness, a precious spectator. "But then where are the actors?" And so I returned to my country but no one was waiting for me. I am not complaining there were 200,000 dead. P. 100

The intellectual should always be fighting for humanity; to liberate the mind, and enable peaceful coexistence. P. 132

Anger welled up, choked me, my hands started to shake, not from fear but repressed bottled-up, festering anger. Saudi Arabia forces you to see yourself through your gender. Living in Saudi Arabia is infantslizing. P. 170

They say we are making spring, but we're not swallows. The Arabs are waking up, they said. But were they sleeping like peaceful little mice whose fields were destroyed long ago? Maybe it's you people in the west who are finally writing us back into history, the history of the world we've been excluded from, hidden from because it's well known that Arabs believe in fate, in Mektoub. They pray under canvas while they wait for paradise. Allah Akbar. P. 102

Is the intellectual, the writer, the journalist, the opinion maker, not angered to witness the murder of those who took to the streets to peacefully demand their civil rights? This is a betrayal of humanity. Are they not roused to defend demands for political reform and a government elected by the people? This is a betrayal of the principles of freedom and democracy. Worse yet, intellectuals rise up against the demonstrators themselves, pasting them with superficial labels like 'Shia' or 'religious', which strip them of their right to protest and reject. In doing so they betray their duty, which is to champion the rights of man regardless of his beliefs or faith. P. 147

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## Eric says

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

*Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution* is a timely book that provides insight into the 2011 uprisings throughout the Middle East. Told in diary-like chapters from individuals in various countries, the book allows you to experience both the exhilarating mass protests and the frightening government crackdowns. Many of the entries also give the reader more information on the background situation that led up to the Arab Spring.

As the Syrian writer Samar Yazbek notes in the Introduction, the entries in the book are in-the-moment from general citizens. Yazbek says social media has created a "new environment" that "signals the end of the classical conception of the writer, of his or her traditionally recognized role and influence. Writing is now for everyone, and the short texts shared on the pages of Facebook activists have become important documents." This can also be a negative, however, since some of the chapters read more like the random and fleeting thoughts of a twitter account than like a serious consideration of important events and Arab society. I think it is here, as a primary source, that the book is somewhat lacking because it feels so narrowly focused on one person's experience without the context that many non-Arab readers will likely need.

The chapters of the book are:

1. Greetings to the Dawn: Living through the Bittersweet Revolution - Tunisia - Malek Sghiri
2. Cairo, City in Waiting - Egypt - Yasmine El Rashidi
3. Bayou and Laila - Libya - Mohamed Mesrati
4. We Are Not Swallows - Algeria - Ghania Mouffok
5. The Resistance: Armed with Words - Yemen - Jamal Jubran
6. Coming Down from the Tower - Bahrain - Ali Aldairy
7. Wishful Thinking - Saudi Arabia - Safa Al Ahmad
8. And the Demonstrations Go On: Diary of an Unfinished Revolution - Syria - Khawla Dunia

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## Jamie says

It took me a couple of weeks to gather my thoughts enough about this collection of essays to write this review, because it is so unsettling, so deeply disturbing, so infuriating, so compelling. But it accomplishes these things in a way we all need and a way with stories and information from which every one of us could take notes and examine our lives and our worlds. Even now, as I am typing, almost three weeks after I finished this book, I am again on the verge of tears through both sadness and anger (this happened often while reading), and am again compelled to act, to find a way to scream from the streets that will get people to actually listen. Through clear, concise, heartfelt, and unpretentious writing, these varied authors guide readers through some of the most horrific and unfathomable atrocities of our modern world. And they do it, not to complain or to make themselves heroes, but to illuminate a dark world that is just beginning to see light. They attempt to widen the cracks in some very thick, and very dangerous, walls. This collection is inspiring and heartbreaking, and I can only hope, if enough people can get access to the real story and to the even more real emotions, needs, and passions underneath that story, that it will give a disenfranchised people the push they need to grab hold of what I myself so often take for granted. This is the story, not of people fighting for wants or things, but quite literally fighting for their lives, and for the right to have independent thoughts. It is genuinely hard to grasp that the actions highlighted in this book were truly from just two years

ago and are still taking place, currently, in 2013, instead of in the Dark Ages. The collection is a must-read, especially for the idealists and those who want change, around the world and in our tiny microcosms as well. But don't make the mistake I did - reading it at work or on planes, or in other public places, because you may find that you want to cry and scream out loud all at once.

This book was won from the publisher through the Goodreads First Reads program. Thank you so much.

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### **Mohanad Elshieky says**

The special thing about this book, is the fact that the story is told by the people who were actually on the ground during Revolution time. While reading it, you can actually feel the words and it takes you to that time, you'd get the feeling you are the one at that war zone or as if you were one of the protestors.

I have lived the revolution in Libya and honestly I couldn't tell the story any better from the way this book tells is. If you are interested in learning about the Arab Spring, this book is definitely what you need.

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### **Liz says**

I received this book through a goodreads giveaway. This is profoundly disturbing on the ground view of what has been happening in the Middle East during the so called "Arab Spring". Hard to figure out something to say that wasn't covered in the prior reviews but definitely worth a read.

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### **Abeer Abdullah says**

We tried to fix the leaking roof and it came crashing down on us.

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### **Jonathon says**

It was an easy interesting read. I will give you my big problems with the book in the subsequent paragraphs. I went into this book thinking I would like it. I love modern historical books, however what this book does is provide a look into some of the bigger Arab Spring uprisings. This is true, however I do not agree with the translator's claim that these people are heroes, in some cases they are quite the opposite. I was describing to a friend this book, and he immediately dismissed the book as a bunch of lies. He says that it is the culture of Arabs to lie to make themselves look good and to not lose face. After speaking with him (he has experience with to know and I do take his advice with a grain of salt) I started looking at the book differently. I am not trying to say that what these people went through are all lies just that this book only offers their perspectives and the Arab Spring uprisings are more complex than what one person from each country can convey.

Another interesting note: in the preface the editors mention that half of the writers are women. Unless it was specifically mentioned I went it thinking all of the authors were male. I just wonder if this is what the world does because of how Arabs treat women.

Tunisia: I thought the writer from Tunisia had a holier than thou complex. He thought that if he wasn't there it wasn't important and he injected himself in each of the major places that the revolution took place.

Egypt: This article was really good. She did a good job explaining the revolution in Egypt by mixing the events with her life and how she felt at the time.

Libya: The worst article in the entire book. I will just say this. The author was never in Libya during the revolution thus I could not take him seriously. He wrote his piece about what was happening in Libya from London. How can you say you lived the revolution when you were safely hidden away in London?

Algeria: This author rambled about and didn't make much sense. She blames what happened to her on Hilary Clinton and the United States.

Yemen: Another really bad article. He complains and whines a lot. He was a weak child that got beat up quite a bit as a child and thus made him a coward as an adult. However, he did do a decent job giving us a history to Yemen under Saleh.

Bahrain: One of the best written articles. The author goes through a revolution that was put down by a foreign army quicker than any other revolution. He does this with clarity and gives us a face of Bahrain's revolution in the first martyr, which he calls the "pearl of the revolution."

Saudi Arabia: I got really confused reading this article. The author went through all of the events that took place in Saudi Arabia (there weren't many) and didn't really give us what happened. She went to a meeting that a disappointing in the eastern part of the country. She mentions that Shia Muslims were the ones leading the "revolution" but they didn't do much to revolt. I was confused because she said things happened but they didn't seem to be a revolution.

Syria: The worst revolution saved for last. I couldn't tell if this author was for or against the revolution in Syria. I think she was for it, but it wasn't clear. She hated the fact that Syrian TV was saying that nothing was happening, when in fact it was. However, she wanted all killers whether government agents or revolutionaries brought to justice.

I can't decide if this is a good commentary to the Arab Spring, or if we are still waiting for history to decide when it is time for it to be written.

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## **Sarah-Hope says**

Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution is a diverse, necessary book that gathers together first-hand accounts of 2011's "Arab Spring." The eight pieces it contains (four by women, four by men) offer a view of events during those months that is both more detailed and more reflective than what was available in the Western media at that time. The authors of the individual pieces come from across the Arab world: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.

Because these are individual accounts, they sometimes lack the context that a more traditional history or politics book would offer, but those individual perspectives are what make Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution such compelling reading.

As Samar Yazbek's introduction reminds us, "these events have been long in the making.... What we witnessed on television was only a small part of a larger struggle that didn't begin with the self-immolation of Tunisian fruit-seller Mohamed Bouazizi, or end when one dictator took a plane to Saudi and another a bullet to the head." These struggles continue though we (at least here in the U.S.) see much less of them, now that our rather homogenous press has moved on to other topics.

This sense of being "in the midst of" is another aspect of this book I find particularly compelling. We (the U.S. again) and our media seem to prefer stories that are limited in time and complexity, but these writers show us a movement in flux, in action. A revolution doesn't end with the ouster of a particular leader or a single election. These revolutions continue to be fought, offering progress, but with little hope of tidy resolution. We may think of the Arab Spring as "over," but it continues, despite the fact that our cameras are now trained in other directions.

The voices in these pieces vary widely by gender, nationality, and religious and political perspectives. In one sense, Arab Spring was a single movement, an upheaval crossing national boundaries, but it was also multiple movements, shaped by the unique circumstances of each region.

Malek Sghiri from Tunisia, puts his country's struggle into the context of his own family history: "[my family] lacked immunity to the virus of revolution and resistance and it infected us all, uncles, aunts, sons and daughters." At one point, when an interrogator tells Sghiri that he had questioned Sghiri's father during a previous uprising, Sghiri responds: "I hope God grants you a long life that you might get to interrogate my sn as well."

Yasmine El Rashidi, author of "Cairo, a City in Waiting," at one time did speech-writing for Egypt's first lady, following official instructions to "stress [the government's] work on poverty elimination," but became a well-known blogger of the revolution.

Mohamed Mesrati of Libya relates his growing understanding of a childhood fable as a commentary on the silencing of the Libyan people: the populace, terrorized by the king's elephant prepare diligently to present a request that the elephant be removed, but when the time to speak to the king arrives, their terror leads them to ask instead for a mate for the elephant "to enrich his life and bear his children." Gradually, he comes to see the tale as tragic, rather than humorous.

Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution won't give you a comprehensive understanding of current revolutionary movements in the Arab world, but it will give you a taste of the lives lived by these revolutionaries, of the courage their protests demanded, of the consequences they faced for their participation, and of the challenges still facing them and their nations. I don't know of any other resource offering such valuable, substantial material.

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## **Teresa says**

"This is not an academic text where all of the catalysts are set out and defined and analyzed but rather the type of information you'd get from your friends and the short conversation you had with the baker while waiting for your coffee. As such, while there is fact here, it is fact thrown through the lens of people themselves. Compelling doesn't begin to describe it."

read more: <http://likeiamfeasting.blogspot.com/2...>



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### **Sonya says**

5+ prose stories told from the POV of young citizens participating in the Arab "Spring" now called Uprisings, given the deterioration in their successes since 2011. The two stories told by young Saudi and Syrian women were particularly moving. The former sarcastically presenting the restrictive life for women in Saudi Arabia; the latter telling the heartbreaking story of the beginning of the Syrian revolution. While the Syrian story ends on such hopefulness, we all know how that ended.

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### **Keval says**

An easy read considering I finished it in less than 3 days. The articles on Bahrain and Egypt were engrossing. The one on Algeria -- exhausting. I almost couldn't feel much for the writer on Libya either, considering he was in London. On the whole though, worth a read if you want a grassroots account of what transpired in the infancy of the so-called Arab Spring.

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### **Michael says**

Consistently vivid writing that is far more personal than most journalism. This collection contains firsthand reporting of the 2011 Arab Spring from women and men who witnessed it firsthand in Libya and Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Syria. I found the last two pieces about Saudi Arabia and Syria, both written by women, to be the most insightful.

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### **Tammy Downing says**

A stirring and inspiring collection of stories from the Arab Spring uprisings. I won this book from Goodreads First Reads contest and was eager to read it. This book is a must read if you want to understand the struggles and victories of the people in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Syria and other countries.

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### **Annie says**

This book took me a while to get through, but I'm glad I did. There's so much about the world that I don't know or understand. This book is made up of first-hand accounts of recent revolutions - many of which were written by women. With every chapter, I kept thinking how hard it was for me to wrap my head around their experiences and how privileged I am to live where I do.

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