



Book Review

Extraordinary Women from the Muslim World
By Natalie Maydell and Sept Riahi, with paintings by Heba Amin
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Reviewed by Meg Wilkes Karraker, PhD¹

Although marketed for children, Maydell and Riahi, with painter Amin, have composed a book that engages anyone interested in filling the chasms of knowledge about the Middle East in general and Muslim women's lives in particular. The publisher's objective is not to provide an exhaustive list of Muslim women who have made a difference in history, but to offer a select number of Muslim women who have lived in ways that "influence their communities in a positive way, often overcoming extreme hardship and inaccurate stereotypes ... placed on the role of women in Islam" (p. 5).

The women profiled in this book include two wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him), three novelists/poets/scholars, a saint, a queen, two warriors, a singer, an artist, a pilot, and a Nobel Prize recipient. The stories of each of thirteen women offer the reader a sense of not only the woman's accomplishments, but also each woman's life in context of the Muslim world at the time she lived. Who knew of the life of Sultan Razia, the "warrior queen of Delhi" who lived in India, circa 1205-1240? Razia was her father's favorite child and, as his successor, went to war to against Hindu, Mongol, and other threats to her country. Or even of the life of the more contemporary Sabiha Gökçen, the world's first female military pilot, born in Turkey in 1913?

Each biography is presented in six to 12 pages of large-font text. Each biography is illustrated with either a painting intended to represent the woman or a facsimile of a quotation from the Qur'an in Arabic, followed by an English translation. For example, the chapter on Aisha bint Abi Bakr "favored wife of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and one of the greatest scholars of Islam of all time" includes *They (your wives) are your garment and you are a garment for them.*

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In a two-page spread preceding the first biography, the authors have placed a clear map of the traditional Islamic world, stretching from Morocco in the west, to Indonesia in the east, and Turkey in the north and Nigeria in the south. Keyed to the women presented in the book, the authors thus provide the reader with a sense of the range and diversity of the Muslim world in habited by these 13 women.

I commend the authors for including not only women from the distant reaches of history (those two wives of the Prophet, praise be upon him), but also women of our time. The biography of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Shirin Ebadi, born in Iran 1947, offers the kind of inspiring story of a contemporary woman that can move young readers to think ambitiously about how a girl from “a happy family [with] a fishpond bordered by roses and lilies” (p. 100) can go on to be a lawyer, a judge, and vigorous activist on behalf of the rights of women in the face of political and religious oppression.

Extraordinary Women would make a fine book club selection, perhaps a chance to bring parents and children together around the issues raised in these biographies. How about including a list of discussion questions, either at the end of the book in the next printing or on the website more immediately? Such questions might include: How did each woman’s relationships with her parents shape her opportunities to contribute to her society? What would each woman’s role be in contemporary society? And what would your role be in her society? In addition to clear and concise endnotes, *Extraordinary Women* includes a bibliography for readers who want to explore further the lives of the women included in this book, as well as other Muslim women and related topics, including Arab feminist writing.

At \$14.95 (with free shipping and handling in the United States), *Extraordinary Women from the Muslim World* is an accessible book that should be in the collections of every school, community library, and family seeking to expand and enrich the vision of womanhood and appreciation for the richness of humanity in our global society. In doing so, readers may well feel “inspired to pursue their life goals with increased vigor and passion” (p. 5).

Extraordinary Women is the recipient of a “Best Books” Award from *USA Book News*, a “Moonbeam Spirit” Children’s Book Award, a Peacemaker Award, and Youth Nonfiction Award from the Middle East Outreach Council. The cover tells the reader that “a portion of the book’s proceeds will be donated to various children’s charities”²

² According to the Website provided (www.extraordinarywomen.tv) that organization is Islamic Relief, a 501(c)3 organized to help the women and children of the Sudan.