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Towelhead: A Novel

By *Alicia Erian*

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It is August 1990. Saddam Hussein has just invaded Kuwait, and Jasira's mother has bought her daughter a one-way ticket to Texas to live with her strict Lebanese father. Living in a neat model home in Charming Gates, just outside of Houston, Jasira struggles with her father's rigid lifestyle and the racism of her classmates, who call her "towelhead." For the first time, the painful truth hits her: she's an Arab. Her aching loneliness and growing frustration with her parents' conflicting rules drive her to rebel in very dangerous ways. Most disturbingly, she becomes sexually obsessed with the bigoted army reservist next door, who alternately cares for, excites, and exploits her.

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Towelhead: A Novel By Alicia Erian Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1528314 in Books
- Brand: Simon & Schuster
- Published on: 2006-04-10
- Released on: 2006-04-10
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.44" h x .90" w x 5.50" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Thirteen-year-old Jasira wants what every girl wants: love and acceptance and the undivided attention of whoever she's with. And if she can't get that from her parents, then why not from her mother's boyfriend, or her father's muscle-bound neighbor, Mr. Vuoso? Alicia Erian's incandescent debut novel, *Towelhead*, will ring true for readers who remember the rarely poetic transition from childhood to young adulthood. Jasira is a creature of contradiction: both innocent (reading romantic intentions into the grossest displays of lust) and oddly clear-sighted, especially when it comes to the imbalance of power, and the things we do for love. When her mother exiles her to Houston to live with Jasira's strict, quick-to-anger Lebanese father, she quickly learns what aspects of herself to suppress in front of him. In private, however, she conducts her sexual awakening with all the false confidence that pop culture and her neighbor's *Playboy* magazines have provided.

Jasira tells her story with candor and glimmers of dark, unexpected humor--as when she describes her mother's boyfriend Barry's assistance in her personal grooming: "A week later, Barry broke down and told her the truth. That he had shaved me himself. That he had been shaving me for weeks. That he couldn't seem to stop shaving me." The freshness of her narrative voice sets *Towelhead* apart from the sentimental or purely harsh treatment of similar subject matter elsewhere, and makes the novel a promising follow-up to Erian's well-regarded short story collection, *The Brutal Language of Love*. --Regina Marler

From Publishers Weekly

Erian (*The Brutal Language of Love*) takes a dogged, unflinching look at what happens as a young woman's sexuality blooms when only a predatory neighbor is paying attention. After 13-year-old Jasira is sent to live with her father in Houston ("I didn't want to live with Daddy. He had a weird accent and came from Lebanon"), she finds herself coming of age in the shadow of his old world, authoritarian ideas, which include a ban on tampons (they're for married women, he insists) and a friendship with a boy who's black. Trapped between her father's rigidity and a wider culture that seems without rules, Jasira is left to handle puberty on her own, as well as her budding sexual desire and an ongoing longing for love and acceptance. Her creepy neighbor, Mr. Vuoso, senses her desires, and she responds eagerly to his sexual overtures. His willingness to eroticize her is heightened by how exotic—as well as distasteful—he finds her, a half-Middle Eastern child living in America on the eve of the first Gulf War. He hires Jasira to baby-sit for his son, and it's clear that their relationship will destroy them. The writing is not subtle—indeed, it can be quite clunky—but as a meditation on race, adolescence and alienation, the novel has moments of power.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Much of the debate over *Towelhead* centers on its controversial title, a racist slur referring to Arab-Americans. It's just one risk of many that Erian takes in her first novel. Most critics praised the mix of blunt sexuality and humor, as well Erian's depiction of racism of all sorts, from the classmates who call Jasira "towelhead" to Jasira's own father, who makes bigoted distinctions between North African Arabs and African Americans. A few, however, found the graphic sex gratuitous and the larger political issues unexplored. They also disagreed about whether Jasira's continued naiveté throughout the novel was poignant and sad, or merely tiresome and annoying.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Willie Briggs:

Exactly why? Because this Towelhead: A Novel is an unordinary book that the inside of the reserve waiting for you to snap the item but later it will jolt you with the secret that inside. Reading this book next to it was fantastic author who all write the book in such wonderful way makes the content on the inside easier to understand, entertaining technique but still convey the meaning fully. So, it is good for you because of not hesitating having this any longer or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of benefits than the other book include such as help improving your expertise and your critical thinking approach. So, still want to hesitate having that book? If I were you I will go to the book store hurriedly.

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