

Book Reviews

The Arab Americans: A History

Gregory Orfalea

New York: Olive Branch Press, 2006. 500 pages.

Since 9/11, Arab Americans have been the subject of much discussion in both popular and scholarly forums. Books on the suddenly visible Arab-American community have been published recently or are forthcoming, and courses dealing with Arab Americans are gradually entering university curricula. This interest is cross-disciplinary, having become evident in numerous humanities and social science fields.

Yet this interest is bound largely to the political marketplace of ideas, for an emergent Arab-American studies existed well before 9/11 and had been on the brink of increased visibility on the eve of 9/11. It took 9/11, however, for this body of scholarship to generate broad attention. In addition, 9/11 altered the trajectories that had already been established, though not as dramatically as an unaffiliated observer might believe. Gregory Orfalea was among the group of scholars and artists who were assessing Arab America before 9/11 through his work as a writer and editor. Orfalea continues his contribution to that project with his latest book, *The Arab Americans: A History*, a voluminous text that mixes exposition, commentary, and analysis.

The author's cross-disciplinary book will be of interest to students and scholars in the humanities and the social sciences, for it contains elements of historiography, sociology, literary criticism, memoir, and anthropology. The introduction and first chapter recount a trip he took as a young man in 1972 with his *jaddu* (grandfather) to Arbeen, Syria, his grandfather's hometown. Subsequent chapters explore a number of sociocultural and political issues of interest to the Arab-American community, including the politics of the Arab world, activism (historical and contemporary) in Arab America, the relationship between Arab Americans and the American government at both the local and federal levels, religious traditions in Arab America, and the instability and diversity of Arab-American identity.

This breadth of analysis is one of the book's strengths. Other strengths include Orfalea's personal knowledge of many of the issues and histories he examines, his humanization through engaging profiles of individuals subsisting within a widely stereotyped community, and his condemnation of draconian legislation targeted at Arab Americans and rationalized by an Arab presence in the United States. At the start of the preface, he suggests that "the past two decades are the most political, by far, in the Arab-American community's history, and a literary renaissance, if not *naissance*, is unfurling by the day" (p. vii). *The Arab Americans* maps out this political trajectory in great detail, paying attention to sociocultural phenomena and also wisely moving beyond the political to assess the artistry of Arab America, particularly in the genre of literature. I use *wisely* to describe this move because Orfalea makes certain his readers understand that reducing Arab Americans to political metonymy or to imply that they have no form of agency beyond grievance or protest is a serious disservice. To comprehend Arab America fully and accurately is to acknowledge a complex positioning on the American landscape. *The Arab Americans* provides that sort of acknowledgment.

Those interested primarily in Islam will likely find *The Arab Americans* of interest. But the book is not about Islam or Muslims; rather, it is about a multi-confessional Arab-American community. Orfalea places great emphasis on the Christian Arabs living in this country. Part of the reason for this emphasis is the historical demography of Arab America; most of the first-wave Arab immigrants to the United States, as Orfalea notes, were Christians who came mainly from the Mount Lebanon region and Greater Syria. Another reason is due to the author's personal exposition throughout the book, which contains a large number of anecdotes and stories drawn from his own Syrian Christian family. Orfalea does not ignore Islam, however, but treats it with nuance and admiration, especially in relation to its considerable influence on the coalescence of an Arab-American ethnic identity.

One of the book's problems, however, is that the author reproduces the widely cited Arab American Institute statistic that only 25 percent of Arab Americans are Muslim, a number that has recently been disputed. Some researchers believe that the number of Arab-American Muslims is at least 33 percent and may be as high as 50-60 percent (a number that I find believable). Otherwise, the preponderance of personal exposition suggests that *The Arab Americans* could have been spliced into two books: one a broad history of the Arab-American community and the other a memoir of the role played by Orfalea and his family in the community's development. The prose at certain points is uninspiring and sometimes merely whimsical, such

as when the author attempts piousness (e.g., “To this day I can drink the hottest substances without a flinch. Some lands give you a birth mark; others give you a burnt mark” [p. 7]). As a result, the narrative’s personal emphasis and the book’s length might dissuade classroom use.

Ultimately, though, *The Arab Americans* makes a strong contribution to several fields and will advance the reader’s understanding of the diverse and multi-layered Arab-American community. It provides not only a comprehensive – indeed, encyclopedic – reference of the individuals and institutions found in Arab America, but also a valuable analysis of its many subjects of inquiry. *The Arab Americans* is recommended to scholars working in the areas of ethnic studies, Arab-American studies, Islamic studies, current affairs, anthropology, literary criticism, and Middle Eastern studies and would be appropriate for student use in a variety of settings.

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