



# The Poet of Baghdad: A True Story of Love and Defiance (Reader's Guide)

*Jo Tatchell*

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In the winter of 1979 Nabeel Yasin, Iraq's most famous young poet, gathered together a handful of belongings and fled Iraq with his wife and son. Life in Baghdad had become intolerable. Silenced by a series of brutal beatings at the hands of the Ba'ath Party's Secret Police and declared an "enemy of the state," he faced certain death if he stayed.

Nabeel had grown up in the late 1950s and early '60s in a large and loving family, amid the domestic drama typical of Iraq's new middle class, with his mother Sabria working as a seamstress to send all of her seven children to college. As his story unfolds, Nabeel meets his future wife and finds his poetic voice while he is a student. But Saddam's rise to power ushers in a new era of repression, imprisonment and betrayal from which few families will escape intact. In this new climate of intimidation and random violence Iraqis live in fear and silence; yet Nabeel's mother tells him "It is your duty to write." His poetry, a blend of myth and history, attacks the regime determined to silence him. As Nabeel's fame and influence as a poet grows, he is forced into hiding when the Party begins to dismantle the city's infrastructure and impose power cuts and food rationing. Two of his brothers are already in prison and a third is used as a human minesweeper on the frontline of the Iran-Iraq war. After six months in hiding, Nabeel escapes with his wife and young son to Beirut, Paris, Prague, Budapest, and finally England.

Written by Jo Tatchell, a journalist who has spent many years in the Middle East and who is a close friend of Nabeel Yasin's, *Nabeel's Song* is the gripping story of a family and its fateful encounter with history. From a warm, lighthearted look at the Yasin family before the Saddam dictatorship, to the tale of Nabeel's persecution and daring flight, and the suspense-filled account of his family's rebellion against Saddam's regime, *Nabeel's Song* is an intimate, illuminating, deeply human chronicle of a country and a culture devastated by political repression and war.

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