



THE  
SKIN  
AND  
ITS  
GIRL

SARAH CYPHER

*book club  
kit*



## DEAR READER:

When did you fall in love with books?

For me, it was while volunteering at a hometown library so small that every member's name fit into three round Rolodexes. I was just another middle-school misfit and this collection, as a physical register, radiated hope: evidence of a citizenship for the imagination, a tribe of the word.

Like my character Betty, I grew up hearing stories about the currents that brought my Arab family to the United States; and also seeking out other stories to help me understand what it meant to be queer in a family and place where the identity was barely spoken of aloud. As a result, the power of language permeates *The Skin and Its Girl*. It begins with an epigraph from beloved poet Mahmoud Darwish: "We have a country of words." His verse speaks of the Palestinian struggle for agency and the power to use tales, histories, and songs to make a refuge—even an identity. Betty Rummani, a queer Arab American girl born with cobalt blue skin, is in search of both.

Betty's Aunt Nuha, a proud misfit in her own right, begins to give Betty the stories she needs—the truth of

Nuha's hidden identity—along with the courage to share the tales in her own terms. Joyfully queer, surrounded by a family who supports her even when they don't always know how to do it well, Betty delights in bringing her family's history to these pages.

Since my years at the library, I've been lucky enough to be in community with other word-lovers: as a bookseller at Waldenbooks, a creative writing student, an independent book editor of 20 years, and the sister of a school librarian. I've found homes in all of these places, and I've written this novel as a love letter to everyone who's ever reached out for their tribe and found a book.

I couldn't be happier that this novel will come out during Arab American Heritage month, and I hope you love it.


Warmly,

*Sarah Cypher*



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. How does the notion of queer sexuality recycle, revise, and challenge traditional perceptions of gender in this novel?
  2. Discuss the novel's title. Did your understanding of it shift throughout the narrative?
  3. Explore the theme of identity in the book. In the creation of an individual identity or sense of self, how much influence do you think comes from upbringing, chosen family, geography, race, gender, class, education? Which of these are mutable and why? Have you ever taken on or discarded aspects of your own identity? To what extent do we create our own identities or have them imposed upon us by others?
  4. How do the themes of secrecy and integrity play out in the novel? Are all of the characters honest with themselves? Which secrets, in the narrative and in life, are justified?
  5. The author skillfully inhabits the voice of the protagonist, Elspeth, and her great aunt, Nuha—alternating between their individual storylines about coming to terms with their identities. In what ways do their stories mirror and differ from one another?
  6. How might *The Skin and Its Girl* cast light on or add complexity to themes that have traditionally been overlooked in the American canon, such as queer relationships?
  7. How does the past affect the present in the novel? What do the characters in the present learn from the past? How does this affect their relationships and help them heal?
  8. What does “home” mean to each of the characters? After the Rummanis left Palestine and the soap factory was sold, did the meaning of “home” change?
  9. Discuss two of the themes of the novel: love and truth. How are these themes at odds and how do they work together?
  10. How did you feel once reaching the novel's end? Do you wish anything had happened differently?
  11. In what ways will *The Skin and Its Girl* leave a lasting impact on you?
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*“Our family . . . lived for unnumbered generations in Nablus.”*



*“Old families like the Rummanis inherit old problems.”*

# THE RUMMANIS

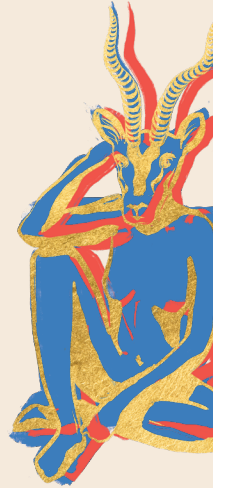
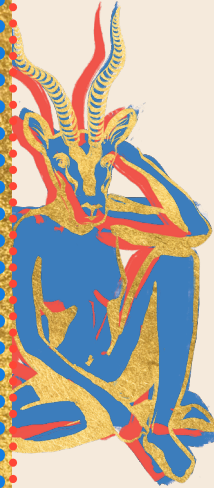
*“The story before the beginning is always more important than anyone realizes.”*

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## JIBRIL

He created indigo cubes of soap for his beloved, staining his future wife’s skin forever blue.

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## THE THREE MUSES

*Nuha*

*Tashi*

*Saeeda*



**ELSEPTH NOURA RUMMANI**

*(Betty for short)*

Born blue.