

## *An Unnecessary Woman* by Rabih Alameddine

**Suggested edition: Grove Press, 2013**

Aaliya Sohbi lives alone in her Beirut apartment, surrounded by stockpiles of books. Godless, fatherless, childless, and divorced, Aaliya is her family's "unnecessary appendage." Every year, she translates a new favorite book into Arabic, then stows it away. The thirty-seven books that Aaliya has translated over her lifetime have never been read—by anyone. After overhearing her neighbors, "the three witches," discussing her too-white hair, Aaliya accidentally dyes her hair too blue.

In this breathtaking portrait of a reclusive woman's late-life crisis, readers follow Aaliya's digressive mind as it ricochets across visions of past and present Beirut. Colorful musings on literature, philosophy, and art are invaded by memories of the Lebanese Civil War and Aaliya's own volatile past. As she tries to overcome her aging body and spontaneous emotional upwellings, Aaliya is faced with an unthinkable disaster that threatens to shatter the little life she has left.

This is a heartrending novel that celebrates the singular life of an obsessive introvert, revealing Beirut's beauties and horrors along the way.

### How to Use This Book Discussion Guide

All art—whether literary or visual—arises from the context of its time. Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts is what makes the **MFAH Book Club** unique.

This discussion guide features questions about broad themes directly related to Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*, as well as questions about artwork in the Museum's collections and exhibitions.

Read the book, discuss some or all of the questions with your group, then reserve an **MFAH Book Club** tour.

### How to Book an MFAH Book Club Tour

For book clubs and other groups of six or more confirmed participants, tours related to Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* are available on select days and times September 1–December 31, 2015. Tours are led by Museum docents and feature excerpts from the book and discussion about artwork on view at the Museum.

For more information, visit [mfah.org/bookclub](http://mfah.org/bookclub). Please e-mail [bookclub@mfah.org](mailto:bookclub@mfah.org) with any questions.

---

## Initial Thoughts...

What was your first impression of Aaliya? Is she likable? Do you sympathize or empathize with her? Why or why not?

---

## The Passage of Time: Aging, Nostalgia, and Inner Life

Beirut plays such an important role in the story. Aaliya says that the city is “too random” and that she doesn’t feel in charge of her life because of it (p. 53). And at one point, she wonders if she has grown too old for Beirut (p. 90). Why do you think Aaliya stays in Beirut? Could the novel have been set anywhere else?

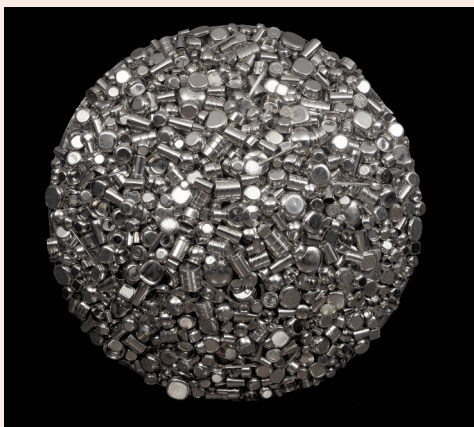
Beirut, a once-glorious jewel of a city, is described as embattled and ruined by civil war. Examine Maurice Utrillo’s painting *The House of Mimi Pinson in Montmartre* and discuss the following:

- Is this how you picture Beirut before the civil war?
- Mimi Pinson was a fictional character in a story written in 1845 by French author Alfred de Musset. Mademoiselle Pinson was a *grisette*—an archetypal young lady of Paris, pretty and gallant, but also uneducated, impoverished, and often driven to alcoholism and prostitution. (Grisette is a reference to inexpensive gray clothing.) After de Musset’s story was published, Mimi Pinson was celebrated in many literary and musical works and in at least two paintings by Utrillo. Do you imagine that Aaliya was, at some point in her life, the Beirut equivalent of a grisette? Why or why not?



Maurice Utrillo, *The House of Mimi Pinson in Montmartre*, c. 1914, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 98.305.

Given that Aaliya is someone who spends most of her time reading fiction—which consists of events that did not happen and characters who do not exist—does that explain why Aaliya believes “no nostalgia hurts as much as nostalgia for things that never existed” (p. 155)? And is that somehow related to her thought that people aren’t defined by what they do in life, so much as what they do not do?



Aaliya has rituals and rules. What criteria does she have for books she will translate? When does she start each translation? What are her working conditions while translating? Discuss her rituals—and her domesticity—in the context of Subodh Gupta’s wall-mounted sculpture made of tiffin tins, spoons, and other stainless-steel utensils.

Subodh Gupta, *Untitled*, 2008, stainless steel, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund and Friends of Asian Art, 2011.546.

Two of Aaliya’s favorite books are W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* and Ota Pavel’s *How I Came to Know Fish*. “What I love about them is that they deal with the Holocaust by looking at it indirectly... Both refuse to soil grief with sentimentalism, and so they are devastating” (p. 203). Later, Aaliya worries that she is becoming sentimental in her old age. Do you think that her interior observations throughout the novel err on sentiment? Or are they more defined by other qualities?

Aaliya has an active, nearly irrepressible sense of humor. Can you cite specific instances? Is her humor something that is supposed to distinguish her from her ill-fated friend Hannah?

## Friendship and Conflict in Beirut

Consider Aaliya's friendship with Hannah:

- Why do you think Hannah was so important to Aaliya? Do you think Aaliya is "over" what happened?
- Aaliya says that her dearest friend Hannah "wrote of her need to be loved, to be desired, as a ravenous monster with an exigent appetite living in a black hole within" (p. 122). Are both women the kind of person that Fadia describes when she says: "There are two kinds of people in this world: people who want to be desired, and people who want to be desired so much that they pretend they don't" (p. 286)?

Consider Aaliya's relationship to Ahmad:

- Were you surprised by their relationship?
- What do you think bound them together?
- Why does he leave the bookstore and Beirut?
- Compare and contrast him to the other male characters in the story, such as Aaliya's "impotent insect" of a husband, Aaliya's half-brother, or Hannah's lieutenant.



Among the Akan people, linguists were advisors to and spokesmen for the chief. Each linguist carried a staff, and each staff had a finial representing a proverb. This finial in the Museum's African art collection represents the following proverb: *"Though the hen knows when it is dawn, she leaves it to the rooster to announce."*

How might this proverb relate to Aaliya, a woman in a man's world who does whatever it takes to retain her independence and to survive?

Akan, *Linguist Staff Finial Representing a Rooster and a Hen*, c. 1900, wood and gold leaf, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., 97.1283.

Aaliya tells the World War II story of a Polish Gestapo officer who spared artist and writer Bruno Schulz because he decided that Schulz was "no ordinary Jew, but a necessary one" (p. 183). What does the anecdote imply about (1) art's role during wartime; and (2) the criteria for "necessary" and "unnecessary" people?

→ Follow-up: Consider the novel's title, *An Unnecessary Woman*. Could Aaliya be "no ordinary woman, but a necessary one"? Could her husband, the "impotent insect," be considered "unnecessary," as he could not perform his husbandly duties?

Aaliya emphasizes how many Jewish artists, writers, and thinkers she enjoys, before she tells her readers, "Like many nation-states, including its sister pygmy state Lebanon, Israel is an abomination" (p. 195). Discuss Aaliya's stance on the state of Israel as a woman who has lived her entire life in Lebanon over a period of time in which both countries have seen war.

Why do you think Aaliya avoids interacting with the three women whom she refers to as the "witches" in her building?

---

## Friendship and Conflict in Beirut *(continued)*



This finial for an Akan linguist staff, on view in the Museum's African art galleries, represents the proverb, "Birds of a feather flock together." Is this how you envision the "witches"? Why?

Akan, *Linguist Staff Finial Representing Bird, Probably Parrots, on a Tree*, 1930–40, wood and gold leaf, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., 97.1296.

When Aaliya's translation manuscripts are ruined in the apartment flood, how would you describe the responses of Aaliya's neighbors (the "witches")? Were you surprised by their responses to her distress? What does this scene at the end of the novel reveal about female friendship?

---

### A Novel About Novels: Aaliya's Literacy

After Aaliya was engaged to be married and taken out of school, she explains, "My only hope was to fake my way to an education" (p. 209). In what ways did she manage her self-education?

Visit the Museum's galleries dedicated to the arts of the Islamic world and *Arts of Islamic Lands: Selections from The al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait*.

- What role does calligraphy, the art of beautiful writing, have in the Islamic world?
- Is writing regarded as significantly here and now? Why?

How does Aaliya's excessive reading habit affect her sense of control and order?

Aaliya talks about the psychological nature of some novels that are too concerned with explaining causation, or why characters do the things that they do. She refers to the day that her brother brought their mother to Aaliya's doorstep: "If this were a novel, you would be able to figure out why my mother screamed" (p. 96). But Aaliya never learns why her mother screamed. Discuss the "meta-commentary" of why Alameddine created Aaliya, a fictional character who questions her own fictionality.

On page 106, Aaliya confesses what she suspects her readers realized long before: that she's never actually tried to publish any of her thirty-seven translated manuscripts. When she's finished translating a book, she sets it aside and doesn't show it to anybody: "I create and crate!"

- As she translates novels for nobody to read, why does she write *this* novel for us to read?
- Why do you think Aaliya keeps translating books? Does this make her "an unnecessary woman" in her own eyes? What are some other ways she might be considered "an unnecessary woman"?
- Though Aaliya's family repeatedly insists that she just be "normal," she desires to be "special" (p. 113). In what ways does she do this? Do you think this is her antidote against being considered "unnecessary"?



---

## A Novel About Novels: Aaliya's Literacy (*continued*)

The Museum has two paintings by Edouard Vuillard on view. Both Madame Hessel and Marcelle Aron are depicted at home; but while the former is obscured in shadow and is surrounded by muted colors, the latter is bathed in bright light and surrounded by vibrant colors.

Which do you think fits Aaliya the best?

Edouard Vuillard, *Madame Hessel at Home*, c. 1908, oil on board, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 98.311.

Edouard Vuillard, *Marcelle Aron (Madame Tristan Bernard)*, 1914, distemper on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Alice C. Simkins in memory of Alice N. Hanszen, 95.222.



All of Aaliya's thirty-seven translations have been works already translated from their original languages—she only does “translations of translations.” But at the end of the novel, Aaliya decides she's ready to undertake her own translations of books initially written in French or English. What does this change say about Aaliya?

→ Follow-up: At the end of the novel, Aaliya is trying to decide between one novel written in English (J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*) and one in French (*Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar). Do you think there is significance to this choice?

---

## Final Thoughts...

Aaliya notes a few times that she avoids stories that culminate in an epiphany. “There should be a new literary resolution: no more epiphanies. Enough. Have pity on readers who reach the end of a real-life conflict in confusion and don't experience a false sense of temporary enlightenment” (p. 148). Does *An Unnecessary Woman* end with an epiphany?

“Reading a fine book for the first time is as sumptuous as the first sip of orange juice that breaks the fast in Ramadan” (p. 117). Is *An Unnecessary Woman* such a book? What books have given you that shot of joy, a sensuous pleasure you can taste?

---

## About the Author



Photo: Rabih Alameddine. Benito Ordonez/Courtesy of Grove Atlantic

Rabih Alameddine is a Lebanese-American painter and writer. He was born in Amman, Jordan, to Lebanese Druze parents. (Alameddine himself is an atheist.) Alameddine grew up in Kuwait and Lebanon, which he left at age 17, first settling in England, then in California.

A lover of mathematics, Alameddine earned a degree in engineering from the University of California at Los Angeles and a master of business administration degree at University of San Francisco. Though he began his career as an engineer, he later shifted to writing and painting.

Alameddine is the author of four novels: *Koolhaas: The Art of War* (1998); *I, the Divine* (2001); *The Hakawati* (2008); and a 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award finalist, *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013). He also published a collection of short stories, *The Perv* (1999). In 2002, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

He divides his time between Beirut, Lebanon, and San Francisco, California.

"No nostalgia hurts as much as nostalgia  
for things that never existed."  
Rabih Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* (p. 155)

*Special thanks to MFAH Book Club docents, Grove Atlantic, and Saxbys Book Club for discussion questions in this guide.*

*The MFAH Book Club receives generous support from Aggie and Joe Foster.*

*All Learning and Interpretation programs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, receive endowment income from funds provided by the Louise Jarrett Moran Bequest; Caroline Wiess Law; the William Randolph Hearst Foundation; The National Endowment for the Humanities; the Fondren Foundation; BMC Software, Inc.; the Wallace Foundation; the Neal Myers and Ken Black Children's Art Fund; the Favrot Fund; and Gifts in honor of Beth Schneider.*