



House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East

Anthony Shadid

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“Evocative and beautifully written, *House of Stone* . . . should be read by anyone who wishes to understand the agonies and hopes of the Middle East.” — Kai Bird, Pulitzer Prize–winning historian and author of *Crossing Mandelbaum Gate*

“In rebuilding his family home in southern Lebanon, Shadid commits an extraordinarily generous act of restoration for his wounded land, and for us all.” — Annia Ciezadlo, author of *Day of Honey*

In spring 2011, Anthony Shadid was one of four *New York Times* reporters captured in Libya, cuffed and beaten, as that country was seized by revolution. When he was freed, he went home. Not to Boston or Beirut—where he lives— or to Oklahoma City, where his Lebanese-American family had settled and where he was raised. Instead, he returned to his great-grandfather’s estate, a house that, over three years earlier, Shadid had begun to rebuild.

House of Stone is the story of a battle-scarred home and a war correspondent’s jostled spirit, and of how reconstructing the one came to fortify the other. In this poignant and resonant memoir, the author of the award-winning *Night Draws Near* creates a mosaic of past and present, tracing the house’s renewal alongside his family’s flight from Lebanon and resettlement in America. In the process, Shadid memorializes a lost world, documents the shifting Middle East, and provides profound insights into this volatile landscape. *House of Stone* is an unforgettable meditation on war, exile, rebirth, and the universal yearning for home.

House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East Details

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From Reader Review House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East for online ebook

Emi Bevacqua says

This is the first Anthony Shadid I've read and he came across as rather guarded. He's much more generous in his descriptions of the foibles and weaknesses of all his ancestors, neighbors and contractors. I did learn a good bit about Lebanon's history, and the country's identity within complicated constructs of cultures and politics (Christian, Muslim, Arab, Maronite, Druze, Levant...).

The story is about an American journalist who gets divorced and takes a leave of absence from the Washington Post to travel to his ancestral home in Lebanon, to rebuild the ruined wreckage in to a beautiful home for its founders' great-great-grand-daughter hopefully. The project takes nearly three years. But I want to know what happened to his ex-wife the doctor, and how his daughter Laila gets along with his new wife and their son, I want to know that everybody is okay since Anthony Shadid died leaving Syria (of an asthma attack), prompting the early release of this book. I guess I'm just nosy.

Marcy says

Anthony Shadid was a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and with every page I read of this novel, he deserved this coveted prize. Anthony's great grandfather, Isber, left war-torn Lebanon with his family to live in America, where he could secure their future, "where his children could realize their ambitions and create their own families without the distractions of fear and conflict."

In better times in Marjayoun, Isber had built a magnificent "house of stone," done in the Levant style when life was tolerant, and "more indulgent" in the Middle East. Isber's homeland "was, in essence, an amalgamation of diversities where many mingled, a realm of intersections, a crossroads of language, culture, religions, and traditions. All were welcome to pass through the territories and homelands within its landscape, where differences were often celebrated. In idea at least, the Levant was open-minded, cosmopolitan; it did not concern itself with particularities or narrow definitions or identities." The era after the Ottoman rule, lands were split up, and war ensued. "Two codes of justice, old imperial and new colonial, clashed and confused. Economies changed, currencies multiplied in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's collapse. First came the Egyptian pound, pegged to the British sterling, then the Syrian pound, fixed to the French franc. Sectarianism and nationalism, the dangerous kinds, reared their heads in spectacles of horror and cruelty." Isber's Lebanon "was perched before an abyss, more unpredictable than the Great War, and nothing, not France, not Arab leaders, not the British army across the border, not the potentates of the old order- could pull it back."

Anthony grew up in Oklahoma. He became a war correspondent and had covered three years of war in Iraq and Baghdad. His wife, "obsessed with the lethal aspects" of Anthony's career, divorced him. Tired of war and the stress of his life, Anthony had one desire, to return to his roots and transform Isber's war-torn home "to one of grace."

The community of eccentric people Anthony befriends and hires to rebuild "the house of stone" in his great-grandfather's home town bring tears to the readers' eye, mostly with laughter, and sometimes great sadness. Anthony listens endlessly to friends who hold grudges, and continue their feuds. He hires a list of characters

to rebuild his great-grandfather's home - drinkers, smokers of cigarettes and pot, war-wounded, and Jean Abu, the elderly, indolent "leader" of the workers who smokes and drinks coffee all day, who actually never works on the house. The work on the house is always delayed. Workers do not show as promised, and Jean Abu's reaction to Anthony's pleading is "If this person doesn't come, if that person doesn't come, what am I supposed to do? Should I pull them by their ear, drag them, and make them work? Should I ask God to invite him over? Should I bring God from heaven and make him bring this guy here?"

Meanwhile, Anthony becomes obsessed with buying the Cemento tiles of the past, with the purpose to lay them in patterns on portions of each room's floor, to lift his great-grandfather's history, and bring back a bygone era. Anthony was in search of his identity, and influence of what Marjayoun used to represent during the height of the Ottoman empire. His great-grandfather's story rivals his own. Both stories captured my attention and my heart.

I was saddened to learn that Anthony Shadid lost his life before this book was published at age 43. Another writer wrote, "Knowing that Shadid lost his life shortly before this book was published makes each piece of tile he polished, each plant he nurtured, feel all the more significant. It also raises the question: Who will watch the house now that this exceptional man is gone?"

Sue says

As I read, I found myself falling into the rhythm of this book--the stumbling attempt to rebuild an old house, the current state of Lebanon and surrounding countries, and the history of the Levant and how the open, multicultural area became a political firestorm. I found the history and current information fascinating as I really had only a superficial understanding of the historical events and little understanding of their impact on the people who lived there, people of such diverse cultures, prior to reading this book.

I also enjoyed seeing Shadid try to work with people who sometimes viewed him as the "rich American" or powerful newspaperman when he appears more to be a man running from his personal ghosts.

Lebanon in this new millennium still suffers from the many problems that began in the early 20th century when British and French created artificial territories in what had been an open multicultural trading area for hundreds of years. This was an outgrowth of the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Lebanon became one of these new "countries". Shadid's family hailed from Marjayoun, what had a formerly been an important town. These new borders altered so much. His quest becomes to rebuild his great-great-grandfather's home and along the way he teaches us about his family, and Lebanon, then and now.

"My aunts and uncles, grandparents and great grandparents were part of a century-long wave of migration that occurred as the Ottoman Empire crumbled then fell, around the time of World War I. In the hinterland of what was then part of Greater Syria...the war marked years of violent anarchy that made bloodshed casual. Disease was rife. So was famine, created by the British and French, who enforced a blockade of all Arab ports in the Mediterranean. Hundreds of thousands starved to death in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine,

and beyond." (loc 114)

Shadid is returning to the ancestral home from which his family, all but the great great grandfather Isber and his wife, had left. The complexity of the terrain is obvious from his description of the area.

"Marjayoun is set on a plateau of muted and melded grays browns, and greens, blended in harmony with the land's past. ..Beyond the town's entrance is the Hula Valley, in present day Israel, where the finer families once kept prosperous estates. To the west of the town, over a ridge, the Litani river flows, ...On the other side are Mount Hermon and its peaks, which serve as borders of Israel and Syria. Beyond it are the Golan Heights". (loc 684)

In the process of rebuilding his ancestor's home, Shadid learns much about his town, the people, the culture, on a deeper level---or so it appears to this reader. And as a reader, I learned much more about the Middle East. I will finish with one final quote about Lebanon.

"This is a nation in recovery from losses that cannot be remembered or articulated, but which are everywhere---in the head, behind the eyes, in the tears and footsteps and words...We have lost the splendors our ancestors created, and we go elsewhere. People are reminded of that every day here, where an older world, still visible on every corner, fails to hide its superior ways." (loc 1232)

I recommend this highly as a memoir of one man's personal mission and as a history of the complicated Middle East.

Hazel says

This book is told in two concurrent parts: Anthony Shadid's family history as shaped by the Levant and the emigration to America, and his restoration of his family's home in Lebanon, also in the context of the disappearance of the Levant and the rise of the troubles of the Middle East. I enjoyed the story of his family more than the repetition and trials of the difficulties of renovation. I appreciated the importance of the

restoration to him and the arc of the story, but it needed further editing. This book is most important now as a testament to the loss and absence of this remarkable reporter, so young in his years. There is a creepy foreshadowing in his restoration: he was warned not to plant the cypress trees so close to his home, they were trees meant for a cemetery: doing so meant an early death.

Beth says

Solid, unprepossessing memoir written by someone with both intimate knowledge of and analytical rigor for the region. The memoir's publication timing, combined with references he makes throughout to Marjayoun as a town where people come to be buried, lend a sense of eeriness given his untimely death last month.

Dave Cullen says

So much about this book to love.

It's only the third book I've ever agreed to blurb. That tells you how much I loved it.

My blurb (and I wrote it myself, and meant every word):

“I was captivated, instantly, by Anthony Shadid’s lushly evocative prose. Crumbling Ottoman outposts, doomed pashas, and roving bandits feel immediate, familiar, and relevant. Lose yourself in these pages, where empires linger, grandparents wander, and a battered Lebanon beckons us home. Savor it all. If Márquez had explored nonfiction, Macondo would feel as real as Marjayoun.”

Reading it sometimes made me feel inadequate as a writer. I wish I could do some of the amazing things he does. Or maybe I wish I could do them so relentlessly. I tend to underline phrases I love, and the pages are covered in ink. Every other sentence leaps out at me. Hard to believe.

Reading it sometimes made me feel inadequate as a writer. I wish I could do some of the amazing things he does. Or maybe I wish I could do them so relentlessly. I tend to underline phrases I love, and the pages are covered in ink. Every other sentence leaps out at me. Hard to believe anyone can be that consistent. Faulkner, Nabokov, Denis Johnson and William Lychak are the only ones who have matched Anthony's underline rate for me.

Update, Feb 2013:

A year later, I still think about this book, and the impact it had on me. Beautiful.

Naila says

Like so many books of this genre, I feel the weight of the gesture overshadows its execution.

Which isn't to say that I'm not glad he tried.

I will always be happy to see anyone, within or without the diaspora, to go back and rediscover their own family legacies, especially when most of the stories worth telling are downplayed by the heroes that star in them. Too many tales of kindness, bravery, and pain are lost to time and the larger-scale events that spurred them. These stories aren't always interesting, and they usually only hold real importance with their subjects' descendants, but they are mementos of people's lives and loves, and that has to count for something.

Basically, the preamble is so that I can say this: *House of Stone* is by no stretch of the imagination a great piece of literature. Even when placed in the small category of Arab "going-home" literature, it doesn't have the gorgeously deep and introspective prose of Amin Maalouf's *Origins*, nor the succinct finality of Kanafani's *Return to Haifa*

But I did enjoy reading it, and I felt it's warmth.

Rob Warner says

As we age, our hearts eventually turn to our fathers, and we try to understand those who went before, what they were like, how they faced life, what challenges they overcame, and we gauge whether we measure up to our ancestors. *House of Stone* chronicles Shadid's return to his roots as he tries to restore the family home in Marjayoun, Lebanon, and also tries to understand his ancestors and his homeland. His quest evokes admiration for Shadid's family, sorrow for the tragedies they faced, and thoughts to return to one's own roots.

As I read, I marveled at the wars and strife that pervade Shadid's homeland, which stem from the intolerance people have for others' beliefs. In the United States we deplore such violence and intolerance, believing ourselves much more tolerant and open to others. If we honestly look at ourselves, however, we find that we are becoming much less tolerant, much more judgmental, and much less able to acknowledge that others' world views have us much validity as our own. We avoid bloodshed over religion and politics only because we avoid discussing them, but we avoid them less and less and clash more and more. Shadid helps us understand what we are becoming.

Knowing that Shadid has passed away brought melancholy as I read. I went to high school with Shadid and have seen his passion, and I felt his pain as he discussed his broken marriage and agonized over his faulty fatherhood. I loved learning about his family history as he made his ancestors come alive. I would love to see the home he restored, and applaud him for making that happen.

Florence says

Anthony Shadid returned to his ancestral home in a Lebanese village, finding it in ruins as the result of war and neglect. He spent a year restoring the home to its former glory and reminiscing about the history of his family and of the Middle East. The area that is now Lebanon was part of the Ottoman Empire. After the First World War when victorious European powers took control of the area, new borders were drawn, cutting off access to Syria and what is now Israel. The imagined past is bittersweet. War seems to be an endless occurrence in Lebanon. The present is frustrating as Shadid struggles with workmen possessing very little work ethic engaged in laying tile and marble in the old house. There were some satisfying friendships, a few good meals, and the pleasure of restoring what Shadid hoped would be a family sanctuary. Unfortunately, Anthony Shadid died in Syria in 2012, shortly after the book was published.

The book would have been more enjoyable if it had included some maps, a few photographs, and a glossary of Arab terms.

???? ???????? Rula Bilbeisi says

“Empires fall. Nations topple. Borders may shift or be realigned. Old loyalties may dissolve or, without warning, be altered. Home, whether it be structure or familiar ground is, finally, the identity that does not fade.”

With such a profound introduction, the story begins. His poetic words and sincere emotions captivated my attention in the beginning, especially when describing how home “bayt” is perceived here, in the Middle East. I quote: “A house was a display of pride and in time it would become a refuge, and finally a memory”.

However, in following chapters, detailed description of the renovation made me struggle to go on. Tile after tile, stone after stone, pipes and paint, that was too much to go through.

As chapters followed, it was like a rollercoaster ride. I was very involved once he starts talking about the immigration of his ancestors to the states, which reminded me of an Arabic novel called “America” that also described in length the Lebanese immigration and life in the states. Then back to the house and its tiles and windows, which was to me very boring.

I really wanted to know more about him, Anthony the man, who was absent in this story, so was his experiences in war zone areas like Iraq and the west bank, or more interesting the time he was held captive in Libya.

I was so sorry to know that he actually died before enjoying his Bayt (home). However, his ashes were spread between the olive trees he planted, covered with his favorite tiles. As if he renovated the house for that reason. In the end, he found his way back home.

Kelly says

I really wanted to read this book when I saw that article about Shadid's death in Syria from an asthma attack. It finally came in at the library, and I started to read it with enthusiasm. Unfortunately, that enthusiasm quickly turned to disappointment as I felt that it became a chore to read. I can honestly only think of one book that I have had such a hard time reading that I did not finish, and it was by a religious zealot that was trying to preach through a series of disjointed stories. While Shadid had a continuous train of thought and a purpose to his book, I just could not get into it. It's a shame, really, because I enjoyed his reporting and had seen reviews of this book about how it was personal and moving and blah blah blah. Instead I found it plodding and slow and you needed a chart to keep track of the cast of characters. I made it through 40% of this book in three weeks (compared to my normal speed of finishing a book like this in 2-3 days) and honestly was a bit relieved when the library loan ended and I could no longer access the book on my Kindle. I'm sorry, but while I wish the family and followers of Shadid well and will miss his contributions, I just couldn't get behind *House of Stone*.

Jennifer Swapp says

Most of this book I read beside a computer, accessing wikipedia and trek earth websites often to better understand the history of lebanon and the Levant, as well as to visualize the descriptive flowers, plants and architecture and countryside that Shadid wonderfully elicited.

It as noteworthy that Shadid's storyline was based on his great grandfather and great grandmother who sent their children to America to protect them from the destruction on war in Lebanon- a sacrifice they were willing to make- a sacrifice that portrayed the great love of Marjayoun, Lebanon- part of their Bayt, and the great love of their family and their desire to protect them- the other part of Bayt. Shadid in his own way mirrored his great grandfather, as he tried to balance the great love of his wife and children, and the great connection to the middle east through journalism. He had to make sacrifices to time with his family in order to continue his journalism and also to work on the reconstruction of his house. His untimely death has lead many to question his commitment to journalism in such a dangerous region of the world.

I loved the history lesson of the middle east. I loved the humorous storyline of the small town experts working to rebuild his house. I also enjoyed the lebanese american immigrant's experience. The imagery of the rebirth of olive trees, the replanting of the passiflora vines, the commitment to the 100 year process of taming a bonsai tree and symbolized the patience and hope in an area often destroyed by wars; the love of a people who would continue to develop beauty in the hope that it will one day remain.

Marieke says

I liked this book more and more as I read, but also felt sadder and sadder with Anthony Shadid's death in the back of my mind. Maybe Dr. Khairallah is teaching him how to care for bonsai now, somewhere in an alternate dimension. Or something...

Here on Earth in the living realm, I found the predictions of the syrian conflict scattered about in the book quite unsettling. On a less morbid note, I really enjoyed reading about his family coming to America and creating their life here. I have an even deeper appreciation now for the immigrant experience here. Not to politicize things too much, but I do hope that those people in the US who are profoundly anti-immigrant take time to look back at their own families' histories...Anthony Shadid was a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist; his grandmother crossed the Mexican border illegally after her uncle, with whom she was coming to America, was rejected at Ellis Island because of an eye infection. I thought that was quite interesting.

Those are my thoughts for now...maybe I'll come back to this.

Catherine says

Shadid was a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, and his posthumous memoir has been promoted on several TV shows and web sites. I was really looking forward to delving into his book.

I'm so sad to say that this was a slog from start to finish. The book is partially about the renovation of his ancestor's home in Lebanon. That portion of the story was typical of so many others I've read, full of construction delays, eccentric characters, and discovering "home." But there was nothing really unique. For me, most of the characters, with only a few exceptions (Dr. Khairalla and perhaps—and I'm being generous—Abu Jean), just weren't interesting enough to include.

Another part of the story was not only his family's history but also Middle Eastern history. Perhaps he should have stayed strictly to his family's history. The history, while informative, strayed a bit from the book being a personal memoir.

I kept thinking as days passed and I still hadn't finished the book that perhaps the author was just too close to the material, unable to edit himself in a way that made the stories more intriguing. He thanked his editor at the end of the book. But I have to say that had the editor done a better job of actually editing the text, taking out unnecessary overly worded descriptions, perhaps the book would have read more like a heartfelt, soulful reflection of the author's memories. Instead there seemed to be too much fretting over the writing. Words can be beautiful and descriptive and lovely, but in this case, for me, it became too much of a good thing.

The Epilogue was the best chapter by far. Had the entire book read like that section, I believe I would have enjoyed the book much more.

Kkraemer says

After a bad patch in his life, Anthony Shadid took a year off to rebuild his grandparents' home in Lebanon. Raised in Oklahoma City, he was more than knowledgeable about the wars and conflicts that had plagued the area, and he wanted to get a sense of its history beyond these travesties, a sense of the real people, the real geography, the family to which he belonged.

The story of his year, then, is rife with descriptions of his friends and the people who come to work on this house, and of their particular perspectives on the world. The story also tells of the grandfather who built the house as a testament to his own success and power, and of the fact that this grandfather sadly came to the understanding that his children had to leave not only the house but the country if they were to thrive. It's the story of his grandmother, too, who lived in the house until her 90's, a presence he feels in every stone and every tile.

The stones of Marjayoun bear scars and witness to the people of this place and their ongoing position as a point of crossfire between Europe and the Middle East; Muslim, Christian, and Jew; and families who have bickered for generations. The stones are deep and beautiful, if a bit irregular...

Along the way, Shadid reflects on the Arabic language and culture, on the history of an area torn by strife and rich in tradition, and on the central importance of olives, almonds, and citrus in any garden, any gathering, any good society.

Because Shadid is, at once, an outsider and an insider, he offers windows into Marjayoun that would be blocked to anyone else. Because he is both a deeply reflective man and an excellent writer, he offers insights unequalled by anything else I've read.

