

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
DISCUSSION GUIDE

TASTING THE SKY:
A Palestinian Childhood
by Ibtisam Barakat

Reading Level
Grades 7 up

"Poignant . . . A story we in the United States have only glimpsed."
—Jennifer Armstrong

"Exquisite . . . Nothing is missing—love, attachment, struggle, fear,
humor, resilience"
—Naomi Shihab Nye



About the Novel

In this groundbreaking memoir set in Ramallah during the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War, Ibtisam Barakat captures what it is like to be a child whose world is shattered by war. With candor and courage, she stitches together memories of her childhood: fear and confusion as bombs explode near her home and she is separated from her family; the harshness of life as a Palestinian refugee; her unexpected joy when she discovers Alef, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet. This is the beginning of her passionate connection to words, and as language becomes her refuge, allowing her to piece together the fragments of her world, it becomes her true home.

Transcending the particulars of politics, this illuminating and timely book provides a telling glimpse into a little-known culture that has become an increasingly important part of the puzzle of world peace.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider the author's dedication. How does it set the tone for the book?
2. What is your understanding of the conflict in the Middle East? Referring to the Historical Note and resources listed in To Learn More, as well as other Web sites such as The History Channel's "Middle East" site (<http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?articleId=216411>), draft a time line of significant events.
3. Research the Six-Day War. What were the ramifications of the war?
4. Read the quotes the author uses to frame the book: at the start, the translation from the Arabic song "Ya Dara Douri Fina," and at the end, the quote attributed to Philo of Alexandria. What meaning do the quotes have for you before reading the book? After? Why might the author have selected them?
5. The book begins with "A Letter to No One" and ends with "A Letter to Everyone." Discuss why the author addressed them as such and what purpose the letters serve.
6. What does Alef represent to Ibtisam?

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7. Why are poetry, letters, and writing so important to Ibtisam?
8. Do you think Abdel Nasser's statement, which Ibtisam's mother repeats, "Freedom of the word is the first prelude to democracy" (p.162), influenced Ibtisam? Do you agree or disagree with the statement?
9. Ibtisam's mother urges her to "Forget, just forget" the war and occupation. What do you think you would do in Ibtisam's place?



About the Author

Ibtisam Barakat is a poet and educator who has worked with organizations such as the United Nations to facilitate a dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis. This is her first book. She currently lives in Columbia, Missouri.

For more information on Ibtisam Barakat:

Web site:

www.fsgkidsbooks.com

Includes a biography of the author and additional information about her novels

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