

Rise the Euphrates

By Carol Edgarian

New York: Random House, 1994

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Rise the Euphrates is Carol Edgarian's first novel. It has been widely acclaimed and recognized in literary circles in the United States, thus establishing the author as a rising American writer. The novel tells the story of a nine-year-old Armenian girl, Garod, a survivor of the Armenian genocide during the First World War. Garod witnessed her mother throwing herself into the Euphrates river, swollen with corpses, rather than be raped and slaughtered by oncoming Turkish soldiers. The mother, Seta, wanted the daughter to throw herself into the river, too, but she lacked the courage to take her own young life. The instinct for survival keeps her alive and on the road, while her mother sinks to the bottom of the river, only her kerchief floating on the water a sign of her life and death.

For the young girl, Garod, this is such a traumatic, mind-numbing experience that she temporarily forgets her own name. She loses her identity, and is renamed "Casard" by the Customs Officer at Ellis Island in New York City, where she meets and later marries an Armenian refugee, settling into the immigrant community of Memorial, Connecticut. There, the young immigrant couple established themselves and had two daughters, one of whom they named Araxi, after the famous river Arax in Armenia.

Throughout her active years as a pillar of the local Armenian community, Casard refuses to talk about the genocide of her people, calling those events "indignities." Even at a Remembrance Day gathering many years later, she keeps her silence and tries to prevent her grandchildren from participating in the memorial activities. Casard carries within her a heavy burden of unexamined traumatic experiences, some of which she witnessed even before seeing her mother drown herself in the Euphrates. She had watched as her hometown, Harput, was devastated by Turkish soldiers, who had first sent all of the village's men on a voyage of no return. Among these men was Casard's brilliant father, a physician whom she had loved dearly. She had also seen the beautiful adolescent girls of her town, their heads removed from their bodies,

hung like lanterns from the municipal council building. Later, on the road to exile, she had watched helplessly as her baby brother died.

Rise the Euphrates is the story of four generations of women uprooted from their homeland. The narrator, 33-year-old Seta Loon, is a third-generation Armenian-American, whose father is an outsider to the Armenian Community in Connecticut. Caught between the generations, caught between her Armenian and American cultural heritages, Seta confronts an even fiercer division: the one within herself. Haunted by survivor's guilt, silence, and isolation, Seta longs to love, to speak, and to be free. "I saw myself as two halves: half Seta, half Loon. I saw my family as shivering fragments and my grandmother falling like a wingless bird" (page 7).

Seta Loon's life is dominated by the stories and memories of Casard, her embittered grandmother. At her baptism, Casard whispers her story and lost name into the infant's ear. "...as I grew, her story would rise from my belly, in my waking hours and in my dreams, and reveal images — a Turkish sword, a muddy river, a child's hand letting go — until at last, I would recover her name....At last I understood that the trouble in my belly was my grandmother calling out to me" (page 84). The memories return, as promised, in a dream: "On this night, the women gave me a new story...not of shame, but a story for the day after the solstice, for the journey back to the light" (page 345).

"The daughter assumes what is unfinished in her mother's life," Seta tells us; "the unanswered questions become her work" (page 347). Seta Loon's quest is clear: she wants to rid herself of the burdensome guilt feelings she inherited from her mother, Araxi, and her grandmother, Casard. Casard's guilt stemmed from her betrayal of her drowning mother when she let go of her mother's hand. She lived and relived this scene during her years in the small Connecticut town. She sometimes questioned whether she would have let go of her father's hand, too, and was happy to realize that no, she wouldn't have betrayed her father. Her emotional bond with him had been far stronger than had been her bond with her mother. Araxi's guilt, on the other hand, was her betrayal of

her mother's dearest wish that she should marry an Armenian. As time went by, and especially after Casard's death, Araxi's sense of betrayal became so overpowering that she had long fits of depression and eventually separated from her American husband. The fourth generation Seta Loon, in her turn, rebelled against her mother's seemingly selfish conduct and sided with her father. Leaving her hometown, she deserted her mother, thus claiming her liberty from her mother's emotional domination, and became pregnant outside of marriage.

From the beginning, Seta Loon was destined to end her family's long trauma. Towards the end of the novel, she is totally liberated from the burden of guilt she had inherited, and comes to terms with her family's gruesome history. She is blessed with the healing of her psychic wounds through self-acceptance and forgiveness. When she accepts her mother and grandmother and forgives them, she can also accept herself. As a result, she is miraculously healed and enabled to move forward into the future, now filled with a strong determination to play an active role in the life of future generations. "Our tales are what bind, they are the spiraling — the vicious, wonderful spiraling — which, if never questioned, lock the generations in a web of infinite expectation, lies, shame and hope....For my unborn child, I am after hope. Hope and the chance for a new story that will put to rest the lies and shame. And so I listen cautiously to Casard, who says: "To make a new life, you must hope for the future, and you must remember what has already been."....Hope grows inside of me, it could pour at any moment from my breasts, gold threads of light, it is that much hope" (page 8).

This novel is based on some factual incidents; the author relates that she has had similar experiences, noting that "in writing about the genocide, I had to live it, and this has been a healing process. That wound which every Armenian feels has healed somewhat for me. I feel like I have come out at the other end [of a long process]". (1) Carol Edgarian had done research as a congressional page (assistant) in Washington, D.C., and spent many weekends looking at the primary documents on the Armenian genocide at the United States National Archives. She had nightmares during this period of her life, because the information she collected was horrifying. Commenting on the experience of Armenians, she says, "that is really the task for all of us: to come to terms with the past and to move forward. That's a frustrating experience for Armenians, because there has never been a public acknowledgment of the past. The book looks at how, pri-

vately, we must each come to terms with it. At the book's end, Seta is really just beginning."

The significance of *Rise the Euphrates* lies in its therapeutic effect on even third generation Armenians in the Diaspora who are still carrying burdens of guilt and shame for the genocide. They can relive the experiences of Seta Loon, and eventually come out of them cleansed and healed. In order to reach other communities and nations suffering from discrimination, mass slaughters, poverty and alienation, Armenians have to first undergo a psychic cleansing and a healing process of self-acceptance and forgiveness. This novel shows one way of embarking on that path.

Footnotes

(1) The author was quoted in an interview by Salpi Ghazarian which appeared in *Aim Magazine* in May, 1994. The magazine is published in Los Angeles, California.



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