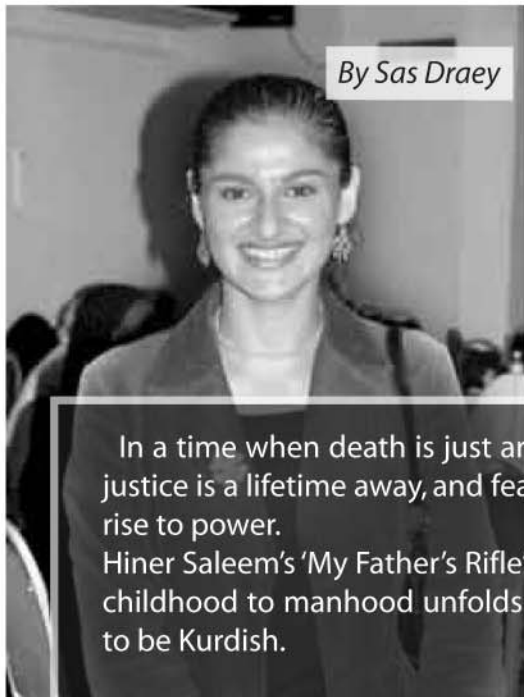
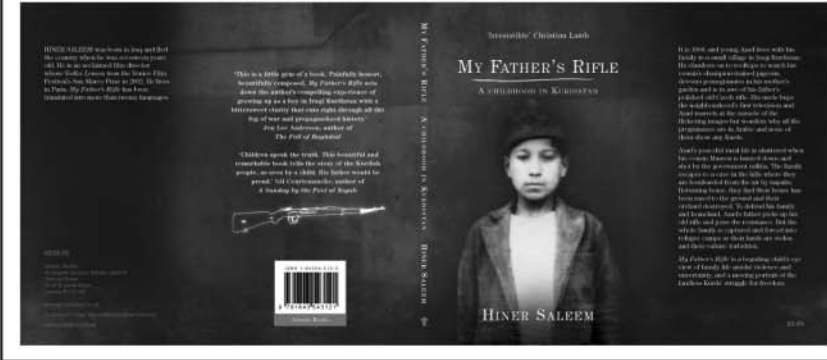


My Father's Rifle



By Sas Draey



In a time when death is just around the corner, when betrayal is your only way to survive, when justice is a lifetime away, and fear is normality, a little boy grows up in the era of Saddam Hussein's rise to power. Hiner Saleem's 'My Father's Rifle' is set in a village of Kurdistan where a little boy's experience from childhood to manhood unfolds at a time and place where it was rather unfortunate and unlucky to be Kurdish.

From the very beginning of the story, in fact from the very first page, there is a clear and powerful message of love of country and a strong desire for identity. This book is not only highly political but it's filled with historical fact. As with most things Kurdish, talking about the past turns out to be an honest, truthful and moving story.

Our young character and storyteller is Azad Shero Salim, who reminds the reader several times that he is only a boy. This is significant for the author; as he not only wants us to see the story from a child's point of view, but perhaps to understand what a child has experienced in times of war in his own words and his own memories.

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The storyteller does not dramatise the situation, but rather tells it like it is, in fact I have personally heard stories much bloodier than the one in the book. So I realised that the writer is merely describing the story as it happens, he puts little of his opinion into it, the story is so strong in itself that he does not need to curse the enemy or praise the Peshmergas. After a few pages the reader has already made up her own mind.

The transition from boyhood to manhood of our main character, Azad, is described very romantically against the harsh political realities of his life. Everything he loves, the reader loves too. The writing is so simple and so uncomplicated that understanding this young boy's point of view is clear and true. Even though a child is telling us this story, we believe him without hesitation because the honesty of his words jumps out of the page. He is timid, shy and innocent; his character is much like the backdrop of the story. Like Kurdistan, young Azad is unspoiled and natural, with him everything is exciting and new. His words are simple yet very descriptive, when he meets someone new, he describes them vividly and with excitement:



"I looked through the doorway and was astonished to see a huge woman, at least six feet tall, with straight blonde hair, skin as white as cheese, and big blue eyes. She was dressed like a Kurd, the same as my mother, in a long, very colourful dress that fell to her ankles and a close-fitting vest."



At first Azad as a young boy does not bring much of his own ideas into the story, he repeats what he is told, he is well disciplined and well taught, and like most Kurdish families, he believes what his father tells him to believe.

"Like my father, he was convinced that after one more year of struggle and sacrifice we would obtain independence. A sweet thrill ran through our bodies. One more year and Kurdistan would be ours."

His father has much influence on the story and the storyteller. Like many of the Kurdish fathers, he is proud and all bravado. His beliefs, teachings and ideas come mainly from his old Soviet radio which he uses to listen to the news as much as possible. Azad paints a picture of a man full of hope and prayer and desperate for independence. In his youth his father was General Barzani's personal Morse Code operator, and he carries this title until the very end. As the story unfolds, the reader begins to feel sympathy for a man who has little in his power to help his family, and his only protection is his rifle that he swears is the best in the land.

His mother, like all mothers, is sweet and simple. Her only concern is her children's well being and of course to marry them off as soon as possible. As soon as her older son arrives home from his Peshmerga duties, she springs marriage on him. Azad idolises his older brother. The way he talks of Dilovan is like he is talking of a hero who is sure to free Kurdistan. Possibly another strong message from the author, he is clear that there is nothing wrong with idolising the young Peshmerga, after all they are the fighters 'who look death straight in the face'.

Azad only knows who the enemy is and who his friend is. As he grows older, this changes, he is confused and cannot distinguish between the enemy and his ally. This is an important message from the author; he is showing us the lost innocence of our main character. At this point in the story, Saddam Hussein had great power and was assigning Kurds to betray Kurds or pay with the death penalty, what is well known as a 'Jash' [Traitor]. We see Azad become suspicious and aware that he may be under suspicion, by now the young boy is a well educated and a courageous young man.

As Azad becomes a man his storytelling becomes more opinionated and more aggressive, his ideas become vengeful and his goal is to be like his brother, a Peshmerga. Reading this book really opened my eyes to our history. I've read of the struggle, I and the pain and the suffering, but to know one person's life story so up close and personal really makes you think about your own privileges. At times the story becomes so graphic and harsh that you experience a deep sorrow:

"We were taken to a building where we were ordered to undress. We were embarrassed, but under threat of the soldiers we had no choice. I ended up next to my father, naked, with my hands on my head. I didn't dare look at him..... Filled with shame, I thought about my mother, my sisters, my sisters-in-law, and what they were being subjected to, and I began to think it might have been better to die in the Iranian camps than be reduced to this."