



Head Above Water: Reflections on Illness Shahd Alshammari

Those who survive know that there is a story to tell.

‘It is a brave book [full of] sensuous prose’
**Jokha Alharthi, Author of *Celestial Bodies*, winner of
the International Man Booker Prize**

‘An important piece of life writing - Shahd Alshammari's
memoir breaks new ground in representing the lives of
disabled Arab women’

Dr. Roxanne Douglas, University of Warwick

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Head Above Water takes us into a space of intimate conversations on illness and society's stigmatization of disabled bodies. We are invited in to ask the big questions about life, loss, and the place of the other. The narrative builds a bridge that reminds us of our common humanity and weaves the threads that tie us all together. Through conversations about women's identities, bodies, and our journeys through life, we arrive at a politics of love, survival, and hope.

Shahd Alshammari has Multiple Sclerosis and is a Kuwaiti-Palestinian author and academic. After gaining her PhD in the UK, she became an Assistant Professor of Literature in Kuwait. Her research interests focus on women with mental illness in literature. Alshammari is especially interested in the concept of hybridity, having been born to a Bedouin father and a Palestinian mother. She is also interested in Disability Studies and the correlation of disability studies with identity in the Arab world, having been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis at the age of 18.

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Praise for Head Above Water

‘Shahd Alshammari’s *Head above Water* is a welcome addition to the growing body of illness narratives. She conveys eloquently and candidly the randomness of her multiple sclerosis, communicating what it’s like to live in her body—Arab, female, disabled—and how her illness has shaped her education and her life as an academic. Her prose is at once lively and deadly serious, vividly somatic and deeply thoughtful, highly engaging. Her book succeeds at a difficult endeavor: narrating chronic illness without imposing a false narrative arc on that experience.’ - **G.T. Couser, author of *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*.**

‘Shahd Alshammari's memoir of life with MS is one of the first distinctly 21st century illness narratives. She situates chronic illness at the intersection of issues that include gender, exile, medical experimentation, and the politics of the Middle East...Reading her, I thought continually of Yeats's famous line, "a terrible beauty is born." In this book, illness is that terrible beauty, always affecting but never determining the author's life.’ - **Arthur W. Frank, Ph.D. Author of *At the Will of the Body and The Wounded Storyteller*.**

‘Beautifully written... the book offers numerous anecdotes filled with trials and tribulations, historical narratives and childhood dreams, and above all human moments that remind us that wherever we lie on the spectrum of being fully able-bodied human beings or significantly disabled we all share similar fears and more importantly hopes.’ - **Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, writer and lecturer, founder of Barjeel Art Foundation.**

‘Shahd Alshammari closes her eyes, gets closer to herself, and produces a breakthrough narrative on dealing with a chronic illness. Conversational in tone, yet candid and probing in nature, *Head above Water* fills a gap in disability narratives by Arab Women.... full of hope, love and appreciation for life and for friendship.’ - **Dr. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, author of *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*.**

‘A necessary and beautiful account of life with a sometimes-invisible and unpredictable disability, complicated by both patriarchy and racism, as well as a professor's love letter to the act of teaching and being taught.’ - **Marcia Lynx Qualey, ArabLit.**

Head Above Water is ‘a welcome addition to the genre of illness narratives written by women of colour.’ - **Yusra Samir Imran, writer for *The New Arab* and author of *Hijab and Red Lipstick* (Hashtag Press, 2020).**

‘This is a rich, lyrical, honest account of living with a chronic, painful condition which deals with pain and loss, and yet is a joy to read.’ - **Catherine Simpson, author of *One Body* (Saraband), *When I Had a Little Sister* (4th Estate), and *True Story* (Sandstone Press).**

‘[A] ground-breaking memoir which challenges the dominant narrative of silence around disability and women’s bodies... refreshingly raw and bold narrative of both illness and life as an Arab woman.’ - **Sharifah Alhinal, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.**