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The Cat I Never Named
A True Story of Love, War, and Survival
By Amra Sabic-El-Rayess
with Laura L. Sullivan

The war didn’t spring on me all at once. Instead, like a cat, it stalked me quietly. There might have been a rustle of leaves, a glint of golden eye. But like a mouse, I didn’t believe it was there until it pounced.

It’s 1992, and Bihac is a multicultural city with Muslims, Croats, and Serbs. But one morning, a sixteen-year-old girl sits down in her first class of the school day to discover that, as if vanished by a supernatural force, half of her friends have disappeared overnight. The missing students are Serbs, and they, along with their families, have strategically departed this once-diverse city. Their clandestine exit will soon prove the harbinger of ethnic cleansing enacted by Serbs against Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) in the Bosnian War.

Amra Sabic-El-Rayess is one of those Bosnian Muslims. In THE CAT I NEVER NAMED, she recounts the 1,150 days she survived under the Serbs’ military siege with profound tenderness and grace. In this memoir of coming of age in the midst of a genocide, she writes unflinchingly about the atrocities she witnessed—jeering soldiers, the constant threat of rape and violence, sudden loss of freedoms—but also the adolescent turmoils and joys that persist even in wartime: Chocolate cake. A birthday party. A handsome boy. And Maci.

Maci, the Bosnian word for kitty, is a calico cat who finds her way to the Sabic family at the start of the war and remains with them like a good luck charm. Seemingly preternaturally attuned to the events around her, she saves the Sabics from violence on several occasions. Along the way, she teaches Amra to nurture, to tend to living things and to love them fiercely, even in the cruelest circumstances.

At once unsparingly true and brimming with hope, THE CAT I NEVER NAMED will make an indelible impression. Amra writes with remarkable compassion—not only for her fellow Bosniaks, but for the whole of humanity. To read Amra’s words is to participate in her radical rejection of hatred, to experience her unfailing optimism, to share in her commitment to a better world.

Amra Sabic-El-Rayess grew up in Bihac, Bosnia and Herzegovina. After surviving ethnic cleansing, she emigrated to the United States in 1995. By December 1999, she had earned a B.A. from Brown University. Later, she obtained two masters degrees and a doctorate from Columbia University. Today, she is a professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, working on understanding how and why societies fall apart and what role education can play in rebuilding decimated communities. Amra has published extensively on education-related issues and has lectured around the world to adult and adolescent audiences.

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Laura L. Sullivan is an author and seasoned collaborator of middle grade and young adult novels, including Under the Green Hill (Holt, 2010), Ladies in Waiting (HMH, 2012), and Love by the Morning Star (HMH, 2014). She collaborated with prolific producer and director Adam Shankman on Girl About Town (Atheneum, May 2016), a Nick and Nora-styled mystery set in 1930s Hollywood, and the sequel. She also worked with YouTube star Joey Graceffa on the bestselling Children of Eden trilogy (Atria/Keywords). Her adult debut, Milady (Berkeley), published in July 2019.

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