



When the Apricots Bloom

by Gina Wilkinson

Martin County Library System Book Club Kit:

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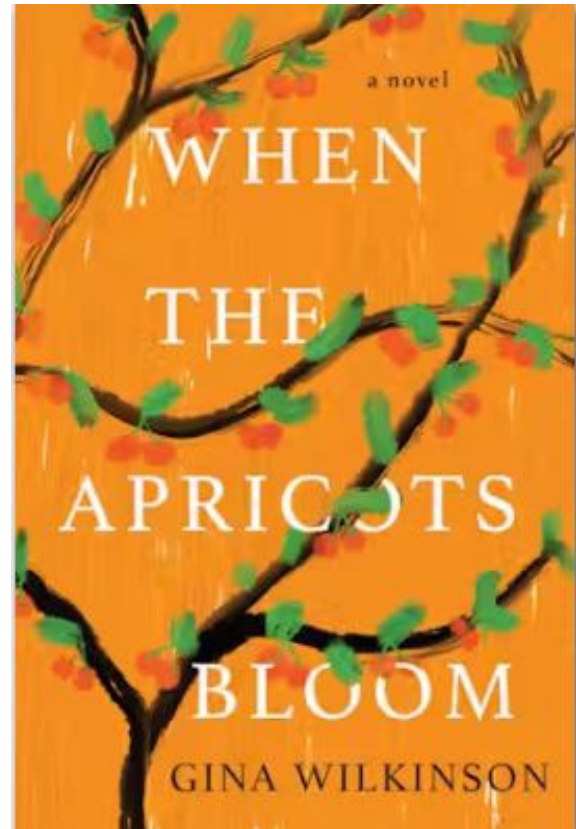
Included in the Kit:

- [Book summary](#)
- [Author biography](#)
- [Discussion questions](#)
- [Recipe suggestions](#)

Book summary

In the historic city of Baghdad, a secretary, an artist and a diplomat's wife, must confront the complexities of trust, friendship, and motherhood under the rule of the dictator Saddam Hussein and his ruthless secret police.

At night, in Huda's fragrant garden, a breeze sweeps in from the desert encircling Baghdad, rustling the leaves of her apricot trees and carrying warning of visitors at her gate. Huda, a secretary at the Australian embassy, lives in fear of the mukhabarat—the secret police who watch and listen for any scrap of information that can be used against America and its allies. They have ordered her to befriend Ally Wilson, the deputy ambassador's wife. Huda has no wish to be



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an informant, but fears for her teenaged son, who may be forced to join a deadly militia. Nor does she know that Ally has dangerous secrets of her own.

Huda's former friend, Rania, enjoyed a privileged upbringing as the daughter of a sheikh. Now her family's wealth is gone, and Rania too is battling to keep her child safe and a roof over their heads. As the women's lives intersect, their hidden pasts spill into the present. Facing possible betrayal at every turn, all three must trust in a fragile, newfound loyalty, even as they discover how much they are willing to sacrifice to protect their families.

Source: Author's website. (ginawilkinson.net/books)





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Meet the Author

I've been a nomad from the age of six-months, when my parents packed me and our Siamese cat into an old Renault and set off for a remote gold-mining town in Australia's Nullarbor desert. Since then, I've circumnavigated the globe many times. As a foreign correspondent, I reported from some of the globe's most intriguing and dangerous places for renowned broadcasters such as the BBC, NPR, and the ABC.



In early 2002, I moved to Baghdad, where my husband worked with UNICEF. At the time, the dictator Saddam Hussein was in power, the country was isolated from the rest of the world, and its people were suffering. Foreign journalists were banned from Iraq, so I temporarily put away my reporter's notebook. Doing otherwise would have led to immediate imprisonment, or worse, for me and for anyone I interviewed.

Still, the regime was watching. In fact, one of my closest Iraqi friends was an informant for Saddam's secret police and reported back on my every move. I don't blame her - few could refuse orders from the dreaded secret police. Still, I never stopped wondering, had we been friends, despite this, or was it just a job for her? That question formed the starting point for my novel, '*When the Apricots Bloom*'.

After the fall of the Saddam regime, I returned to journalism, and eventually I moved into aid work. Now I juggle novel writing with projects that fight poverty in the developing world. I live in Melbourne, Australia - on the traditional land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people - with my husband, two sons, and a hairless sphynx cat called Obiwan.

Source: Author's website. (ginawilkinson.net/about)



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Discussion Questions

1. When the *Apricots Bloom* was partly inspired by the author's own experiences living in Baghdad under Saddam Hussein, at a time when Western sanctions kept Iraq virtually cut off from the outside world. During that period, her closest Iraqi friend worked as a secret police informant and reported on her every move. Did her portrayal of life in Baghdad seem realistic to you? What did you learn about life for ordinary Iraqis that surprised you? If you were in Huda's situation, how would you have responded to the orders from the secret police? Should Huda have felt guilty about any of her actions?
2. Compared to Huda, how does Rania handle pressure from the regime? Does her family's status protect her, or is that just an illusion?
3. Rania is an artist—a respected role in Iraqi society. How does this compare to prevailing attitudes toward artists in your own culture? Ally is desperate to find a connection with her mother. Given the restrictions she's under, do you think her subterfuge is justified, or is her search for clues to her mother's past irresponsible? What would you have done differently?
4. Huda's husband, Abdul Amir, plays a key role in the book. To what extent does he influence Huda's decisions? Did your perception of him alter over time? If so, how?
5. The novel alternates between Huda's, Rania's, and Ally's points of view. How are their worldviews and attitudes reflected in their narrative styles? Do you prefer one to the other? How would the novel have differed if it had been told from only one perspective?
6. The daily lives of Huda, Rania, and Ali are very different from our own, but in some ways, they may feel very familiar. While reading this novel, were there any day-to-day details, activities, or concerns that you found surprisingly similar to your own? Did you find any parallels between the lives of these women and your own life?

Source: Author's website. (ginawilkinson.net/for-book-clubs)

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Recipes

Fatayer (Levantine Spinach Turnover)

For the filling

- 2 lb spinach, chopped, washed and drained
- 2 onions, cut into small cubes
- 5 tablespoons olive oil (or sunflower oil)
- 3 lemons, freshly squeezed
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon sumac
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1 tablespoon pomegranate molasses



For the dough

- 3 cups flour
- 1/2 cup sunflower oil (or olive oil)
- 1/3 cup fine semolina
- 3 tablespoons milk powder
- 1 teaspoon active dry yeast
- 3 tablespoons white vinegar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1/2 cup warm water (more or less)

Filling

The day before, mix all the filling ingredients in a frying pan over a high heat. Brown, stirring regularly, for 10 minutes. Cool and reserve in the refrigerator.



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The next day, mix this stuffing well and add into a colander.

Dough

In the bowl of a stand mixer, add the flour, semolina, salt, sugar, milk powder and mix well. Dig a well in the center and add in the yeast. Add the oil, and the white vinegar and, while adding the water gradually, knead until obtaining a smooth dough that separates from the sides of the bowl and can be collected as a ball around the dough hook.

Place the dough in a bowl, coat with a little oil on the surface, cover it with a cloth and let it sit for one hour at room temperature.

Roll the dough into a large disc and cut into small circles 3 inches (8 cm) in diameter. Drop 1 tablespoon of spinach stuffing in the center of each circle. Lift the 3 ends and fold them inwards so as to completely enclose the stuffing and form a triangle and then pinch the edges to seal them well.

Arrange the fatayer on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper and bake at 350 F (180°C) until the base is fully baked and the surface is lightly browned.

Source: 196 Flavors. (196flavors.com/fatayer)



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Qamar Al-deen juice

A famous Ramadan drink in the Middle East.

- 1 package (400gm) of Qamar Addeen or homemade apricot leather
- 3 cups tap water
- 1/3 cup sugar

Cut the apricot leather into small pieces something like 2-inch squares. Put in a deep bowl and cover with water. Refrigerate overnight.

In your blender blend the apricot with water and sugar until no lumps are visible. Strain if you like, I do not strain mine.



Pour into a pitcher and refrigerate until serving time. Serve cold.

Source: Amira's Pantry. (amiraspantry.com/qamar-al-deen-apricot-drink)

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