

A Graywolf Press Reading Group Guide

THE CONVERT

A TALE OF EXILE AND EXTREMISM

Deborah Baker



The Subject Talks Back

Anyone who has ever written about a living person knows *the wait*. Sometimes you receive a laundry list of grievances. Sometimes word trickles back of rage and feelings of betrayal. There might be a letter from a law firm or simply a punishing silence. When all is said and done, the person you have written about has a kind of hold over your work that a reviewer can only dream of. I'd nearly given up when there it was, wedged between the water bill and a bank statement, an airmail envelope addressed to me. Familiar handwriting, familiar return address in Lahore, Pakistan.

My first book was a biography of an obscure American poet born in 1901. When I approached her in 1989, she was living as a recluse in a Florida citrus grove. Fifty years before, she had not merely renounced her own poetry but everybody else's as well. Through an intermediary, she conveyed to me that I should write a sample chapter (she assigned the topic). If it met with her approval, we would work together on her biography. She could use a secretary, she said. But before I could reply, she fell ill. When she heard I had proceeded without her, she wrote me angrily, calling me "sluttish." Her minions sent me lengthy poison-pen missives, dissecting my character with the calculated cruelty she had once dispensed to her admirers.

She never read a word of what I'd written. The day after I sent the final manuscript to the publisher, she had a heart attack and died, as if my book and her life were paired like Siamese twins and

I had killed her by finishing it. This is the kind of magical thinking that binds the biographer to her subject.

When I first came upon the archive of the Islamic writer Maryam Jameelah, six years after the attacks of September 11 and in the thick of the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I wasn't sure what I had found. From the early 1960s until the mid-eighties, Jameelah had written numerous books and pamphlets, translated into a dozen languages. These books were welcomed all over the Islamic world as the definitive word on the superiority of Islamic values over Western ones. Moreover, in mini-biographies of fabled mujahidin, she urged young Muslims to martyr themselves as "freedom fighters" against the godless infidels of the West and their secular Muslim enablers. Her author photo was that of a shapeless black ghost; not even her eyes could be seen behind the dark folds of her veil.

But the Maryam Jameelah archive also contained letters to her parents, Herbert and Myra Marcus, secular Zionist Jews living in a New York City suburb. For Jameelah had been born Margaret Marcus in White Plains in 1934. In 1962 she had left for Pakistan, never to return to America. She went there to live as the adopted daughter of the founding father of militant, political Islam. Her vivid and titillating portrayal of the moral and cultural depravity of America, I then realized, was drawn from Peggy Marcus's coming-of-age in a postwar suburb, the same one depicted in the best-selling comic memoir *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*. The infidels she condemned were her own people.

Yet unlike the hectoring prose of her books, her letters to her parents were affectionate, funny, and acutely observant. Filled with dramatic incident, dialogue, and surprise developments, there were pages and pages of mesmerizing details about living in purdah under the roof of the aging emir who was the first to call for a twentieth-century global jihad against the west.

I was well into writing her story when I came upon a drawing she'd done dated September 11, 2001, nearly forty years after

she had left America. Even then I was not prepared to consider the possibility that Maryam Jameelah might still be alive. Was I obliged to meet her? I had her letters and writings, what more could she add? What need did I have of an old woman with unreliable memories living on the other side of the world?

But if she lived to see the attacks, what did she make of them? Did she watch the city she had once known so well fall to pieces? Had she changed her mind about the evils of the West or did she remain resolute? Could she help me make sense of 9/11 and the war on terror that followed, or would she see me as her sworn enemy? Suddenly, the obscure story of Margaret Marcus and Maryam Jameelah became the means by which I might cut the Gordian knot that bound America and large parts of the Islamic world in enmity.

At one level I knew this was yet another example of magical thinking. But in the long and largely lonely years spent writing a book, all sorts of absurd ideas keep you company. So I wrote a letter to the address of her publisher and Maryam Jameelah promptly wrote back, inviting me to come see her in Pakistan. I arrived six months later, in December 2007, at the height of the state of emergency.

As soon as I stepped into her room, I realized that the woman I had conjured from the letters bore little resemblance to the woman in front of me. While she talked nonstop in a strange keening voice I tried to remember what it was I had wanted from her. Her third-floor bedroom was suffocating; as soon as I arrived, I couldn't wait to leave and no sooner had I left then I realized that I had to go back. This kept up for two weeks. I still can't fully explain what happened to me in that room. But then Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, and with that the nuances of the argument between Islam and America and the details of the dueling narratives of Margaret and Maryam seemed pretty much beside the point. I returned to New York shattered.

Eventually, I reconceived the entire book, stretching the art

of biography to accommodate both the facts and the fantasies Maryam and Margaret had spun in those letters to her family. For she, too, had struggled to make sense of the mystery of her life. She had cast and recast the signature events of the twentieth century in a way that made the radical turn she had taken defensible, romantic, even noble. By portraying that struggle both in her words and in my own, I hoped to get beyond the supposed divide between our respective, warring worlds.

And when I tore open that long-awaited letter it seemed at first to promise a kind of truce: “This note is to acknowledge safe receipt of your book parcel from Delhi (India),” she wrote. “I am satisfied with your book as a fair and just detailed appraisal of my life and work.” Not a week later, however, the library in which I found her archive also received a letter. In this one, Maryam Jameelah insisted my portrayal of her was filled with falsehoods and unfounded allegations.

Perhaps I had captured only a hint of that woman beneath the veil. Or perhaps fifty years of purdah limited her view of herself and the world she had a hand in making. But somewhere between these two letters lay the unearthly promise of biography: a partly open door, a glimpse of another life. As if all it takes is a moment to look in and wonder.

This essay first appeared on the Paris Review Daily

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1) Did you find Maryam Jameelah to be a sympathetic or admirable figure? Why or why not? Were there any parts of Jameelah's tale that you found you could personally relate to?

2) What do you think drew Deborah Baker to Jameelah as a biographical subject? Despite their very different lives, do you think Baker and Jameelah share any value systems or life experiences that make them particularly well matched as biographer and subject? Why do you think Baker chose to bring her own voice and point of view into the narrative of Jameelah's story? How does this differ from other biographical or nonfiction works you've read?

3) Baker points out how mental illness was treated and viewed in the 1950s and 1960s. How do you think Jameelah's life might have unfolded differently if she were a teenager today? How did the revelation of her illness impact your reading of her letters?

4) Does the fact that Jameelah was left alone to write her books, forgoing the traditional chores and dependent roles she and Mawdudi advocated for Muslim women, undermine the substance of her critique of feminism and Western lifestyles?

5) Most of Jameelah's letters in *The Convert* are addressed to her parents. Why do you think she continued to maintain this

connection, which seemed so vital to her existence, despite having renounced her parents' country, culture, and religious beliefs?

6) Baker conducted the majority of her research for *The Convert* at the New York Public Library, where Jameelah's letters are archived. Why do you think Jameelah chose to not only make her letters available to the public, but to entrust them to a Western institution? Why not send her archives to an institution in Pakistan?

7) At the end of *The Convert*, Baker writes, "In her most recent letter to me, Maryam asked that I send her two copies of a *National Geographic* book of photographs. I'm still trying to decide what books I will send instead." What books would you send to Maryam Jameelah, and why?

8) Baker opens *The Convert* with the following epigraphs:

"If a man passes a door which has no curtain and is not shut and looks in, he has committed no sin."—Muhammed ibn 'Abd Allah Kahtip al-Tibrizi, *Mishkat al-Masabih*

"Whoever undertakes to write a biography binds himself to lying, to concealment, to hypocrisy, to flummery. . . . Truth is not accessible."—Sigmund Freud

Why do you think Baker chose these epigraphs? Did the revelation that she had rewritten and condensed many of Jameelah's letters change your reading of *The Convert* as a work of nonfiction up until that point? Is there ever such a thing as "pure" nonfiction when it comes to biography and memoir?

9) What do you think motivated Mawdudi to take Jameelah into his home?

10) Does it matter what Jameelah makes of *The Convert*?