

# Navigating through life with love and politics

By LISA BRAMEN

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Love relationships can be an emotional minefield, even among couples of the same culture. When partners from different parts of the world come together, though, particularly partners from places with a history of conflict and power imbalance, the territory can become especially treacherous.

In Kim Jensen's debut novel, "The Woman I Left Behind," an American woman, Irene, and a Palestinian man, Khalid, fall in love and, in the process, must confront the ways that politics and history color their relationship.

"The love story is the location where all these unresolved polit-

## IF YOU GO

Author and poet Kim Jensen will read from her work and lead a discussion of "Israeli and Palestinian Voices: A Dialogue with Both Sides" by Cathy Sultan at 7:30 p.m. Monday at Saratoga Springs Public Library. Jensen will also read from and discuss her work 7 to 9 p.m. Tuesday in the Visual Arts Gallery in Dearlove Hall at Adirondack Community College. Both events are free and open to the public.

ical issues come to the surface," the author said in a phone interview from Baltimore, where she lives and teaches English and Arabic literature at a community college.

Jensen will read from and discuss her book and the issues it raises at two local events this week — at Saratoga Springs

Public Library on Monday and Adirondack Community College on Tuesday.

The ACC event is part of the college's Writer's Project, which, this year, includes "Voices from the Middle East," a mini-series of speakers who are either from or have close ties to the Middle East. Two



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Iraqi poets, Sinan Antoon and Dunya Mikhail, will visit in the spring.

"Literature is one of the greatest humanizing forces of civilization, and I believe the

American media has fostered a distorted view of the conflict which Jensen's novel can help to correct," said Lale Davidson, associate professor of English at ACC.

Jensen has lived and taught in the Middle East, and is married to a Palestinian man. She has written for numerous newspapers and magazines, including *Al Jadid*, *Rain Taxi Review*, *Al Ahran Weekly*, the *Oakland Tribune* and *Poetry Flash*. A section of "The Woman I Left Behind" (Curbstone 2006) won the Raymond Carver Prize for Short Fiction.

Jensen met her husband, Zahi Khamis, in the 1980s at a lecture by Edward Said, the well-known

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# Woman uses real-life story to craft novel

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Palestinian-American theorist and activist, at the University of California at San Diego. At the time, she was involved in campus politics, but was more focused on the anti-apartheid movement and Latin American issues than the Middle East.

"We actually got into a dispute," she said. "It was a typical college debate." But a few days later, Khamis came into the vegetarian cafe where she worked, and they soon developed a relationship.

After meeting Khamis, Jensen learned more about Palestinian culture and the situation in the Middle East.

"Before I met my husband, I only understood a general outline of the Palestinian issue, but didn't fully grasp the depth and width of the historical injustice

they endured," she said. Palestinians refer to the 1948 creation of the state of Israel and its consequences as "al-Nakbah," or "the Catastrophe."

"All of a sudden, an entire people became stateless and robbed of identity," she said. "I, like many Americans, was very ignorant of the role our government played in this, and continues to play."

Living in the Galilee, a part of Israel with a significant Palestinian population, gave Jensen a more intimate understanding of Palestinian life today.

"Americans get a very narrow sliver of the reality of Palestinians," she said, because it is the nature of news to focus on the bad things that happen rather than the subtleties of daily life.

"That's part of the reason I teach Arabic literature," she

said. "News is never the place to go if you want to understand a culture."

Although Palestinians are living under incredibly trying circumstances, she said, they don't let it define them. They have weddings, write poetry and use the Internet, like anyone else, yet most of the images Americans see are of bombed-out buildings and violence.

"Despite the fact that the news isn't false, that frame isn't wide enough to show the full picture," she said.

Jensen calls her novel an "emotional autobiography," saying it "follows an emotional path Kim and Zahi took," but the dialogue, the conflicts, the secondary characters, and many of the circumstances of the main characters' lives are fictional.

"My husband went through pretty much nothing Khalid

went through," she said.

Khalid and Irene, like Jensen and Khamis, were initially entranced by the differences between them, even when they found them difficult to understand.

"He's the opposite of everything she hates about America," she said, and, although Khalid views Irene as coming from "the enemy culture," he is attracted at the same time.

In the book, Khalid and Irene's relationship problems become magnified by their cultural misunderstandings.

Time, and the job of raising children together, have helped Jensen and Khamis avoid a similar fate.

"Learning to respect one another" has been the key, she said, to making their relationship work — a lesson, perhaps, the rest of the world should heed.