

Defne Suman

Istanbul Greeks held the key to a magical world, and now that they are gone, that magical world has closed off. My grandparents said: "With the loss of Istanbul's Greeks, the joy is gone forever."

Interview copyright [Ino Cohen](#) - Photos courtesy Defne Suman and Ino Cohen. They include their families from Istanbul and Smyrna.

Where did you get the inspiration to write this book? Was it a true story?



In 2013, when I started writing, I had in mind a story in the 1980's at the island of **Prinkipo**, where I grew up. Smyrna was the last thing on my mind, really! One of characters, **a 9-year old child, kept talking about an old aunt who lived in Smyrna**. I was intrigued and let my pen do the writing... Soon I found out more things about that old aunt. Nobody knew her age, she didn't speak and her name was Scheherazade. Then I understood that it is this Scheherazade who keeps this story, **so I gave her the pen to write it!** The book is not based on a true story. Of course, the plot includes historical facts but the characters and the story are all fiction.

How did you built the image' of Smyrna at the old times? How was it different than the Izmir of today?



I didn't know much about Smyrna or Izmir, , old or new. Funny enough, I have not been there until I was 38 years old. In Turkey we don't grow up with the story of "*the good old days of Smyrna*". The Ottoman and Greek Smyrna are a bit taboo subject. **Sad to say but a mass amnesia about the past exists in Turkey**. So when I realized that this story is about the Ottoman Smyrna I panicked a little, because I knew nothing about it.

Luckily, I had one reference point and that was **Jeffrey Eugenides's** amazing novel **Middlesex** that talks about Smyrna in 1922, its beauty and destruction- not only as a city but also as a cosmopolitan way of life. That was my starting point.

Were you familiar with the **Greek culture** where you were living **in Istanbul**?



There is some kind of **nostalgia in Istanbul for the good old days**. It was there in 1980s and it is still there- **even stronger today**. Part of that nostalgia has something to do with **the loss of the Greek population...**

When I was a child, I was listening to stories how clean and modern Istanbul was once upon a time when **Greek gentlemen and ladies walked on the streets of Pera in fancy outfits**. They produced the best patisserie in their shops and made the best dresses. It always sounded that **life was more joyful in the past**; there was beauty, laughter and grace. Many times I heard

my **grandparents** saying: "**With the loss of Istanbul's Greek population, the joy is gone forever and now the city is filled with dark faced unrefined people**".



When I was a teenager, as I walked in the old Greek neighborhoods, Pera and Fanari, and searched signs of this loss in dark alleys, abandoned buildings and forgotten churches where there are candles still alive. I was very attracted to everything that remained from them. **I felt like Istanbul Greeks held the key for some magical world and now that they are gone, that magical world is closed off**. So for me, the exposure to the Greek culture did not happen because of the

existence but most because of the lack (or loss) of Istanbul Greeks.

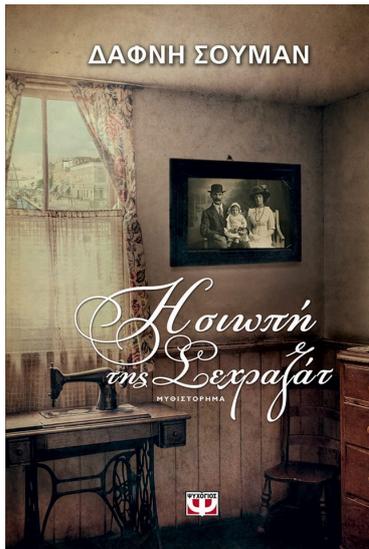
Was *Arabian Nights* and Scheherazade one of your favorites as a kid?



No, when I was child the *Arabian Nights* was not my favorite - I didn't like fairy tales. **I liked realistic stories**. But when I grew up and took a deeper interest in literature, I discovered the *Arabian Nights*. To me, it's a very interesting concept that Scheherazade had to tell stories to stay alive. I wonder if it's true for all. **As long as we keep our imagination alive and continue creating, we are alive**. Otherwise we're dying.

In my story, Sehzade is a 100-year old woman who has **not spoken a word** for 80 years. She lives alone in a dilapidated mansion. She's mute so **she tells her stories via her pen**. The reason she writes is not to save her life, like the original Scheherazade. On the contrary, this 100-year old Scheherazade **writes her story so that the death can finally finds her** in that forgotten old mansion. Everything else is as realistic as possible.

Do you believe in fate? Would you ever imagine that your life would have that course?



Yes, **I believe a path is laid out** for each one of us. I understand **it's for the best**, when I look back to my life. Things have fallen together in such a way that **no individual planning could have been capable of knitting a life like that**. Now I know that when I decided to not go to do PhD in the USA, I was not making a choice even though I thought was making one. That was my only path.

Whatever we choose that is our only path - I don't believe there is another one. But if my path was to do PhD in the USA then, I believe I would still be as content as I am today. **Our state of being has little to do with our outer environment. It is much more to do with our inner experience, how we perceive and approach life.** That is my belief.

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Defne's book '[The silence of Scheharazade](#)' is going to be published in Greek by Psychogios and in Turkey at the same date, March 3, 2016. All the best!