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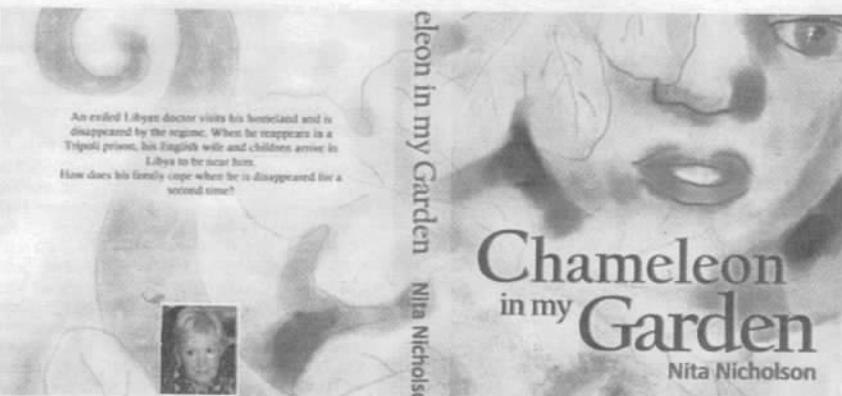
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'Writing has helped me to survive'

Author's debut work recounts horrible days in Libya



■ BY ANGELIKA LABNO

The effects of living in an oppressive society stayed with Nita Nicholson long after she had left Libya. It was not until decades later that her silence, enforced under Muammar Gaddafi's rule, finally took refuge in the pages of her debut novel.

The British author will be in the North Shore and in Chicago promoting her book "Chameleon in My Garden," which is drawn largely from her experience of living in Libya and visiting her Libyan husband, a political prisoner, in Tripoli and Benghazi prisons. Winnetka Library will host an event Dec. 16 at 7 p.m., and The Book Stall in Winnetka will feature the author on Jan. 22 at 7 p.m.

Set in Libya during the 1970s, the novel describes the oppression of the Gaddafi regime towards its own people. It focuses on a family whose son, a medical doctor, has been imprisoned for dissent. His family, including his English wife and their two children, are faced with challenges and obstacles in the quest for the missing son, and communication and trust among them break down. The family's one place of refuge is the garden, where the chameleon hides.

"I think that if you live in a very oppressive state, in order to survive, you have to close down your feelings," Nicholson explains. "In my final draft [of the book], I realized I hadn't explained how anybody felt. I then began to understand there was more, and I had to rewrite the novel again."

Multiple perspectives are woven into the story, as Nicholson believed it was important to illustrate the situation not only through the author's eyes.

"For my husband's family to have this English woman in their midst — when Gaddafi had made marriage to foreigners illegal — I was a burden to that family," Nicholson says. "I was an additional cross they had to bear, but they surmounted it."

Nicholson's daughter, Sehaam Caselberg, lives in Winnetka with her family. She was between two and eight years old when she lived in Libya, and she thanks her mother for sheltering her from much of what was going on. She says that reading the book helped her reframe her experiences of people and see them in another light.

"She gave me a way to see another side to somebody that I maybe found challenging when I was growing up," she said. "I've come to appreciate her ability to connect to and have that compassion for people, even though what she's going through is pretty horrific."

Nicholson describes the writing process as a difficult experience of reliving such a dark time in her life. The family moved to Libya in 1969 when her husband, a talented surgeon, was called to be a director of health for the Green Mountain region. He was imprisoned, along with other intelligentsia, in 1973. Nicholson stayed in the country until 1979, when she

took her family back to the United Kingdom. There, she campaigned for her husband's release, which was eventually granted in 1984.

"When he came out of prison, he realized Libya was an entire prison," said Nicholson. "If anyone decent puts their head above the parapet, it's high risk."

She believes there is an altruism among the Libyan people, whom she also describes as moderate, tolerant, sane and good people, but that outsiders might have little understanding of a society that lacks institutions for help.

Caselberg would argue that her parents are similarly altruistic, putting their own lives at risk for the sake of doing what is right.

"This is a story of endurance and an important record of the atrocities that happened under Gaddafi's watch," she notes.

Now that she's retired from teaching, Nicholson



Nita Nicholson

has opened the floodgates to her inner artist. She is working on a new novel, and she also enjoys writing poetry and taking ceramics. She is most interested in the conversations that may take place surrounding her first novel, especially the feedback from Libyans. She cautions against one presumption, however.

"I don't think my book is about Libya or me and my experience," Nicholson says. "It translates to many different parts of the world. The book was about me finding my freedom of speech."

"I feel I have survived — writing has helped me to survive."

Sample chapters and more about the author can be found at www.nitanicholson.com. ■