



# Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East

*Brian Whitaker*

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Homosexuality is a taboo subject in Arab countries. Clerics denounce it as a heinous sin, while newspapers write cryptically of "shameful acts." Although many parts of the world now accept sexual diversity, the Middle East is moving in the opposite direction. In this absorbing account, journalist Brian Whitaker calls attention to the voices of men and women who are struggling with gay identities in societies where they are marginalized and persecuted by the authorities. He paints a disturbing picture of people who live secretive, fearful lives and who are often jailed, beaten, and ostracized by their families, or sent to be "cured" by psychiatrists.

Whitaker's exploration of changing sexual behavior in the Arab world reveals that—while deeply repressive prejudices and stereotypes still govern much thinking about homosexuality—there are pockets of change and tolerance. The author combines personal accounts from individuals in the region with a look at recent Arab films and novels featuring gay characters and conducts a sensitive comparative reading of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic strictures around sexuality. Deeply informed and engagingly written, *Unspeakable Love* draws long overdue attention to a crucial subject.

*Copub: Saqi Books*

**Brian Whitaker** was Middle East editor at the Guardian for seven years and then an editor for the newspaper's Comment is Free website. He is the author of *What's Really Wrong with the Middle East* (Saqi Books, 2009). His website, [www.al-bab.com](http://www.al-bab.com), is devoted to Arab culture and politics. *Unspeakable Love* was shortlisted for the Lambda Literary Award in 2006.

## Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East Details

Date : Published June 22nd 2011 by University of California Press (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780520250178

Author : Brian Whitaker

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Lgbt, Sexuality, History, Glbt, Queer, Sociology

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Indeed, 'active' (penetrative) gay males are often seen to be even more masculine, as this is seen to require greater physicality and sexual appetite ... Then there is the concept of family honour, marriage and tradition thrown into the mix, and you have a very complicated social situation largely predicated on invisibility and

denial.

Whitaker states early on that "sexual rights are not only a basic element of human rights, but should have an integral part in moves towards Arab reform." This is particularly difficult, of course, in a country like Saudi Arabia, where homosexuality is punishable by death, and where bribery and secrecy rule the day.

Added to this is the peculiar schizophrenia inherent in some Arab cultures, such as denouncing American imperialism on the one hand and then championing American brands, fast food and consumer goods on the other.

This book is a fascinating introduction into the Arab mentality towards gender and sexuality in general. It is far more than being about homosexuality per se, as it touches on so many other aspects of social life: the family, law, language, religion, education.

In addition, Whitaker provides cogent analyses of key Christian and Islamic texts often used to denounce homosexuality, and the implications for gays in the Arab world. In his suggestions for reform, he argues that Arab gays will inevitably have to band together for their rights and dignity, as the current policy of invisibility will only go so far.

There is a fascinating side-discussion on controversial issues such as Israel championing gay rights as a means of legitimising the current regime, while cracking down hard on the Palestinians on the other. Another fascinating debate is to what extent a government can legislate what happens in a country's bedrooms, between consenting adults (Egypt was notorious for this apparently).

Equally fascinating is how the technology of social media have liberated the Arab youth, both gay and straight, or just generally disaffected, right under the noses of oppressive governments. (Then again, to be seen to conform is often more important than the act of conformance itself).

Commenting on the blanket religious conformity exacted by the authorities and religious police in Saudi Arabia, for example, Whitaker says: "All this is done in pursuit of a cultural authenticity that is not only unattainable in practice but often no more authentic than the England of thatched cottages, cream teas and croquet on the lawn."

One thing that struck me while reading this is how diverse the Arab world is ethnically. Whitaker makes a partial listing: Alawites, Armenians, Assyrians, Baha'is, Berbers, Chaldeans, Copts, Druzes, Ibadis, Ismailis, Jews, Kurds, Maronites, Sahrawis, Tuareq, Turkmen (from Turkmenistan), Yezidis and Zaidis.

He adds: "... Yet serious discussion of ethnic/religious diversity and its place in society is almost as big a taboo as discussion of sexual diversity. If the existence of non-Arab or non-Muslim groups is acknowledged at all, it is usually only to declare how harmoniously everyone gets along."

Clearly this is not the case, and clearly sexual diversity is only the tip of a veritable iceberg of social issues that the Arab world is grappling with.

Fascinating, and essential reading for anyone interested in this part of the world beyond the often sensationalist headlines often reported in the Western press.

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## Dania Abutaha says

[illegible]

## Thuraya Al-otaibi says

Hands down, the most comprehensive considerate book I've ever read. Whitaker covers every single aspect of the issue.

**lady victoriana says**

I'm Egyptian, so whenever I begin any book on the topic of homosexuality in the Middle East, I approach it with some measure of caution. When that book is written by an American white man, that caution increases tenfold. Brian Whitaker has been a journalist for The Guardian since 1987 and was its Middle East editor from 2000 to 2007. A robust background to be sure, but not necessarily one that would automatically negate orientalist views, and so I began reading with some trepidation. But I was pleasantly surprised!

Whitaker entire approach is based on nuance; he consistently and purposely shies away from making any sort of sweeping generalization about anything. He explores homosexuality in the Middle East as impartially as one could expect, balancing interviews with scholarly and popular publications to convey both a personal narrative and an overarching historical and societal one. Whitaker discusses various topics, from media coverage to Islamic legal analyses. While he never really delves fully into any one subject he succeeds in providing a broad overview, enough to give a decent primer on the issue.

Focusing mainly on Lebanon and Egypt, Whitaker threads between case studies, historical analyses, religious arguments, and personal interviews. He cites several landmark books, such as Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle's *Homosexuality in Islam*, which delves deeply into Islamic legal arguments against homosexuality and their validity - or lack thereof. Deftly summarizing Kugle's work, Whitaker elucidates the shaky foundation for religious laws against homosexuality. Whitaker also brings up Joseph Massad, author of *The Gay International*, best known for critiquing the universalizing of gay rights and their exportation to the non-Western world. Whitaker counters Massad's main argument while acknowledging that Massad's thesis is not without its merits.

One thing I would have liked to have seen more of is a discussion of lesbianism in the Middle East, but this

is not necessarily a fault of the book. Whitaker acknowledges that gay women often tend to fly below the radar. He terms this "lesbian invisibility" and goes on to say:

*“Lesbian invisibility does have some advantages. In the big cities of Egypt, two women living together as ‘flatmates’ would not arouse much curiosity, Laila said - though that would depend to some extent on their choice of district. Neighbours would first of all want to establish whether they were prostitutes and would probably quiz the bawwab, the doorman who watches all comings and goings in Egyptian blocks of flats. If satisfied on that count, they might then imagine other explanations for the girls’ presence – quarrels with parents, etc.*

*‘They would think of anything else but lesbianism,’ Laila said. She recalled how much one lesbian couple had been adored by their landlady. ‘I wish all my tenants were like you,’ the landlady told them, suspecting nothing.”*

Overall, this is a great introduction to a thorny topic. Whitaker delivers information objectively and manages to avoid wading into the waters of orientalist or condescending discourse (most of the time, anyway). The book, though, is a surface level examination of a dense, complex issue, and it left me wanting more.

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## ????? says

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## Sarah Kaddoura says

The book is designed for a western audience mainly. Also, it's a white man that tried to equate left-handedness to homosexuality in Islam..

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## Naji Tawk says

Being almost a pioneer to initiate such topics and deep researches about homosexuality in the Middle East, it deserves, I think, much credit.

I learnt a lot of stuff through the book: some places they use Electric Shocks to 'cure' homosexuals; the Quran doesn't say anything about homosexuality \_however if we want to overanalyze, we can conclude that it was gay-friendly\_ but in the ahadith which were fabricated after the death of Muhammad, Islamic scholars wanted to condemn homosexuality; Sodom and Gomorra is the worst fairytale and it says nothing about homosexuality, still Christians Muslims and Jews wanted to analyze it as a symbol for homosexuality and even calling every gay person whether a saint or not a sodomite! and they don't know the second part of the story where Lot and his two daughters have incestuous sex in a cave and bear children. Why didn't the scholars talk about that?!

However, the language used is slightly difficult. I think it should have been easier so more people would read it.

There is a lot of redundancy.

Hence, you'll learn about the crackdown in Egypt (Queen Boat) and in Britain (1950), about many persons living in hell on Earth, about much injustice.

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### Cha.Me says

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### Melissa says

Overall, I really enjoyed this book. It is a well thought out, well researched book which presents its arguments in a logical fashion. However, I was left feeling that the argument was flawed in some way. The main argument of the book was that we shouldn't try to change the religion, for that will just cause a push back in the name of protectionism. Thus, we must seek to change the culture (through secularization within the government).

This is a fairly decent idea, except the author supports this position by using the examples of the United States and Israel. The flaw in this is that both these countries were founded with secularism in place from the beginning. They weren't trying to root religion out of a government when religion has BEEN the government for the past however many centuries. Thus, this approach would be doomed from the beginning.

Then the second part is that this secularization would lead to more questioning and interpretation of the Qur'an, which is basically fighting to change the religion. It's not that I don't agree that there needs to be reinterpretation of some of the passages, but I think this will lead right back to the fundamentalist push back.

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### ???? says

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### Brianna says

It's hard to say "really liked it" when it's a book about oppression, but I definitely learned a lot about how homosexuality was treated in the past (for instance, it "abounds" in classic Arabic literature, but started to disappear from books when literacy became more widespread, and the audience was wider), and how it's treated in the present (each country's penalties for sodomy, for instance, and how they tend to prosecute just enough to make an example of an unlucky few, but not enough to make people think homosexuality might be

too common).

On lesbians:

*In the Arab world ... the lesbian identity doesn't seem to exist, not because there are no lesbians, but because practices which might be termed lesbian in Western culture are left nameless in the Arab culture. Taking into consideration that the word 'lesbian' [suhaaquiyya] is rarely used in Arabic and, once used, it is charged with negative connotations, most lesbians avoid any public assertion of their identities. Besides, it is quite easy for Arab lesbians to deprive their emotional and physical intimacies of their lesbian connotations because it is common in a conservative Arab culture that advocates separation between the sexes to find intimate relations among members of the same sex, without having to call such relations homosexual.*

On the dangers of black and whitening the issue:

*To say that Islam prescribes 'death for homosexuals' is simplistic and misleading, even though religious conservatives and Western gay rights campaigners (each for their own reasons) like to claim that it does ... This sort of propagandising is particularly unhelpful to those gay and lesbian Muslims who are struggling to reconcile their sexuality with their religion.*

On the Qur'an:

*Despite the intolerance often found in Muslim societies today, [Scott Siraj al-Haqq] Kugle observes that the Qur'an 'positively assesses natural diversity in creation and in human societies'. In contrast to the biblical story of Babel, where God scatters the people and makes them speak mutually incomprehensible languages as a punishment, the Qur'an welcomes their differences:*

***We created you different tribes and nations so that you may come to know one another and acknowledge that the most honourable among you are those that stay the most conscious of Allah.***

***From among Allah's signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the difference of your tongues and the variation of your colours.***

*With the Qur'an's vivid portrayal of diversity at so many levels of the natural and human world, it would be logical to assume that this diversity of creation plays out on the level of sexuality as well.*

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